Cross-Border Remittances and Mobility in North Korea

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Central Lancashire

December 2024

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School	**School of Psychology and Humanities**

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Abstract

Non-governmental organisations have developed a repertoire of information campaigns to expand information dissemination in North Korea through pamphlets, radio broadcasts, and outside media. The main purpose of the information campaigns by NGOs has been to educate North Koreans about universal rights and the outside world, but they have had the unintended effect of driving outflows of people seeking the opportunities and freedom other countries offer. Simultaneously, the transnational networks crossing the borders to assist North Koreans in escape and bring items, messages, and money into the country have solidified and entangled themselves with the border economy. Academic research has focused on the non-personal information flows into the country and the financial remittance impact on the local economy and border-crossing, overlooking how social remittances can shape mobility. With this in mind, this thesis aims to examine the role of financial and social remittances in North Korean migration, stemming from the understanding that migration is a two-step process in which individuals first want to migrate to accomplish or attaint something and then they migrate using their capabilities. In doing so, this study has addressed the following research questions: do financial and social remittances prompt aspirations to leave North Korea?; and is mobility enabled through social remittances? This research has taken a qualitative case study approach including in-depth semi-structured interviews with North Koreans, and scholars and individuals working on North Korea or with North Koreans, a qualitative survey, and review of published materials. It has used the Aspiration and Ability model to trace the influence of remittances in each migration step. The findings of this research show that financial remittances act both as mobility deterrents and enablers as they provide enough capital to potentially cover migration fees. At the same time, however, receivers live more comfortably or become entrepreneurs in North Korea. Social remittances are mobility drivers as they carry trustworthy information about life outside, disseminate know-how about how to escape, and share crucial information about the broker networks to contact. The study argues financial remittances have the dual effect of enabling migration while simultaneously giving economic comfort to the receivers. Social remittances are crucial in the migration process and make the journey safer for receivers. Remittance-receiving through communication with trustworthy individuals along with financial inflows are key contributors to successful voluntary mobility out of North Korea.

Acknowledgments

Firstly, I wish to express my appreciation to my first supervisor, Dr Sojin Lim, for the encouragement, guidance, and the honesty. I also want to thank my second supervisor, Dr Jeong-Im Hyun, for all the support. Thank you as well to the Academy of Korean Studies and the International Institute of Korean Studies (IKSU) at the University of Central Lancashire for generously supporting my PhD journey, it has been a privilege to be able to complete my PhD and seize all the opportunities it has provided. I want to thank everyone who has donated their time to participate and share data for this thesis.

I, of course, thank the marvellous people I have at least crossed paths with at the University of Central Lancashire for the words of encouragement, guidance, and most especially, the drinks. This includes Professor Niki Alsford, Dr Moises Lopes De Souza, Dr Lara Momesso, and all my PhD cohort (those of you who survived and those of you who did not): Fatimaah J. Menefee, the Kim Jong Huns (Lauren Eloise Robertson, Ami Garrod, and Sam Swash), David Hall, Grace Evans, Inès Morales, Nara Leung, Kate Martin, and Dan Mitchum.

I also want to acknowledge two women who have inspired me throughout my life and I probably would not be here if it were not for them. My grandma Pilar Mellado Campmajor, I think you would be proud. And Teodora (Teddy) Gyupchanova who started as a role model, yet I am glad to say she has now become a mentor and like an older sister to me. I also want to thank my two best friends, Carla Cusell Contreras and Ahmed Elshamy.

Thank you to my family who has been patient with me never responding to messages and visiting once every two years. My dad, Josep Boadella Solés; my monkey/little sister, Aina Boadella Cruz; Ydalia Cruz Molina; Quim Prunell Mellado, Montse Esteve Sole, Anna Prunell Esteve, and the doggos (Fosca and Courage), Albert Fontecha, and Gemma Fontecha. I also want to thank my friends. I will not attempt to list every person who has made this PhD journey easier, but I am forever grateful to everyone who has checked on me, socialised with me at conferences, or had a beer with me in the past three years and a half. Special mention to Hanna Song and Euvin Kim for their support during fieldwork.

Lastly, I want to thank NKDB, HRNK, LiNK, and other North Korean human rights organisations for their dedication and efforts in gathering data and advocating for the fundamental rights of North Korean people. The North Korean human rights movement is what made me interested in North Korea and one of the reasons why I found myself thinking of doing a PhD. It has remained an inspiration and proof of the contributions of research within and beyond academia.

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Throughout history, people have moved away from family and friends to settle elsewhere. The term 'mobility' refers to the physical movement of individuals, but 'migration' itself implies an uprooting, a radical change to a person's life after re-settling (Houtkamp, 2014: 17). Mobility is necessary for migration. Still, the physical movement itself does not necessarily involve transforming an individual's life as it may include leisure travel or short-term opportunities abroad. Historically, the act of becoming mobile has been carried out in various ways and impelled by diverse and often interplaying motivations (Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long, 2017). Existing research on migration has examined mobility drivers and motivations for migration including climate change (Cresswell, 2020; Lubkemann, 2008), persecution and generalised violence (Carling and Talleeras, 2016), armed conflicts (Melander, Öberg and Hall, 2009), economic or educational opportunities (Faini, 2003), and household strategies (Rapoport and Docquier, 2005; Thomassen, 2020; Van Dalen, Groenewold and Fokkema, 2005). The focus on finding and expanding the repertoire of mobility drivers has created a 'mobility bias' (Schewel, 2020: 231) in mobility literature. This bias has overlooked mobility deterrents that counterbalance outward migration. The dominant trend in this biased literature has been to examine mobility through the lens of the income maximisation rationale in which individuals engage in logical calculations prior to their outward journey (for example, Harris and Todaro, 1970; Lee, 1966; Van Hear et al., 2017).

Migration drivers and enablers do not emerge in a vacuum. Communities with established outward mobility traditions are referred to as migration cultures. Sirkeci, Cohen, and Yazgan (2012: 17) define 'migration culture' as: "the fluid and dynamic nature of migration links movers and non-movers over space and time and in cultural social and economic ways that develop in relation to an individual's abilities; the strengths and weaknesses of their sending community; and the economic and political realities of sending and receiving countries that include social expectations, opportunities, conflicts, security, and insecurity." The interaction between the mobile and those in the sending country has transnationalised migration cultures in what Kandel and Massey (2002: 982) refer to as the 'cumulative causation of migration.' Existing literature has identified household strategies related to migration and remittance-sending practices (Boyd, 1989; Mahmud, 2020).

Motivations, networks, and structures enable and prompt mobility between countries. The sending and receiving territories share different characteristics: legal frameworks in both nations make legal migration possible from one place to the other (Carling, 2002); citizens are allowed to make international phone calls and send (or receive) items and money abroad (Francisco, 2003; Haug, 2008; Vertovec, 1999); and, in some degree, individuals that have become mobile can return to their home country temporarily and have a role in the sending communities and households (Carling, 2014; Rapoport and Docquier, 2005; Sharma and Cardenas, 2020).

Research has rarely observed how the limitations these practices incur in some authoritarian regimes impact emigration drivers and enablers. The case of North Korea is an example of how these transnational endeavours are curtailed as mobility and international communication are not scrutinised but forbidden. North Korea's purported hermeticism and particularities, which are

similar to other authoritarian regimes, have not alienated the case from migration literature. North Korean mobility has been examined through the lenses of human security (Chang, Haggard and Nolan, 2006; Kook, 2019; Song, 2015), the genderisation of migration and the economy (Kim et al., 2009; Kim, 2011; Kim, 2020; Kook, 2018; Sung and Cho, 2018; Sung, 2023), and the identity formation of ethnic communities abroad (Bidet, 2013; Kim, 2012; Lankov, 2006). A limited number of studies have looked into North Korean mobility using migration theory and acknowledged the relevance of transnational links in the process (Bell, 2021; Kook, 2019; Lankov, 2004; Yoon, 2013). In North Korea, receiving international calls, items, or money is considered a crime, and so is any sort of international movement by regular citizens (Kim, 2022). A migration culture requires a translocal space for the immobile and the mobile to interplay and live 'here-and-there' (Núñez-Madrazo, 2007: 2; Peth and Sakdapolrak, 2020). Yet, this interaction necessitates a fluidity that does not exist in North Korea as these activities are prosecuted by the regime (Kim, 2022). The apparent lack of migration culture has perhaps limited the number of North Koreans leaving the country, yet existing research has shown how transnational activities from communities of North Korean migrants attempt to or have impacted the sending country. Transnational networks including brokers have seen an opportunity in the mobility business in the Korean borders which has supported the emergence and prevalence of chain migration.

The prevalence of these transnational networks along with 'chain defection' has maintained escape routes that reduce the risk of leaving the country (Chun, 2020: 107). Beyond cross-border mobility, broker networks have contributed to the practice of receiving and sending remittances, an activity regarded as being an inherent part of the lives of North Korean migrants. The link between remittances and migration has been vastly covered in the broader migration literature. Migration theory has looked at remittance-sending behaviour and found households use mobility as a family strategy to produce financial remittances, which makes remitting a migration driver in itself (Mahmud, 2020; Lucas and Stark, 1985; Van Dalen et al., 2005). Other remittance-sending behaviour theories dwell on the migrant's social position and the capability of an individual to invest in their sending country (or hometown) and return for short- or long-term to enjoy the new social category (Batnitzky, McDowell and Dyer, 2012; Lucas and Stark, 1985; Rapoport and Docquier, 2005). Similarly, developing countries frequently promote the practice of financial remittance-sending to attract investment, which often outpaces external investment or aid (Lim, 2014), and reinforces nationalistic ideals at home and abroad (Momesso and Lee, 2017). While sending money, items, or information to North Korea is challenging, transnational activities still occur and thus these theories can still help explain its impact on emigration.

The practice of remittance-sending to North Korea has persisted through time and challenges such as migrants going into debt for it (NKDB, 2020), the difficulty of keeping up with insistent requests of the immobile (Bell, 2021; Park et al., 2020; Park, 2023), and the struggle to find jobs abroad (Han, 2023: 298; Lee and Kim, 2022: 38). The prevalence of remittance-sending is explained as it can be accompanied by contact with loved ones in the home country. International contact endangers the individual in North Korea as being caught communicating with others outside the country is a punishable crime (Kim, 2022). Nevertheless, some North Korean migrants still call their families to confirm they have received their remittances (NKDB, 2020). Simultaneously, these calls also act as 'social glue' between the migrant and the receiver (Vertovec, 2004: 2020). At the same time, remittances restructure relationships subverting the receiver as dependent on the sender (Hoang and Yeoh, 2015). The economic benefits for the family back home are another enticement for the migrants as micro-enterprises have become a by-product of remittance-

receiving. These entrepreneurial endeavours have included becoming micro-lenders, which has contributed to marketisation and access to credit for North Koreans (Jung, Dalton and Willis, 2018; Kim, 2020b).

As migrants and remittance receivers 'glued' together through international contact, remittances have become characteristic of North Korea's chain migration. While a group of North Korean migration scholars argue that most North Koreans only attempt migration if information about how to migrate comes from trustworthy sources, namely kin and close family (for example, Chang et al., 2006), others claim that border-crossing is often made possible by receiving remittances (Kim, 2016; Kim, 2020; Lankov, 2004; Park, 2021). However, the association of escaping North Korea with remittances remains mostly anecdotal, and remittances themselves – financial or social – have remained rather unstudied. Social remittances are transmitted through transnational communication and items from abroad that can include Bibles, communication devices (such as phones and radios), medicine, or DVDs. These build up perceptions of life abroad for North Koreans. Outside information does not remain within the migrants' direct circle but goes beyond it and becomes word-of-mouth knowledge shared with those who are close to the recipients (Chang et al., 2006). The de-bordering effects of these social remittances have been explored by examining how consistent cross-border communication strengthens ties between senders and receivers and challenges the regime's border control (Shin, 2021). At the same time, research has indicated financial remittances are used to cover mobility costs (Lankov, 2004).

The actual impact of social and financial remittances on North Korean mobility or immobility coexists with conflicting realities. It is not uncommon for migrants to speak negatively about living abroad. Those who are the recipients of this information can choose to seek profit domestically by requesting items from outside and selling them within North Korea, voluntarily staying (Bell, 2021: 92). Thus, neither financial nor social remittances necessarily trigger mobility aspirations, and migration does not rely on outsiders' financial assistance. The link between mobility and remittances is not clear-cut and yet, throughout the years, migration has prevailed, and remittance-sending has continued to be a practice amongst North Korean migrants. Rather than Western Union or fast interbank transfers, sanctions and North Korea's imperviousness force North Koreans to remit illicitly through expensive smugglers that are proficient in outmanoeuvring border patrols (Weissmann and Hagström, 2016). Smugglers can run away with the items or money that was to be sent (Park, 2022: 102). Remittance-sending is, thus, not without risks and this thesis questions the motives behind the practice. Concurrently, it is questionable whether migrants would seek social status back in North Korea as they would face the consequences of their original deportation and border-crossing is seen as an act of treason. Social remittances, however, prompt stayers to build a perception of the migrant experience and life abroad which have the potential to become migration drivers or mobility deterrents (White, 2016: 64).

1.2 Research Questions

Financial remittances have been examined as an intrinsic part of the North Korean migrant community as something forwarded out of guilt or duty to support the families left behind. As previously presented, existing research has demonstrated the uses of money sent by migrants as mobility enablers to cover broker fees. Social remittances, understood as the transfer of ideas and values through means of photos and messages, however, have been overlooked within the North

Korean migration context. As the literature review in Chapter 2 of this thesis will show, both remittances exist in a conflicting reality where their influence on mobility and immobility has been examined but not in-depth. In light of this, the theory review also in Chapter 2 will further display how migration theory is evolving to incorporate the examination of being immobile willingly or unwillingly and how applying this new wave of scholarship assists in understanding mobility out of North Korea. The case study of this research will find that remittances are observed as a duty and a burden for North Korean migrants and as an activity that is meant to take care of their families back in North Korea. At the same time, remittances will be introduced as a necessary resource to leave North Korea for some migrants who rely on outside income and support. Yet, remittance theory poses how financial flows can deter migration by promoting entrepreneurship (Funkhouser, 2002), or creating comfort (Shastri, 2021), and dependence (Alba and Sugui, 2011). This thesis will identify where in this spectrum North Korean remittance-receivers are at.

Data from civil society organisations (CSOs) such as the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB)[1] (2019 and 2020) has shown that North Koreans send money to take care of living expenses and not to cover escaping costs while they simultaneously hope to reunify with the family. NKDB's studies (2019 and 2020) reflect intent, yet academic literature reflects how this capital, in practice, is used for mobility purposes. This thesis will show the relevance of the social aspect of remittance-sending as intangible social capital impacts the left behind as much as receiving hard cash. If North Koreans send money out of duty to cover living expenses and not aiming for family reunification, then how and when does chain-defection[2] develop? What are the drivers and enablers behind this mobility and how does it differentiate from individuals who do not receive transnational support? As the literature review chapter will demonstrate, these questions surrounding remittances remain unanswered by existing literature. While the use of financial remittances is acknowledged as the means to pay for mobility-related expenses, the value of the social capital transferred by migrants to North Koreans helps address why mobility takes place.

In light of this, two main research questions have been raised: do financial and social remittances prompt aspirations to leave North Korea?; and is mobility enabled through social remittances? In addressing them, this study aims to analyse the potential of social and financial remittances as mobility deterrents, drivers, or enablers in North Korea in the decision-making and realising stages of migration. The first question seeks to observe how remittances (social and financial in isolation or combination) impact the status of an individual as a voluntary immobile or involuntary immobile person. In other words, it examines how remittances deter migration or, on the contrary, they drive the individual to seek projects that can only be accomplished abroad (for example, family reunification or pursuing higher education). The second question specifically observes

[1] The NKDB is a South Korean non-governmental organisation (NGO) founded in 2003 that documents human rights violations and provides resettlement support to North Koreans in South Korea. This NGO has gathered data from over 20,000 North Korean migrants and collected over 80,000 accounts of human rights violations from surveys and interviewees with North Koreans in the country (NKDB, 2024). As part of their regular research, NKDB publish an annual White Paper on North Korean Human Rights and a report on the Social and Economic Integration of North Korean Defectors in South Korea.

[2] This thesis has used the term 'chain-defection' that was defined by Denney and Green (2018: 2): as chain migration coming from North Korea. Chain migration is understood as current migrants assisting individuals back in the country emigrating and then, these new migrants, helping new people become mobile.

social remittances. The reason for this is that the impact of financial remittances on North Korean migration is more evident and has been noted in the works of previous scholars as the means used to pay for broker fees and bribes (for example, Kim, 2016; Kim, 2020a; and Lankov, 2004). Social remittances have been under-researched within the North Korean context and its migration. However, authors like Park (2022) and Bell (2022) have presented receiving letters and photos from Japan has reverberations in how those in North Korea perceive the outside. For example, these two scholars show how pictures of family members working in the United States or letters about life in Japan change the perception of living abroad into a more attractive one. More especially, Son and Kim (2017, as cited in Kim, 2022: 134) found that social capital shared by North Korean migrants included information about how they had escaped. Beyond the migration realm, Shin (2022) explored social remittances as a political tool to challenge North Korea. In this query, the emphasis is put on how social remittances carry trustworthy information about going and living abroad that is communicated to known people. Those who do not receive remittances may rely on impersonal information and hearsay (radio broadcasts or word of mouth) and fiction (South Korean drama and movies, and so on). Thus, this question addresses how social remittances contribute to the successful realisation of North Korean migration and how the experience of remittance-receivers differs from non-receivers.

1.3 Aims of the Study

Perceptions of life outside North Korea are fostered by those who are immobile through information from the outside. In North Korea, details on other countries and outside information disseminated within the borders can be biased or censored (in the case of North Korean news, for example), or fictional (coming from films and TV shows from abroad). Word of mouth can also contribute to how North Koreans craft their perceptions of what migrant life is like, yet the focus of this thesis lies in what is coming from loved ones. In other words, this research will examine money (financial remittances) and social capital that is carried through books, messages, or photos (social remittances). To give an example, a North Korean migrant may send medicine, money, phones, books, and so on to their family members back in North Korea (Baek, 2016). This contribution, which may come along with financial remittances and communication, can elicit the idea that everything is easily available outside, and thus, ‘it pays to emigrate’ (Van Dalen et al., 2005: 378). Whether social or financial remittances become a migration driver or not, partly depends on how these are mediated and how the individual abroad talks about the migrant experience. Direct mediation of remittances and personal communication with North Koreans is dangerous for the receiving side (Baek, 2016), and thus only 51.5 per cent of remittance senders contact their families (NKDB, 2018: 11). Mediating remittances is partly important for migrants who can turn life abroad into a desirable idea or earmark what remittances are meant to be used for (Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou, 2017). In the North Korean case, mediation is limited. Carling (2014) observes how a lack of mediation disrupts relationships as the migrants’ motivations for sending remittances cannot be shared, leading the receiving side to freely make their own ideas and build their expectations (Carling, 2014). Thus, this thesis will investigate how remittance usage and outside world perception are impacted by having no mediation or mediation being limited, which limits the social capital transferred due to this lack of communication.

In light of this, this thesis aims to examine the role of financial and social remittances in North Korean mobility as mobility enablers, deterrents, and/or drivers. The research questions presented above stem from understanding migration as a two-step process where people first aspire to emigrate and then emigrate successfully or not. North Korean migration research has centred around different themes without focusing on the central question of which combination of aspirations and abilities makes mobility happen (for example, Kim, 2020a; Kook, 2018). The role of remittances as migration drivers will be analysed by looking at the different paths out of North Korea and what influences North Koreans to start the journey and complete it successfully. Social and financial remittances have the potential to be as detrimental to the mobility of North Koreans and the aim of this research is to examine why and when they promote or dissuade migration by answering the research questions. Existing literature exploring North Korean migration has followed the specific trends of looking at mobility from a gender-based, human rights, or human security perspective, which have had few exceptions (Bell, 2021; Park, 2021; Song and Habib, 2021; Sung, 2023; Thae, 2019). However, the actual impact of remittance-receiving in the mobility decision-making process has been seldom left behind. In particular, this thesis will examine two crucial elements in mobility that have not received much attention in North Korean migration work: how remittance-receiving impacts voluntary immobility of the household, and the different impact of general outside information such as media in contrast to reliable information from migrants.

Migration theory has given less attention to immobility and focused on mobility. This thesis will contribute to the growing body of existing literature concerning immobility and mobility by analysing the situational role of remittances as mobility drivers and mobility deterrents. Moreover, the study has larger implications concerning remittance behaviour and migration as part of family strategies in authoritarian contexts with migration patterns, but without migration cultures. It will also add to the debates in the Asian remittance-sending behaviour scholarship and the those surrounding remittances as part of family strategies that divide households into dependents and senders (Hoang and Yeoh, 2015; Khamkhom and Jampaklay, 2020; Imran, Devadason and Cheok, 2020). Concurrently, financial remittances are also framed as mobility deterrents as they act as economic shock absorbers. This means that, if the family left behind was struggling financially and they could have used migration as a way to ease the situation, this is no longer necessary due to the migrant providing the monetary (Singh, 2010; Singh et al., 2011). Although remittances are presented as volatile and irregular in most countries (Jawaid and Raza, 2016; Pant, 2017), literature examining Asian cases observes how they cause a dependency syndrome that is only countered through lower amounts (Castañeda, 2013; Dash, 2010).

The North Korean case presents an interesting contribution as the frequency and volume of remittances are lower than what is seen in other countries in the continent including Thailand (Khamkhom and Jampaklay, 2020) and Pakistan (Imran, Devadason and Cheok, 2020). Exploring the characteristics of North Korean remittances in contrast to those from neighbouring countries sheds light on how remittances with diverging shapes and patterns can influence mobility strategies differently. Thus, this research also will also contribute to the fields of migration theory and its nexus to remittance behaviour and North Korean studies by presenting the characteristics of North Korean migration. These include the lack of migration culture, that North Koreans are guaranteed a home in South Korea, and challenges to monetary and communication flows. This research will challenge the mobility bias in migration theory by providing insight into how remittances to North

Korea are both drivers and deterrents and will provide an in-depth analysis of the remittance-migration nexus in an authoritarian context. Lastly, this study will examine the influence of social remittances which, as the previous section has highlighted, have been under-researched within the North Korean context. Whereas the motivations behind financial remittances in the North Korean context have been addressed (for example, Park, 2023), this research will examine the uses of social and financial remittances for North Korean emigration. Likewise, scholarship on North Korea has examined the dissemination of outside information including K-drama in the country (for instance, McDonald, 2018; Ward and Denney, 2023). This thesis sets itself apart by acknowledging the crucial difference between the flows of information smuggled from abroad, which is informal and, frequently, in the form of entertainment, and social capital shared personally by migrants.

1.4 The 'Migrant' Terminology

Although this research does not intend to discuss which nomenclature should be given to individuals who have left North Korea, this thesis uses the terminology of 'migrants', as opposed to other widely used terms such as defectors, refugees, or escapees. This section will provide the reasoning behind this choice and simultaneously account for why the methodology used for this research comes from migration studies. As the literature review will show, the reason why North Koreans become mobile has diversified over the years. North Korea has changed, and the challenges North Koreans have experienced domestically have varied under the three different leaders. Migration became more relevant under Kim Jong-il's rule (1994-2011) as it coincided with North Korea's famine known as the Arduous March (1994-1998), the faltering economy, and the eventual intrusion of outside information within the borders. Afterwards, Kim Jong-un ascended to power in a North Korea that had become acclimated to the contradictions of North Korean life: unofficial markets and the informal economy provided where the state implied it did; mobility, though illegal, happened both for frequent border-crossers and individuals who engaged in permanent migration; and the rampant corruption blurred the state's interference in the private sphere. In other words, 'everything' was permitted for those who paid bribes, including engaging with the markets (Lankov et al., 2017: 52). Kim Jong-un's approach towards *jangmadang* (grey markets) and illegal trade has zigzagged from support to attempts to eradicate them, yet for the most part, it has been characterised by indifference or benevolent negligence (Lankov, 2018b).

Whilst still illegal and punishable, smuggling and escaping North Korea has had room to evolve and develop complex and interconnected networks that facilitate temporary and permanent mobility (as well as involuntary and voluntary mobilities). Mobility out of North Korea has been impacted by the country's strict lockdowns and increased border control, which has resulted in a drastic decline in the number of North Koreans getting to South Korea from 1,047 in 2019 to 63 in 2021 (Ministry of Unification, 2024). Whereas this thesis will observe mobility and remittance behaviour up until the pandemic, it is noteworthy to mention that emigration has plummeted from 2020 onwards. Simultaneous with consolidating transnational mobility networks, markets have grown enough for a new affluent social class to emerge, the *donju* (masters of money). Lastly, young North Koreans (also known as the *jangmadang* generation or the North Korean MZ generation) born or grown up in this new North Korea characterised by grassroots capitalism and illicit foreign media consumption, are considerably more familiar with how life outside looks like.

During the famine, North Koreans escaped because of hunger, and due to other reasons, such as economic opportunities or fearing persecution, these motivations have changed with the growth of the informal economy and information dissemination. Kim Jong-un's indifference and intermittent support have allowed markets to develop and a *nouveau riche* class to emerge, but this (along with stricter control) has only managed to reduce out-migration flows up until pandemic border closures, as mentioned above. Furthermore, Kim Jong-un reduced penalties for committing certain crimes such as border-crossing (Chang et al., 2006: 19) during his first years as a leader, an approach that changed later on. Nonetheless, not all North Koreans have thrived under his rule nor became content with the regime. Fewer North Koreans leave now due to political reasons, economic opportunities, and hunger. The new ongoing trend for escaping is for individuals to seek freedom (Song, 2015). Because the reasons behind why North Koreans escape are varied, the definition of refugee posed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) does not always fit the bill as it is described to be for individuals who are driven out of their countries due toviolence or persecution. Asylum seekers apply and then wait to be granted asylum in a new destination country. This concept is reserved for those who claim fear of persecution which is, again, not the case for all North Koreans who escape (Ford, 2018; Song, 2015).

Regardless of the reason or how a North Korean leaves the country, migrating from North Korea remains a crime. Attempted migration in North Korea is a capital crime that endangers both the unsuccessful North Koreans and anybody who helped in planning or enacting the escape. Moreover, even when a North Korean successfully reaches China, the risk of being caught by Chinese authorities and repatriated back to North Korea is a legitimate concern. Fear of repatriation leads the estimated 100,000-400,000 North Koreans in China to live in secret and hide their identities (Kirkpatrick, 2006; Seymour, 2005: 16; Song, 2015: 401). This being said, border-crossing or returning to North Korea is not necessarily a rare activity. However, it involves a risk of being caught and facing repercussions or, at the very least, paying a bribe.

North Koreans in China are at risk because they are not recognised as asylum-seekers or refugees. Instead, the Chinese government automatically identifies them as illegal economic migrants which justifies their repatriation as indicated in the "Illegal Immigrants Repatriation Agreement" signed by North Korea and China in the 1960s (Won, 2013). The status of the migrant is thus bestowed on individuals who are under persecution within China and who will, if returned to North Korea, face consequences for having left (Chang et al., 2006). Even though a number of North Koreans leave their country because of economic reasons, these are inherently interlinked with the North Korean regime and what it allows its citizens to do (Gahng, 2009). It is needless to say regular migrants from other countries do not face repercussions of the same severity for having migrated. Because of the consequences North Koreans can face upon returning to North Korea, once they cross the borders and enter China, they can qualify as *refugees sur place* (Gahng, 2009: 375). The status of refugees *sur place* is given as it has been demonstrated there is a well-founded fear of being punished and persecuted upon their return to North Korea because of having left the country previously. In other words, unlike the term ‘refugee’ in itself, refugee *sur place* is reserved for those whose need for protection emerges ‘after’ they have migrated and not before (Ford, 2018: 123; Gahng, 2009). In the case of China, such classification and access to protection are unavailable.

The complexity of choosing a nomenclature for North Koreans begins right when the individuals cross the borders. For most refugees whose final destination is not China, the next step on their journeys is to get to South Korea. Article 3 of the South Korean Constitution (1948) states that the "territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands." Hence, most North Koreans gain South Korean citizenship when they prove their identities (Wolman, 2014), reinforcing the 'one people' idea and the unity of the Korean people (Kim, 2012: 97-98). Citizenship aside, this connection does not hold. Firstly, North Koreans often struggle to integrate into the country (Han, 2022), and secondly, North Koreans are 'labelled' (Shim, 2014: 123, 129). The labels bestowed on North Koreans in South Korea have varied across time, mainly due to politics and the implications of the terminology. Kim (2012) identifies three different periods according to the label uses and connotations used by South Korea:

- The period of the hero and the defector (1953-1989): North Koreans who escaped to South Korea were seen as defected soldiers seeking freedom. The label of *talbukja* ('escapees from the North' which is commonly translated as 'defector' in English) took over the one of 'heroes who returned to the state' (Chung, 2008: 8). Both labels held a robust anti-communist sentiment and served the purpose of setting boundaries between South Korea's 'us and North Korea's 'them' (Kim, 2012: 98).
- The period of the refugee and the ethnic Koreans (1990s): During this time, North Koreans were no longer seen as heroes, yet the label of defector prevailed. North Koreans who escaped the famine were labelled as refugees to justify the expenses that went into assisting them. Another label that rose was *kwisun* (returned to the state) (Chung, 2008: 8-9), which served the same purpose while aiming to connote the shared Korean ethnicity.
- The period of the (economic) migrant (2000 onwards): The legal label they receive is *bukhanintaljumin* (residents who escaped from North Korea) (Chung, 2008: 9; Shim, 2014: 124). The term refugee is used whenever addressing North Korea's extreme living conditions (Kim, 2012: 104), but new labels have emerged and replaced the most common one of *talbukja* after 2005. The Ministry of Unification in South Korea has proposed the name of *saeteomin* (new settlers, or those searching for a new life place). However, during the 2007 Inaugural Ceremony of the Commission on the Democratisation of North Korea, North Koreans in South Korea unanimously approved that *saeteomin* was not a desirable term for them due to the strong economic motivations it implies (Chung, 2008: 12).

The rejection of the term *saeteomin* by the North Korean community has prompted the proposal of their label: *jayu ijumin* (free migrants), which implies the search for freedom (Chung, 2008: 12) and drops the political and economic connotations of *talbukja* and *saeteomin*. North Koreans abroad have also declared their preference for terminologies such as *jokugul ttonan saram* (person who has left their motherland), *monjo toonan saram* (person who left earlier), and *silhyangmin* (person who has lost their hometown) (Shim, 2014: 123).

The most common labels used in the English language to refer to North Koreans who have escaped their home country are defectors, refugees, escapees, and migrants. This research acknowledges there are a few other terms in the Korean language that have held implications and connotations throughout time. Thus, how should we refer to North Koreans abroad? The answer to this question is manifold.

Fundamentally, the labels that are bestowed on North Koreans outside of North Korea are arbitrary. Regardless of whether they are called migrants, escapees, or left due to economic or other reasons, all North Koreans who have migrated have one common characteristic: they could face repercussions if they returned to North Korea. Consequently, most of them can qualify as *refugees sur place* (Tan, 2015: 158). This being said, North Korea's Orwellian state is not as robust and extreme as it is popularly believed to be. As existing research and this study examines, border-crossing has been a recurring practice for many North Koreans throughout the years. The regime's attempts to control crossing have fluctuated as well and, as such, the possibility (and thus, the fear) of facing repercussions for being mobile has at times risen and, at other times, wavered (KINU, 2016). Whereas facing punishment due to mobility is, in reality, never off the table, North Koreans and networks involved in getting people across have learned how to avoid being caught, and, if all fails, bribes have become a way to circumvent penalties and sentences.

This study will examine the thought process and the capabilities surrounding mobility. Whereas this research acknowledges and makes brief mention of the particular experiences of 'involuntary' mobility (such as victims of human trafficking), the mobility examined will be voluntary. In other words, it will analyse migration as a product that results from desiring to be mobile and realising this goal (Carling, 2002). As such, the term migrant is used as a blanket term to refer to individuals who have escaped to find freedom, economic opportunities, better prospects, or follow family strategies. Determining the motivations behind leaving North Korea, or any country, is not a simple matter. Grey areas in the definition of 'migrants' and migration allow for examination of the complex nature of mobility, which is a practice that involves an interplay of motivations and personal goals. At the same time and because this thesis looks especially at 'voluntary' migration, using the term migrant reinforces the individual's agency as opposed to one-dimensional reasoning such as political allegiances (in the case of 'defector'). By taking this stance and focusing on agency, this thesis seeks to challenge the distorted imagery combining migration and helplessness as a practice enacted out of necessity (Binder and Tošić, 2005: 611) rather than something that can be a choice.

Lastly, returning to the idea of the agency of North Koreans, the label they put forward should be recognised. While the term 'migrant' resonates strongly with the rejected name of *saeteomin* (Chung, 2008), *jayu ijumin* is loosely translated to free migrant. This shows how the concept is multi-dimensional and encompasses a grey area. In choosing to utilise the term migrant, this study does not reduce North Korean migration as one that sprouts because of economic implications. Instead, the term migrant emphasises that these individuals may be looking for a better future, something that intrinsically encompasses more than money, and through the research questions, this study will look into how remittances inspire and/or enable an individual to become a migrant.

1.5 Research Outline

This chapter has introduced the research, focusing on the main rationale for this study. It has offered a brief overview of the role of remittances in the North Korean migration process as context for the research questions, aims, and purposes that have the objective of gauging the scope of remittances both for mobility and immobility. Moreover, it has demonstrated the need for such a thesis by indicating which research gaps will be filled within migration studies and North Korean

studies. Finally, this chapter has made an addendum to justify the use of the 'migrant' terminology as opposed to other nouns used to refer to North Koreans abroad (such as defectors, refugees, or escapees).

Chapter 2 will be dedicated to the literature review and will first explore existing scholarship in two sections dedicated to the case study which will be followed by an examination of existing work about migration and remittances, transnationalism, microfinancing in migrant countries, and (im)mobility theories. The sections observing North Korea will cover remittance behaviour in the country as well as how migration has evolved throughout the years up until the pandemic.

The chapter will present remittances and migration theory, with an emphasis on scholarship that has not only observed voluntary emigration but also immobility. It will begin by assessing published literature on remittance behaviour and remittances in Asia and transnational networks in migration. In examining remittance behaviour, the nature of the practice will be presented as altruistic, self-serving for the individual's socio-political position, or as part of household strategies. Migrants from Asia who remit and communicate with those left behind are commonly part of family strategies and provide a means to replace their absence or demonstrate filial piety while offering financial support and transferring knowledge. It will proceed by examining the existing body of literature concerning transnational communities and practices as they link with out-migration through reciprocity-based linkages that encourage and maintain chain migration. The review will offer a look into how accessing credit through remittances and microfinancing services correlates with higher migration and entrepreneurial activities. Remittance-based family strategies designate one household member as the migrant who would contribute to the family rather than becoming mobile as a group. This is a contrast to classic migration theory which would consider personal economic gain as the logical reason for migration.

This thesis will thus look at traditional economy-based theories and then move on to immobility-acknowledging migration theories that have been used by academics to study individuals who remain even when there are better chances abroad. These are displacement in place, motility in connection to trapped people, and the Aspiration and Ability model. The literature review will examine mobility theories and present elements that are crucial within the practice of remittance-sending and mobility. This will include the ways in which transnational networks enable and promote chain migration through reducing costs, family migration strategies, and remittances as promoters of entrepreneurship in the developing world. Moreover, the examination of migration theory will show the different lenses scholarship has taken to understand international emigration in a traditional sense: individuals using information available to emigrate when it is attractive. The presentation of theories that include immobility will give further tools and concepts to understand why immobility may be a preferable choice beyond economic reasons, or how mobility may not be possible at all. This will prove useful for the case study in this thesis as North Korea's legal emigration pathways are limited, and illegal mobility comes with risks that can be the reason for mobility deterrence or the cause for failing to leave the country successfully.

The next chapter will be dedicated to the research methodology of the study. First, it will present the Aspiration and Ability model as the theoretical framework for this study which will be used to analyse North Korean mobility and how and when remittances play a part in favour of mobility or immobility. It will then move on to integrate North Korean mobility into the migration umbrella

by identifying which components of it belong in the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. This chapter will look at the potential relevance of different, interplaying elements into the two steps of migration: aspiring and realising mobility. Following the theoretical framework, the chapter will present the research design of this thesis. It will introduce the reasoning behind why a qualitative methodology has been chosen for this study as it intends to explore how remittances impact the perceptions and aspirations of North Koreans – something that is inherently incalculable and interpretative. Moreover, this chapter will further corroborate the decision to use a multi-method case study approach, and present the sources of data, concerns over migrant trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and the research's limitations and how these have been addressed.

Chapter 4 will present the case study of this research based on the data collected regarding remittances and mobility in North Korea. The case study will be structured around four major sections following the process of migration in North Korea, parting from the baseline of being socialised in the country's socioeconomic aspects and how outside media has challenged perceptions of the outside world. The foundational section will be followed by three sections that analyse how remittances influence migration in three areas: aspirations as mobility drivers; abilities as mobility enablers; and as mobility deterrents. Political socialisation will be addressed to examine how the inherent restrictions of living in North Korea are seen as 'normal' by its citizens and both the state, outside information, and remittances (or migrant propaganda) shape perceptions of the outside. It will continue by observing how international mobility is understood by the average North Korean, moving on to understand the 'new normal' brought by the *jangmadang* which has contributed to the normalisation of border crossing. The case study will then explore mass surveillance and North Korea's organisational life as well as how North Koreans conceal certain deviant activities such as remittance-receiving and international communication. The structure above reflects the two-step migration process as defined by Carling's (2002) Aspiration and Ability model and it observes how remittances influence migration in wanting to emigrate and executing migration. Firstly, this section will identify the projects that North Koreans pursue when wishing to become mobile and how social and financial remittances directly impact these aspirations by creating ideas of what it is like to live as a North Korean migrant, emotional connection, and providing trustworthy information. Secondly, it will look at how these projects may be executed by defining the paths North Koreans can take to leave and which abilities make it possible for them to seize such opportunities. These paths lead to China, South Korea, and other destinations, and involve different transnational agents such as brokers, NGOs, Christian groups, and human traffickers. Social remittances provide crucial information and network contacts to be acquainted with paths to emigrate. Moreover, financial remittances prove useful in different mobility stages as a means to pay fees and bribes, amongst others.

Finally, Chapter 5 will conclude the thesis with a summary of the study preceding a section directly responding to the research questions. This chapter will then move on to discuss the empirical findings of how remittance-receiving influences mobility out of North Korea. Social remittances create imagery of how migrant life looks like but, more importantly, opportunities that can be found abroad in education, work, and life quality of one's own and the overall family. They act as social glue and provide an emotional connection between the migrant and the family members in North Korea with the potential of increasing desire to emigrate to reunite with the household member abroad. Financial remittances serve, in a way, to prove a point that life abroad is not fiction, as migrant stories come along with hard cash. Social and financial capital have an impact

on emigration abilities too by providing crucial information, transnational contacts, and tangible support needed to become mobile in the North Korean case and, most importantly, reducing risks of repatriation and human trafficking. The arguments in this conclusion will contribute to the current state of transnationalism in migration literature by exposing how kinship groups abroad use remittance-sending to support chain migration from countries with tight information control and limited mobilities. Finally, it will provide future research opportunities this thesis puts forward such as expanding gender perspectives in migration literature, reviewing potential changes in remittance behaviour or mobility practices post-pandemic, or further examining the link between transnationalism and entrepreneurship in North Korea.

2. Literature Review

The literature review will firstly present existing scholarship on North Korean migration, remittance behaviour, and microfinancing opportunities within the country. It will then move on to introduce and engage with remittance behaviour, transnationalism, and migration literature to reflect what elements and patterns impact international migration such as the North Korean case, including chain migration and profit-seeking networks involved in mobility. The chapter aims to offer a holistic view of how migration and remittances to North Korea have evolved throughout the years, including how they have grown to include new networks and transnational activities. This will be expanded with literature on transnationalism and how it has transformed migration through phenomena including the feminisation of mobility (Dash, 2020; Sassen, 2002), chain migration (Sharma and Cardenas, 2020), and migrant solidarity (Haug, 2008). As the literature review will show, most North Korean migrants find themselves in China and South Korea, which is why ethnic enclaves and kinship networks are crucial in examining the methods, direction, and motives of North Korean mobility. Studies on transnationalism observe emigration as a social practice in which transnational networks linked through ethnic association (Boyd, 1989) shape the methods and direction of mobility flows (White, 2016). Hence, this chapter will expose scholarship that will contribute to the understanding of the influence of North Korean remittances.

The review will re-address the gap in the existing literature in which the potential link between remittance behaviour and mobility in North Korea remains unaddressed. Mobility paths have become established and grown around the existing transnational networks that influence the informal economy. Similarly, remittance-sending and receiving have prevailed and become common practice as a duty to support the family (Park, 2023). Following this, the literature review will examine the impact of remittances in the receiving household's microfinances to observe the first direct impact of remittances. Authors like Orgad (2012) and Veronese et al. (2020) have examined that social media, hearsay, and outside media shape the perceptions of the migrant experience for the consumers, which is something present in the North Korean context though the dissemination of outside media. Research has examined the cognitive dissonance and impact of foreign media into the country (for example, Lim 2023), North Korean transnational networks and their support towards chain migration (Denney and Green, 2018), and financial remittances inspiring migration motives while providing support (Kim, 2020a; Lim, 2023; Park, 2021). However, the impact of social remittances on mobility in liaison with financial remittances has seldom been examined. This chapter, thus, will explore how existing scholarship on remittance behaviour, transnationalism, and the absence of microfinancing impact the developing world and migration, as well as how this connects to the North Korean context. The review will provide an overview of traditional migration literature and the trends in current migration scholarship, addressing classical theories focused on economic motivations to newer literature focusing on migration for the purposes of improving one's lifestyle or migration strategies. It will conclude with the exposition of different migration theories that include the outcome of immobility as a choice, challenging the mobility bias in migration literature, by examining what elements may render the person immobile voluntarily or involuntarily.

2.1 North Korean Migration

Throughout the 1990s, North Korea was afflicted by a great famine (also known as the Arduous March), an economic crisis, and natural disasters. The extent of the Arduous March's devastation became obvious after the regime opened up to international humanitarian aid yet, to this date, the precise famine toll remains unknown. Estimates vary largely across sources from North Korea's own statement that there had been approximately 220,000 deaths, to North Korean politician Hwang Jang-yop who estimated 1 to 2.5 million deceased (Haggard and Noland, 2007: 73). Haggard and Noland (2007: 75-76) estimated the demographic impact to be between 600,000 and 1 million deaths, corresponding to 3-5 per cent of North Korea's population.

Prior to the famine and following the division of the peninsula in the 1940s, North Korea was deemed to be the 'economic miracle' of the two Koreas. Kim Il-sung's (1948-1994) Spartan economy was characterised by *juche* (self-sufficiency) and rhetorical deception. Contrary to the North Korean state narrative, the economy was dependent on the country's allies who offered resources and technologies at subsidised rates (Lankov, 2013: 76). Flailing relations with China, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and natural disasters converged, triggering North Korea's steady deterioration and culminating in the famine. Up until the time of the Arduous March, however, Kim Il-sung's public sphere had been robust in concealing elements that challenged the regime's narrative and ideology (Dukalskis, 2017). Mass starvation and the dwindling economy were the first taste of cognitive dissonance for North Koreans who were conflicted by the government's narrative and their actual experiences (Baek, 2016; Yeo, 2020). Plenty of migrants have shared their personal accounts of the famine and their stories often converge on a joint point: North Koreans were forced into the dilemma of remaining loyal to the Party or engaging in activities that would be considered against it. Choosing the first option put the individual at risk of perishing as the public distribution system (PDS) had halted sending rations outside Pyongyang (Baek, 2016: 159). Or, as a migrant shared with Demick (2009: 141), "simple and kindhearted people did what they were told - they were the first to die." The latter path forked into different choices and activities North Koreans could engage in to survive: take part in the growing *jangmadang*, become a border-crosser or smuggler, and trade products back and forth between China and North Korea (Kim, 2016), stealing, or escape the country.

When North Korea's economy hit its worst by the end of the decade, the number of migrants who had arrived in South Korea came up to 947 people (Lee, 2020: 470). By 2001, thousands of North Koreans had crossed the borders to China and remained there. The two groups had very different backgrounds. The first group of North Koreans who had left the country comprised fishermen, soldiers, and higher-ranking members of society who had been deployed to foreign countries before their escape. The reasoning behind the escape of these pioneering migrants has been identified as mostly political and in opposition to the North Korean regime (Chung, 2008: 8; Lankov, 2006: 109). The newer outflows were predominantly composed of regular citizens whose workplaces and residences were within the borders of North Korea.

Migrants who first escaped during and after the famine did so to search for food and avoid starvation, yet the factors that drove North Koreans outside of their country diversified quickly to include economic reasons, political dissatisfaction, lack of opportunities, low living standards, and persecution and repression (Chang et al., 2006: 19). By the end of the 1990s, the crises had been stabilised partly due to international humanitarian and food aid, and partly because of the resourcefulness of North Koreans themselves. Citizens who had items and foodstuff to exchange,

such as vegetables grown in their residences' private gardens, became involved in the *jangmadang* that allowed them to survive when the regime did not provide for them (Ford, 2018: 113). While this did not mean North Koreans were suddenly well-fed, the Arduous March had inherently changed life in North Korea introducing new dynamics such as the *jangmadang* and border-crossing.

Border-crossing in North Korea is illegal and, thus, has its risks. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is a multilateral treaty that aims to protect civil and political rights, including freedom of mobility. Regardless of North Korea's membership to this treaty, the country does not grant free movement to its citizens. Crossing frontiers is seen as an act of treason that is punished by the North Korean penal code (Han, Kim, and Lee, 2017: 8-9), though it is worth mentioning the 2004 amendment supposedly eased the penalisation for those who have escaped or assisted someone in the process of leaving (Chang et al., 2006: 18-19). Attempting to cross the DMZ (demilitarised zone) to reach South Korea is objectively the most dangerous choice for a North Korean as the frontier is patrolled by soldiers and the area is plagued with land mines. While this border-crossing spot is rare, there are cases of North Korean soldiers escaping through the border with the South (Baek, 2016: 45). Crossing more often takes place along the border with China where most escape hubs are located. Consequently, most North Korean migrants originate from provinces in the northern region near the border with China. For instance, of the 34,104 North Korean migrants in South Korea, 28,951 are from North and South Hamgyeong and Ryanggang provinces (Ministry of Unification, 2024). Whether crossing is temporary (to smuggle, to trade, or to visit) or permanent (to work and live elsewhere), North Koreans risk repatriation while in China and punishment back in their home country (Lee, 2020). For many of them, however, the trip is worth the danger. The famine led to the emergence of frequent border-crossers who learnt how to make money in China. These individuals had, firstly, inspired the surge of a borderland along the Tumen River where Chinese and North Koreans (migrants and border-crossers) could escape the authorities' tight control, reside, work, and visit (Kim, 2016: 117). Secondly, border-crossers brought back information about the outside world within the borders of North Korea.

Outside information dissemination is something that, although illegal, the North Korean regime has not managed to staunch to this date. During the famine, information from China and South Korea came through from border-crossers. Word of mouth spread about the better economy, plethora of opportunities, and quality of life that citizens from other countries had as opposed to North Korea's reality. If by 1998 the number of North Koreans that had entered South Korea was below one thousand, in 2021 it had skyrocketed to over 30,000 migrants (NKDB, 2021). This number does not include the thousands of North Koreans who attempted escape and were repatriated (or willingly returned to North Korea) or those who have remained in China. However, the number reflects the impact outside information has had on North Korean migration. That is to say that, if the first border-crossers had returned with news that life outside was worse than inside, the North Korean "exodus" would not have reached today's numbers. Information dissemination has become more sophisticated with smugglers bringing USBs with foreign media in the country and North Koreans listening to foreign radio broadcasts (Baek, 2016). Nevertheless, word of mouth remains the most credible source (Chang et al., 2006: 20).

Word of mouth is the most reliable source as it spreads through first-hand accounts from frequent border-crossers and migrants. Pioneering migrants who had departed North Korea maintained

social and family ties within the country (Lim, 2021). In doing so, numerous transnational networks arose in which these migrants introduced capital inside North Korea in the form of information, items, and financial remittances (Gauthier, 2015: 123; Hough and Bell, 2020: 174-175; Lankov, 2013: 97). Outside information dissemination began and was maintained by trusted networks and repeat border-crossers that held personal connections with North Korean citizens. Not only did trustworthy individuals communicate details about other countries that clashed with the regime's narrative, but they had financial resources and newly acquired values that backed their words. The discordance of information caused cognitive dissonance amongst North Korean citizens who were conflicted with the knowledge that North Korea was not as well off as the regime said. As a result, this dissonance drove North Koreans to compare their reality to the experiences of those abroad (Baek, 2016: 189).

The perception that life outside was better was critical in the decision-making processes of the migrants who fled North Korea amidst the famine. For them, China had become a viable escape from starvation. North Korean migrants grew exponentially throughout the years. Simultaneously, the reasonings behind their escape diversified while the ways they used to leave changed and became more sophisticated. It is only natural for activities that persist throughout the years to evolve, and the transformation of North Korean migration was accompanied by two different phenomena. Firstly, North Korean migrant communities settled and grew across the globe, especially those located in China and South Korea. With them, transnational networks also expanded and arranged escape routes, and exchange of information and remittances (Coggins and Torghabeh, 2018: 56; Hastings, Wertz, and Yeo, 2021: 2). Secondly, as migrants started escaping, North Korea's human rights abuses and chronic humanitarian crises became international knowledge. This prompted states, international organisations, and civil society groups to attempt dialoguing with the regime. Simultaneously, civil society actors such as non-governmental organisations and Christian missionaries became actively involved in helping North Koreans escape their country and reach South Korea safely (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Lankov, 2006: 115).

The networks involved in information dissemination as introduced by Jieun Baek (2016: 23-27) parallel the linkages working in the North Korean 'mobility business.' As the author presents, there are three groups entangled in migration: the demand-driven networks, which in this case would comprise the customers (North Koreans attempting to leave and/or migrants needing assistance bringing a relative out); the compassion-driven networks, meaning NGOs and Christian groups; and the profit-driven networks, which are the smugglers and brokers both within and outside North Korea who facilitate and arrange the escape process in exchange of fees. This latter group emerged in the mid-2000s and has since permeated the North Korean mobility process (Denney and Green, 2018: 3). Smugglers not only facilitate North Korean migration and maintain escape routes but are also involved in the activities of delivering items, financial remittances, and smuggling foreign media inside the borders (Yeo, 2020: 648).

Profit-driven networks include human traffickers who sell North Korean women into the sex industry or single Chinese men who would marry them (Sung, 2023). North Korean women are not always victims of trafficking but sometimes willingly partake in this method of escaping North Korea. Escaping the country has become increasingly expensive and by using this route, North Korean women can cover the trip out by selling themselves (Kook, 2018), which is a price worth paying for some as it lets them provide for their families back in North Korea (Kim, 2016; Kim,

2020). Hence, what started as individuals crossing borders and putting themselves in danger of North Korean border guards, harsh weather conditions (for example, freezing rivers or snow), and repatriation, now requires substantial organisation, personal networks, and resources. Most North Koreans require capital and assistance from others when escaping, mostly from illicit networks and remittances (Chang et al., 2006: 20). The North Korean migration chain structure of mobility begins with a migrant crossing and settling somewhere abroad. Then, the person either saves wages or uses resettlement money (in South Korea, this is the so-called 'defector reward' which is given by the South Korean government to North Korean migrants) to cover the escape of a relative back in North Korea. This second migrant would, in turn, repeat the process. The so-called 'chain defection' (Chun, 2020: 107) became increasingly common among migrants after 2005 (Denney and Green, 2018: 3).

North Korean emigration during the Arduous March began as forced migration since migrants escaped due to hunger, environmental and economic issues, and search for freedom (Song, 2015: 399). Before the appearance of brokers and smugglers, North Koreans had simply, albeit dangerously, crossed the border to escape. They had done so with limited information about how to do it and what to do afterwards. After the 2000s, the interplay between the compassion-driven, profit-driven, and demand-driven groups caused North Korean mobility to evolve and diversify (Baek, 2016). Regardless of the path available and taken by migrants, there is no legal way for regular citizens to leave the country. North Korean mobility is, thus, irregular migration (Song, 2015: 402).

Human flows out of North Korea have been as dynamic as they have been tied to the historical period in which they occurred. In other words, migration has been used to react to North Korea's conditions at the time of escape and as a survival tactic (Kim, 2014; Sung and Cho, 2018). This has divided the flow of North Koreans escaping into two different generations. The first generation was the offspring of the Arduous March from the 1990s to mid-2000s. Whereas this period did not initiate mobility in the country, it jumpstarted what has sometimes been called the 'North Korean exodus' (Lee, 2004: 275). At the time, North Koreans traversed the border to survive and find food (Fahy, 2005) with very little information about how to cross and what they would find on the other side, let alone how to reach another third country or even return to their home country if desired. Mobility took a turn in the late 2000s. After over a decade of people border-crossing, information about life in China and South Korea had seeped into the border areas. Networks of brokers, smugglers, and human traffickers had grown as there was profit to be made from trade (of items and people) and assisting people escaping (Baek, 2016). Similarly, motivations for escaping changed as starvation was no longer the main concern. Times had changed and North Koreans now pursued enjoying greater freedoms and rights than they had in North Korea (Kang, Ling, and Chib, 2018), hence why they have been defined as 'migrants for freedom' (Lim and Chung, 2006: 90).

These transnational networks help North Korean migrants escape through routes known as North Korea's underground railroad, which borrows its name from the network of routes and safe houses in the United States (the US henceforth) used by African Americans to escape enslavement (Kirkpatrick, 2014: 14). The North Korean homonym stands for a similar network first used by Christian associations and NGOs. Afterwards, small-scale smuggler networks became involved in them to smuggle North Koreans out of China (or sometimes North Korea) (Kim, 2008;

Kirkpatrick, 2012) into South Korea. Because North Koreans are considered illegal migrants in China and, therefore, unable to make their presence known, the underground railroad takes an indirect route to South Korea. This route involves slipping through Southeast Asian countries before migrants can reach their destination (Chang et al., 2006: 20). Furthermore, new paths have been added in which migrants transit through Mongolia and Russia (Kirkpatrick, 2012: 10). These countries are only transit states for North Koreans as they are safer for the migrants – which often means that instead of repatriation or imprisonment, fees can be paid to secure the individual's passage from the countries' authorities (Song, 2015). Once North Korean migrants reach the final country in their journey, they may choose between two options if they are aware of them: they can either board a plane to South Korea, where they will identify themselves as North Koreans, or seek assistance from diplomatic missions (Kirkpatrick, 2012). In 2008, 75 per cent of migrants who successfully entered South Korea used the underground railroads and, for the most part, did so through the route across Laos-Thailand (Song, 2015: 405).

Brokers and smugglers offer planned escapes or escape packages that can be bought by prospective migrants to complete their way out of North Korea into another country The underground railroad is the most commonly used path to reach South Korea and is, perhaps, the most affordable for North Koreans. In the 2010s, these routes cost around USD 2,000-3,000 per migrant (Lankov, 2013: 96). These packages, however, require arduous travel through the underground railroad, where individuals face significant risks, including imprisonment and threats to their physical safety. Alternatively, first-class escape packages are available, albeit considerably more expensive; in 2013, these ranged between USD 10,000-15,000 (Lankov, 2013: 96). By 2019, fees for standard packages using the underground railroad had risen to USD 5,000-14,000 per person, suggesting that luxury packages may now be even more costly (Yoon, 2019a: 166). These are much faster as migrants receive a forged passport and can fly directly from China to South Korea (Ford, 2018: 123-124; Kirkpatrick, 2012). Planned escapes can be purchased directly by North Koreans or by other parties for a North Korean citizen, such as NGOs or migrants settled abroad. A common practice for parents who escape before their children are to pay smugglers to bring them to South Korea with them. In this case, the migrants-to-be are approached by someone pretending to be an uncle or distant relative, the hired smuggler, who takes them out of North Korea (Baek, 2016: 28, 229; Lee and McClelland, 2016). Due to the illegal status of North Koreans in China who need to remain in hiding, those who escaped North Korea without an escape package to South Korea can purchase it after; due to constraints and low wages, it is common for migrants to need between four and five years to afford a deal with the smugglers (Lee, 2020: 471).

It must be noted that these fees are not the only expense for North Koreans attempting escape, as border-crossing often involves paying bribes to North Korean officials (Baek, 2016). Most North Koreans who manage to escape receive assistance from abroad. Capital provided by transnational networks lowers (and may even cover) escape costs (Coggins and Torghabeh, 2018: 56), hence it is not surprising that migrants consider financial support as the most useful to migrate (Chang et al., 2006: 20). Research has also examined how financial remittances are used to cover mobility costs such as fees to enable border-crossing (Kim, 2016; Kim, 2020a; Lankov, 2004: 871; Park, 2021: 233). However, many North Koreans are initially unable to pay the full amount of their escape packages. In this case, aspiring migrants are forced to reach agreements with brokers in which they promise a substantive percentage of their resettlement money once they reach South Korea (Baek, 2016: 36).

The options outlined above are the most frequently used by North Koreans to reach South Korea from China and North Korea. North Korean women have an additional escape path available for them through illicit networks of human traffickers who take them to China and sell them to become wives of Chinese men or to the sex industry. Many are tricked under the premise of reuniting with family, allured by job prospects or by better conditions in comparison to North Korea's (Kang et al., 2018: 3539). Not all women are pulled forcibly from North Korea. Some of them voluntarily take this path, as it is often the only viable option for escaping and providing for their families on the other side of the border, although this is not always the case (Kim et al., 2009: 160-161; Kook, 2018). Human trafficking is known to happen among North Korean and Chinese authorities. Yet, it has prevailed and grown into a complex network with profits that approximately reach the equivalent of $105 million USD a year (Yoon, 2019b: 13). It is estimated that 70-80 per cent of North Korean women who enter China have been trafficked and sold for a price that usually ranges between ¥1,000-50,000 Chinese Yuan (approximately $146-7,330 USD) (Yoon, 2019b: 13, 42). Once trafficked, North Korean women in China complete their 'contract,' escape, or are freed by those who bought them. The trafficked then choose to stay in China, return to North Korea, or contact smugglers, brokers, NGOs, or Christian missionaries for assistance to reach South Korea (Kook, 2018: 117).

In conclusion, outside information has increased and transformed the reasonings behind North Korean mobility aspirations. What once involved border-crossers looking for food, has now evolved into complex, inter-connected linkages between profit-, demand-, and compassion-driven groups working to pull North Koreans outside of their country.

2.2 Remittances to North Korea

There are two types of remittances: financial remittances and social remittances, the latter involving the transmission of values, ideas, and socio-cultural capital through communication or goods. While Section 2.4 Remittance Behaviour and Remittances in Asia, will explore scholarship on remittance behaviour, this section will provide an overview of remittances in the North Korean context. Both social and financial remittances differ in how they are sent to North Korea, but all are characterized by their complexity. Due to the country's legally enforced impermeability, there is no straightforward way to interact with North Korea. To reiterate the complexity of remittance-sending, a few points must be noted. Firstly, North Koreans abroad do not have the option to return to their homes for temporary visits to see what their remittances have achieved as investments or the household's well-being. Secondly, return migration is not necessarily an option for North Koreans Scholarship examining other countries has argued that there is a link between remittances and social mobility for migrants upon their final return to their homeland (Carling, 2014: S241-S242; Lucas and Stark, 1985; Rapoport and Docquier, 2005). However, this is not the case for North Korea. Re-migration to North Korea occurs infrequently and the regime may detain and use returnees in propaganda videos. Yet, the fate of returnees is largely unknown (Green, Denney, and Gleason, 2015). State-endorsed videos featuring them do not indicate a better social or political position. These show repentant individuals who are ashamed and blamed by their decision of having left. And thirdly, whereas migrants are burdened by the duty of sending money to their families, the issue is not the frequency of remitting, but the amount sent (Park, 2023). The lack of

cheaper remitting options available worldwide but not within North Korea, such as simple bank international transfers, MoneyGram, Western Union, or Wise makes sending money frequently costly and risky.

Baek (2016: 436-439) and NKDB (2018: 170-171) draw from extensive experience and in-depth interviews with North Korean migrants to track the steps used to send financial remittances. NKDB's (2018 and 2020) data shows that the majority of remittance-senders send money twice a year with the purpose of covering living expenses. Sending remittances is complex. North Korean migrants cannot simply transfer money internationally to a North Korean bank account. The endeavour may not be possible due to local laws (in the case of South Korea), international sanctions (Zadeh-Cummings and Harris, 2020: 49), and, additionally, North Korean banks may not be functional to receive them. The money-remitting steps are delineated below for clarity:

1. The North Korean recipient and the sender (the migrant abroad) agree on the needed money that will be sent.
2. A remittance broker in North Korea contacts a business partner, usually a *Joseonjeok* (a Korean word that refers to Koreans with Chinese citizenship) broker located in China or South Korea, to receive the details of a Chinese bank account for the sender.
3. The sender transfers the agreed amount to the second broker's bank account.
4. Once the transfer has been received, the broker in China contacts the one in North Korea to notify them about the successful transaction.
5. The broker in North Korea then contacts the recipient to arrange a pickup location for the hard cash.

The brokers in North Korea have the cash ready and available, thus financial transfers are remarkably fast as they rely on their business partners in China to forward them the money at a later date. Because they are the ones most at risk of North Korean authorities, brokers within the country receive a larger percentage of the fee that is collected per transaction, which commonly lingers between 25-30 per cent (Lankov, 2013: 97). Even with the complexity of the transaction and fees, the scale of remittances by 2011 was estimated to be around $5-20 million USD a year (Lankov, 2013: 264). The socio-economic integration report of North Koreans in South Korea by NKDB has noticed an increase in the number of migrants remitting money in the latter years from 47.4 per cent in 2012 to 61.8 per cent in 2018 (NKDB, 2019: 171-172). Due to the pandemic, this number decreased to 26.6 per cent in 2020. The total annual amount remitted by all North Koreans has also declined from 327.9 million won in 2018 (NKDB, 2019: 187) to 299.78 million won in 2019 (NKDB, 2020: 9).

Modern technologies have largely facilitated the process mapped out above. Cell phones are instrumental as they allow migrants to contact the recipients in North Korea directly and, at times, in real-time. Interaction with North Koreans is done through international phone calls using Chinese SIM cards (Baek, 2016: 111, 125), messaging through apps such as the South Korean instant messaging application KakaoTalk (Baek, 2016: 302, 328), or calling (and even video calling) using Skype (Baek, 2016: 294). As NKDB's (2018 and 2020) study indicates, North Korean migrants are more prone to send financial remittances than they are to contact their families, and, when they do, most of them do it to double-check the receipt of the money and items. Below, the method followed to send goods and letters (social remittances) is introduced. The

possibility of real-time communication (or contact with a short delay) justifies why over 90 per cent of migrants prefer contacting their relatives in North Korea using phones (NKDB, 2018: 64-65; NKDB, 2020: 62).

Physical items and care packages sent to North Korea include letters, medicine, cell phones, Bibles, and English dictionaries. The process takes more time and is the most complex and problematic of the methods. Baek's (2016: 296-297) study delineates the process followed to dispatch the goods:

1. The sender (migrant abroad) and the individual in North Korea contact each other to identify the recipient's needs.
2. Once the sender has collected and bought the items, these are waterproofed with bags and plastic wrappings.
3. The sender contacts a *Joseonjeok* broker in China and sends the items to the person.
4. The broker in China then contacts the Chinese smuggler whowill be in charge of delivering them to North Korea and the North Korean smuggler who will retrieve the package. The exchange happens at the narrowest points of the Tumen River where the waterproofed goods are thrown from the Chinese side to the North Korean one (Baek, 2016: 20-21). The North Korean smuggler often bribes North Korean border guards to avoid detention (Hastings, Wertz, and Yeo, 2021), which puts the latter at risk of punishment if caught abetting the transmission of remittances. Due to needing to pay bribes and the dangers on the North Korean side of the process, it is also not uncommon for them to keep part of the goods to themselves and deem them as lost during the river exchange (Baek, 2016: 298).
5. After the package has been picked up, the smuggler hand-delivers it to the recipient.

Most North Korean migrants do not escape with the intention of going to South Korea. Their major purpose is, essentially, survival and a comfortable life - if not for them, at least for their families and friends who live amidst North Korea's "chronic difficult times" (Lankov, 2004: 871). Hence, regardless of the difficulties in providing, information, money, or communicating with their loved ones, migrants take any chance to provide for those back home. Remitting becomes an obligation. Thus, transnational organisations including settled migrants, Chinese, and *Joseonjeok* play a key part in remittance-sending and sharing with newcomers how to continue the practice (Shin, 2021: 5). The task is, to a degree, easily facilitated by the *Joseonjeok* as they have access to travel permits into North Korea that allow them to cross the border (Chen, 2022). In other words, these enable migrants to live between "here-and-there" as they carry on transnational practices (Yoon, 2013: 29-30).

It is the responsibility of those who are 'newly arrived' to attain information about how to provide for those back home. This can include contacting smuggler networks that do cross-border business, learning it from other migrants at Hanawon centres[3], or through joining North Korean ethnic communities after graduation from the Hanawon centre. The two former steps are much simpler for North Koreans: on the one hand, most North Koreans are acquainted with smugglers due to their involvement in the migration journey; on the other hand, new arrivals in South Korea are sent

[3] Hanawon centres are training facilities where newly arrived North Koreans go through a three-month mandatory program that prepares them to live in North Korea. This includes learning aspects of everyday life such as looking for jobs or banking (Song and Bell, 2019; Wolman, 2022).

to Hanawon centres with other migrants where they are trained for their new lives in the country. Learning the remittance know-how can be challenging for some migrants who do not want to be involved with ethnic organisations or networks (Bidet, 2013: 110).

2.3 Microfinancing, Remittances, and North Korean Migration

This literature review so far has examined existing literature looking at migration and remittance-sending behaviour within the North Korean context. Microfinancing is a subject that is predominantly unexplored in this country. The Singaporean non-governmental organisation Choson Exchange (CE) contemplated the viability of microfinancing institutions (MFIs) to be established in North Korea to support micro-enterprises. The idea was positively received by North Koreans and the organisation identified there is high demand for micro-loans. CE concluded that setting up lending institutions should not encounter obstacles once "the regulatory framework and structure is clarified" (Sinclair, 2015: para. 13). However, Cuba illustrates how political issues and sanctions can override the establishment of MFIs (Lapenu, 2000; Vidal, 2019). Other authors like Silberstein (2016) have proposed microfinance services as a vehicle for development cooperation with North Korea to support marketisation and entrepreneurship.

As it is, microfinancing in North Korea has been not only solely analysed under the lenses of economic cooperation and development, but it has also been hypothetical. MFIs are not yet a reality in North Korea and thus the potential reverberations on further out-migration, transitioning to free markets, entrepreneurship, and economic development remain speculative within this context. Similarly, microfinancing-led economic development can be a deterrent for further migration (Rozelle et al., 1999).

Multilateral and unilateral sanctions have been imposed on North Korea due to its nuclear program, impacting key aspects of its economy, such as trade and banking (Zadeh-Cummings and Harris, 2020). Sanctions, North Korea's challenging international relations, and the local socio-economic context complicate the establishment of MFIs within the country. However, this does not mean there is a universal lack of access to credit domestically. As North Korea watchers oft emphasise, there are two aspects of the North Korean people: their resourcefulness and their resilience particularly in the face of ongoing economic struggles (Lim, 2021; Sung, 2023: 291). The vast networks of brokers and smugglers that have contributed to North Korea's growing informal economy, illegal migration, human trafficking, and migrant services (remittance-sending and communication facilitation), have made accessing credit possible for North Koreans. Whereas established microfinancing institutions remain absent, brokers (Chinese or *Joseonjeok*) have served as a replacement and acted as loan sharks (KINU, 2015: 14; Lankov and Kim, 2008: 67). As the socio-economic spheres developed (mainly due to border-crossing and the flourishing of a border economy), North Korea witnessed the rise of the *donju*, the masters of money. Originally the term was used for individuals who possessed large amounts of money and would lend money and charge high interests. Still, it has now become an umbrella term for the nouveau riche, including moneylenders, business owners, and market entrepreneurs (Jung et al., 2018; Kim, 2020b: 3). Their rise has been partly fuelled by access to international networks like brokers, which facilitate entrepreneurial activities within North Korea (Jung et al., 2018).

All in all, broker networks and the rising *donju* moneylenders have become what could be referred to as microfinancing with North Korean characteristics. A number of published studies have examined how the two have massively contributed to local market economies and the expansion of informal trade networks (Hastings, 2022; Hastings et al., 2021; Kim and Kim, 2019). As the previous section assessed, access to credit eases migration but, simultaneously, incentivises economic development. This, in turn, reduces migration aspirations as incomes rise and , thus, the income gap between the international level and the home country diminishes (Barnett and Webber, 2010; De Haas, 2007; Rozelle et al., 1999).

Therefore, while the literature provides some information about microfinancing and access to credit in North Korea, little is known about their impact on household migration strategies or the economic strategies they influence. Whereas MFIs remain a 'what if' in North Korea's future, *donju*, and brokers have emerged as a replacement for them, expanding access to loans to be used for a variety of activities. This particular research examines how financial (and social) remittances impact migration aspirations and capabilities by looking at different aspects unexplored by existing research. Investigating the link between remittances and access to credit, outside information and transnational network access, and remittances and entrepreneurship enables understanding the developments of North Korean migration, but also changes in the socio-economic context.

2.4 Remittance Behaviour and Remittances in Asia

Having outlined what existing scholarship has addressed regarding North Korean migration, remittance behaviour, and how financial remittances substitute for the absence of MFIs in the country, this chapter will engage with the broader fields of remittance behaviour and migration. Remittances are understood as money, information, or goods transferred by migrants abroad to their families or social networks in their home country (Ivlevs, Nikolova, and Graham, 2019: 115; Van Dalen et al., 2005: 376). This definition differs from the common understanding of remittances as solely financial transactions from a migrant to the origin country through the inclusion of social capital. Social remittances comprise the migration-driven cultural diffusion of social capital, understood as resources carried through social networks (Huber, 2008) such as ideas, information, and behaviours (Levitt, 1998: 936). These types of non-monetary remittances are transmitted through different mechanisms including face-to-face meetings, letters, sent goods (such as DVDs and books), videos, or international calls. Social remittances are critical as they prompt individuals to build representations of the migrant experience and life in another location (White, 2016: 64).

This section is divided into short sub-sections focusing on different themes within remittance behaviour that concern motivations for remittance-sending, mobility, and the receiving household. These are altruistic and self-serving motivators behind remittance-sending; benefiting the household economy; shaping emigration perceptions and de-bordering; and the relationship between the family and the sender through transnational interactions.

2.4.1 Altruistic Remittance-Sending

Research examining remittances has shown their impact on receiving communities with an interdisciplinary approach through the lenses of migration theory, sociology, and microeconomics. These range from how providing financial remittances serves as a means for the migrants to move up the social hierarchical when they move back (Lucas and Stark, 1985; Rapoport and Docquier, 2005) to the pressures of migrants abroad in sending money frequently back home (Boccagni, 2015; Hammond, 2011). Additionally, remittances provide a link between the migrants and the sending countries themselves. Developing countries frequently promote the practice of financial remittance-sending to attract investment, which has been noted to outpace foreign investment or aid (Lim, 2014: 1). Financial remittances earmarked as investment effectively reinforce nationalistic ideals both in the home country and in the settling country as the migrants maintain their loyalty and have an active role in strengthening the place they have left behind (Momesso and Lee, 2017: 465). Thus, remittance behaviour can be influenced by motivators from the sender, the receiver, and the home country.

Scholarship on how remittances play in the lives and the communities of those left behind is extensive. Existing literature looking at financial remittances identifies remittance-sending as being financially incentivised. The motivations behind the transactions are simply reduced to being either altruistic or self-serving (Rapoport and Docquier, 2005), or sprouting from rational, economy-based arrangements with 'migrant households' (Lubkemann, 2016; Lucas and Stark, 1985). The latter is particularly predominant in scholarship concerning Asian countries such as China (Wei, 2018), the Philippines (Gutierrez, 2018), and Vietnam (Le and Nguyen, 2019). The next sub-section will address migrant households, and the present one will examine the motivations behind remittance-sending.

The dominant body of literature concerning remittances has hyper-focused on the dyad between the migrant abroad and the households left behind, often emphasising altruism as the main motivator. However, altruism cannot be predicted, making it difficult to forecast remittance transfer timing or the likelihood of their occurrence. Previous sections have shown North Korean migrants send remittances regularly to the households left behind (NKDB, 2020). While some literature critiques altruism for its unpredictability, North Korean remittances appear to deviate from this narrative as the flows are more consistent. Defining remittance behaviour solely through intervals and volume of transfer risks oversimplification and could ignore their broader significance. An alternative approach is to examine what is transmitted rather than when or if it is sent. Cliggert (2005), in analysing gift-sending practices, concluded: "the crucial feature emerging is that the actual gift itself matters very little, while the process of gifting is at the core" (Cliggert, 2005: 38). This perspective highlights the social value of remittances and challenges their assessment as purely monetary exchanges as it looks at what is sent and why. An item, such as a Bible or a DVD, can be forwarded as a present but also carry comfort or particular values to the recipient. Baek (2016) reflects on what is sent to North Korea beyond money, including cell phones and medicine, which serve a particular purpose. Cell phone devices can contribute to the communication between the sender and the receiver.

Unpredictable altruism does not necessarily explain why migrants, who may have additional challenges to send remittances or trauma, choose to send anything back home. As noted previously,

North Korean remittances do not share the unpredictability of altruism as financial capital is usually sent regularly and items have a purpose. If remittance-sending is seen in its entirety by weighing social implications on top of the material ones, it can be seen as a practice that is not fully altruistic but has self-serving implications. The *self* that benefits from remittances may not be just the sender, but also the receiving end (the country that welcomes the investment or the family itself). Examples of self-serviceness show that remittances can be meant to revive links with the origin country through social ties but also political (Teye-Kau and Madibbo, 2020: 29) or the practice can be shaped by cultural obligations linked to gender. In this last regard, Ullah and Chattoraj (2023) find that exposure to remittances and thus the experience of *what* is sent can be influenced by the gender of senders and receivers. Their study finds that female recipients obtain fewer financial remittances while male senders provide higher amounts to male recipients. This shows that individuals may provide remittances to fulfil their cultural and family roles instead of just plain altruism.

2.4.2 Self-Serving Remittances and Migrant Households

Remittance-sending theories looking at self-interest and migrant households overlap as they define the practice as the result of a cost-benefit calculation. Self-interest is considered to be the sender's reward. Migrant households, a concept coined in a study of migration in the Philippines (Paul, 2015: 76), refer to families that leverage mobility to support those remaining at home or to benefit both the household and the migrants themselves (Mahmud, 2020). Ultimately, the notion that migration serves a projected goal underscores the rationality of both the migrant and the household in their decision-making processes with the idea that "it pays to emigrate" (Van Dalen et al., 2005: 378). Hence, remittance-receiving has been found to have an overwhelmingly positive effect on migration perceptions and the desire to emigrate (Aslany et al., 2021: 45). The economic benefits of out-migration and remittances for the left behind often improve life satisfaction and psychological well-being by lessening stress and depression, though not happiness overall (Ives et al., 2014; Ivlevs, Nikolova, and Graham, 2019).

Implying rationality of the involved parties obscures the social processes behind decision-making and individual interests (Mahmud, 2020: 175). In extension, this also applies to theories based on self-interest. Remittance-sending is an inherent part of how migrant households work, as they benefit from sending family members abroad for different types of profit that are usually financial. In the case of North Korea, data from NKDB (2020 and 2021) shows that forwarding money to the household left behind is, to a degree, a common practice among North Korean migrants. While not all of them actively engage in sending remittances yearly, the majority of their interviewees had experience with the practice. Yet, academics like Song (2015) or North Korean memoirs such as Jang and Cha's (2022), observe that emigration is not something that is discussed in the household. These authors explain how escaping is something that is done individually and secretly so the family left behind cannot be punished. Thus, is it possible that North Korean households use migration as a strategy for the family's wellbeing? Rationality, therefore, would imply the full-on, constant cooperation of the migrants who dutifully partake in sending remittances. However, North Korean households may not get to discuss mutually beneficial contracts or reach any agreement. Simultaneously, the smoothness of the remittance-sending process is jeopardised by the new social environment migrants find themselves in as they try to build their lives 'in-between'

both locations. In this regard, Park (2023) reflects on the burden of remittance-sending for North Korean migrants who are pressured into carrying the financial responsibilities of the North Korean household.

Migrant households engage in migration through what should be mutually beneficial contracts between the migrant-to-be and the head of the family, the household dictator (Mahmud, 2020: 175). However, the effectiveness of the migrant household concept is undermined by the fragmentation of families due to factors such as gender, generation, and social environment. As Mahmud (2020) exposes, the household dictator tends to be the oldest man in the family. Yet, in the North Korean case, the relation between gender and the economy has changed with marketisation. Haggard and Nolan (2011) expose how the informal economy has put a double burden on North Korean women as the caregivers and breadwinners of the family. Authors like Kook (2018), Sung (2023), and Kim (2020) expose the genderisation of North Korean migration as some women voluntarily leave to provide for their families, a decision made by themselves without a household dictator behind it. Remittance transfers positively impact the well-being of the household in the country of origin (Ivlevs, Nikolova, and Graham, 2019), and scholarship has shown how North Korean women pursue this influence for their families.

North Korean households may decide on migration and remittance strategies either in advance or as circumstances arise. Regardless of the timing, North Korean migrants actively engage in these transnational practices, which can benefit their families. The success of these arrangements, defined by the extent to which benefits are maximised, and mutually suitable agreements are established, largely depends on the quality and availability of information (Gutierrez, 2018; Lubkemann, 2016). Thus, families and migrants may think they are engaging in mutually beneficial contracts when they send a member abroad. However, integrating and making money in the destination country may not be as simple as originally thought. The information sources' trustworthiness and reliability become relevant since faulty knowledge may lead to imprecise cost-benefit calculations. Overseas information dissemination is a highly discussed topic within the North Korean studies field, and it has been connected to migration (for example, see Lee, 2013). Yet information about how to escape is largely shared through word of mouth which may not be as trustworthy (Chang et al., 2006). This study will pay particular attention to social remittances to observe the type of information that is shared with the North Korean household and its influence.

One way to understand how households develop migration strategies is by framing remittance-receiving as a form of family investment. A key aspect of this process is examining the mechanisms through which remittances are delivered to the family. Most countries facilitate sending money through bank transfers, remittance businesses like Western Union (Bolzani, 2018), or the more recent remittance-sending phone apps like Remitly. Bank transfers and remittance services exist, in part, because remittances can bring economic benefit to the home country in the form of investments in business, real estate, or local development. Hence, governments in the sending country ease remittance-receiving infrastructures to allow this cash flow in, which is something seen in Taiwan (Momesso and Lee, 2017). The elements of investment and risks are also very much involved in this nuanced definition of the household as a super trader unit (Van Dalen et al., 2005: 376).

As discussed in the previous section, Remittances to North Korea, the mechanisms for sending money to North Korea have evolved into a unique system that has endured over the years. This study will show how local authorities are complicit in the prevalence of remittance-sending into the country, which can contribute to the emergence of migrant households. Moreover, when looking at monetary remittances solely considering their financial value, research has investigated how they influence the survival of autocratic regimes and reached conflicting conclusions regarding how these affect them. Studies concluded monetary remittances stabilise autocratic regimes (Ahmed, 2012), worsen corruption, and weaken institutions (Abdih et al., 2012), or improve the likelihood of democratisation by eroding the patronage links on which the party is dependent on holding power (Escribà-Folch, Meseguer, and Wright, 2015).

Migrant households are not, however, the norm in migration, which can help explain why the number of North Koreans abroad is not excessive. Living close to family members is an important deterrent for mobility itself (Ermisch and Mulder, 2019; Mulder, 2018) and mobility is more often triggered towards family rather than socioeconomic causes (Thomas and Dommermuth, 2020). The instances in which families become involved in migration and remittances are those in which these intertwine their members in household migration strategies. The schemes involve sending family members abroad to continue the remittance-sending chain (Boyd, 1989: 651). Another instance concerns individuals seeking support to migrate as individuals may migrate after taking a loan from the household. In this case, the individual pays it back, with additional interest, with remittances (Rapoport and Docquier, 2005: 9). An aspect that will be introduced later on in the section about transnational networks, which will delve into how the here-and-thereness aspect of transnationalism and communication links can facilitate migration. Communication and social remittance-sending act as ‘social glue’ (Vertovec, 2004) and North Korean migrants engage in both, thus easing the negative effects of distancing from the family.

An important aspect to consider when speaking of migrant households is the hierarchy within the family. Gram et al. (2018) find that countries with a tradition connected to Confucianism are seeing a drastic transformation. Those who remain immobile and are necessarily key agents during the decision-making step (Mondain and Diagne, 2013: 506) where traditionally the head of the house selects who will remain comfortable and live off remittances and who will leave and work to provide them (Mahmud, 2020). When mobile family members depart and remittance-sending begins, family hierarchies are often transformed (Hoang and Yeoh, 2015; Khamkhom and Jampaklay, 2020), triggering a phenomenon termed ‘dependency syndrome’ (Dash, 2020: 10). This syndrome describes the reliance of recipients on remittances from migrants for survival. Efforts to counter this dependency, such as reducing the amount and frequency of remittances (Castañeda, 2013: e24-e25), are sometimes implemented but they may have little ineffective as it happens in Thailand, where households remain reliant on overseas support (Khamkhom and Jampaklay, 2020). Dependency does not solely occur financially but also involves social remittances as those who remain immobile rely on those abroad for outside knowledge transfer (Imran et al., 2020). The scene displays the potential effect of remittances as migration drivers and deterrents, as households choose remittance-sending as the motivation for some to become mobile and to stay put for the rest. Whereas Shin (2021) and Park (2023) have examined how migrants deal with the pressure of their families back in North Korea asking for money, this may not mean the households solely depend on this income. The present research will look into remittance dependency in North Korea to give new insight into North Korean remittance behaviour.

Finally, another noteworthy aspect is that scholarship has also addressed remittances as shock absorbers as they are sent and used to palliate negative effects of economic or socio-political causes in the sending country (Shastri, 2021; Singh, 2010). In this scenario, migrants often remit larger sums or send money more frequently to provide additional support for those left behind. While this does not negate the existence of an ongoing household strategy, it is notable that these remittances are not intended as a means for the family to migrate and escape the crisis. Instead, they are sent specifically to sustain and support them in place (Dash, 2020; Semyonov and Gorodzeisky, 2005). On the topic of North Korea, Baek (2016) has found a similar connection as North Korean migrants provided and warned their family members about the upcoming currency reform in 2009. This combination of social remittances (the warning) and financial transfers helped avert the potential economic shock for the receiving households.

2.4.3 Shaping Emigration Perceptions

The next section will address how transnationalism has made migration a social product. Migrant households seek mutually beneficial contracts for the family and the migrant, and individual migrants may pursue their goals before becoming mobile. What pulls individuals out of one country to another is shaped by the information available to them. If this information is not trustworthy and gives a false perception of the destination, any investment or potential of remittance-sending can be at risk. Shin (2021 and 2023) has reflected on how social remittances have de-bordered North Korea, a concept that will be expanded upon shortly. Information coming into the country, regardless of quality, shapes how the immobile people see their position in the world, their home country, and emigration.

Van Dalen et al. (2005) conclude that remittances have a positive influence on emigration intentions and there is a myriad of reasons behind it. Economic approaches to the ramifications of receiving remittances have moved beyond the micro-level and considered the broader, macroeconomic aftereffects in inequality, entrepreneurship, and human and local development (Bakker, 2015; Rapoport and Docquier, 2005; Stahl and Arnold, 1986). As the informal economy has grown in North Korea, border-crossing has become commonplace. Song (2015) observed that with the growth of marketisation, the number of North Koreans abroad increased. Even with the additional challenges that came into place with Kim Jong-un, it was only the pandemic that finally put emigration out of the country to a halt (MoU, 2024). Hastings, Wertz, and Yeo (2021) expose how marketisation has triggered more entrepreneurship and human development and, with it, the relationship between how North Koreans interact with the authorities and the country has changed. Remittances have the power to influence not only household's resources, but also how the family interprets the world surrounding them.

There is a social aspect of financial remittances in the eventuality that the sender can mediate the transaction face-to-face (Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou, 2017), yet this is not a guarantee for the North Korean case. Other studies identify remittances as de-bordering tools involving financial investment in the home country and the transmission of foreign values and ideas. Both have the potential to challenge a country's borders and test their robustness or porosity, as Shin (2021) finds in her work with North Koreans. Remittances influence borders by de-bordering but sharing and

communicating with those back home sways migrants into a life 'in-between' or living in a re-bordered 'third space' (Small, 2019; Tedeschi, Vorobeva, and Jauhiainen, 2020: 9).

Authors expose that living in-between and remittance-sending practices are embedded in the migrant life of those who have left Asian countries (for example, Wei, 2018). Scholarship on remittances and mobility in Asia presents these transnational transactions as migration drivers that divide families into immobile (recipients) and mobile (senders). This is characteristic of Nepal, China (Wei, 2018; Wilson, Hu, and Rahman, 2018), the Philippines (Gutierrez, 2018; Semyonov and Gorodzeisky, 2005), Thailand (Khamkhom and Jampaklay, 2020), and Vietnam (Le and Nguyen, 2019) amongst many others (Handoyo and Simanjuntak, 2018). The North Korean case seems to show something that is, perhaps, similar, but mostly represented by the feminisation of mobility (Kook, 2018; Kim, 2020). This strategical choice finds human migration as the path towards the household's wellbeing through remittance-receiving, which can lead to upward mobility for the immobile (Bharti and Tripathi, 2020). Considering the punishment that North Korean families may face if a member of the household escapes (Song, 2015) and the secrecy that comes with communicating with migrants (NKDB, 2020), the social mobility of the family in this case can be put into question. Yet, the financial aspect of remittances could still play into it and this thesis examines that.

New research has further examined household strategies in particular areas, especially after the financial crisis in Asia, and identified how outflows have been shaped by the 'feminisation of survival' where women have better prospects of becoming mobile and supporting the family with cash remittances (Sassen, 2002: 258). Whereas migrant women generally have limited access to jobs, human trafficking and involvement in the sex industry have contributed to female hypermobility and higher remittance flows[4] (Sassen, 2002).

2.4.4 Family Ties and Cultural Roles

Another crucial aspect to observe in remittance behaviour is the social realm in the home and destination countries and the nature of a migrant's linkages back. Parella, Silvester, and Petroff (2021: 269) analysed remittance behaviour among immigrants from Bolivia in Spain and concluded: "remitting is embedded in socially constructed norms." Remittances are influenced and conditioned by the migrants' connection with the ones they have left behind and, additionally, by their desire to assimilate into the country of residence (Parella, Silvester, and Pestroff, 2021: 264). Therefore, other than transnational links, individual motivations linked to the social and economic environment at the destination country also shape and impact the frequency, channel, and amount of remittance transactions. The introduction of socially constructed norms and how they interplay with individual motivations (altruistic and self-interested) and the migrants' social environment (transnational or local) depict the complexity of theorizing remittance behaviour. Moreover, the dual nature of remittances poses a challenge. Theories tend to examine monetary (financial) or non-monetary (social) remittances, subsequently dividing remittance literature depending on

[4] 'Higher remittance flows' refers to the comparison of what women migrants would be able to attain in regular jobs. Men migrants tend to contribute higher remittances than women across the board (King, Castaldo, and Vullnetari, 2011; Orkoh and Stolzenburg, 2020). It must be noted that this data, in certain cases, may have been inflated to emphasise the roles of 'dutiful sons and loyal husbands' (King, Castaldo, and Vullnetari, 2011: 400).

which type is being examined. The introduction of 'remittance scripts' (Carling, 2014: S221) has re-conceptualised financial remittances as social acts, presenting an opportunity to assess both kinds under the same scope.

Carling's concept implies remittances are composite transactions of material, emotional, and relational elements. His focus is not on *what* is sent but on the social constructs in which remittances occur. 'Scripts' represent a repertoire of social structures, statuses, and actions involved in the interaction and understood by both transactors. 12 types of remittance scripts are identified: compensation; repayment; authorisation; pooling; gifting; allowance; obligation and entitlement; sacrifice; blackmail; help; investment; and donation. Additionally, scripts can layer when the sender and the recipient assign different scripts to the same remittance transaction (Carling, 2014: S231-S243 and S250). This dynamism and multi-layering are important since they acknowledge the complexity behind remittance motivations, or as expressed by Van Dalen and colleagues (2005: 388): "One cannot expect remittances to be driven by a single motive (…) even someone who is led purely by altruistic motives may still act in accordance with some kind of social contract." As addressed earlier, remittance scripts can be applied for social and financial remittances. Nevertheless, studies have rarely addressed the ramifications of both types of transactions neither in conjunction nor in comparison but have commonly focused on one of the two.

The rationale for sending remittances to support those left behind is similar to the motivation behind remittance-sending of Asian parents who have left behind their children in the sending country. Distance parenthood is performed as a rite in a way that remittances are not provided for family reunification, but to support and compensate for the parental absence (Chung, 2018). This is an aspect of migration that is seen in North Korea with women voluntarily engaging in human trafficking to provide for their families (Kook, 2018; Kim, 2020). Conversely, when the parents are immobile, financial remittances and especially social remittances are forwarded to perform filial piety (Chan, 2017; Tu, 2016). Park (2023) does not use the concepts of parental duty or filial piety. Still, his research includes the sense of duty and burden of North Korean migrants who leave, regardless of their position in the family. What authors like Chan (2017) expose is that transnational support can be a mobility deterrent as the left behind do not see any reward in migrating when they are already provided with their needs from abroad. This also connects with the 'moral hazard problem' that accompanies remittances where the dependents and recipients decide to stop working as they have enough from remittances (Alba and Sugui, 2011: 2). In other words, dependency transforms them into passive agents who are not strategists anymore (if at all) and uninterested in migration. Shin (2021), examining North Korean remittance sending, exposes the contrary as the left behind continue asking for money actively, regardless of their desire to become mobile.

To conclude this section, financial remittances are increasingly relevant in the academic literature concerning Asian migration. Household strategies divide families into two groups: the mobile and the immobile; the senders and the receivers; both differentiated and defined as the breadwinners and the dependents. These strategies are only possible through new values gained through social remittances which build a translocal place where negotiations occur and knowledge is transferred (Peth and Sakdapolrak, 2020). Shin (2021 and 2023) shares this view and concludes that it has led to the de-bordering of North Korea for the receivers. Park (2023) concludes that the receiving

family also continues to have an active role in requesting money from the migrant. The actual role of remittances here, and the rationale behind remittance-sending and communication, serves the different objectives of maintaining ties with the family, but also supporting their current livelihoods where they are and as they are. This contrasts with classical migration theory which commonly presents individuals becoming mobile if there are better salaries and overall economic opportunities elsewhere. As Mondain and Diagne (2013: 506) propose, "the 'left-behind' of today may become the migrants of tomorrow"; but perhaps most importantly, their research emphasises that immobility can be a strategic decision, especially when remittances are involved.

2.5 Transnational Networks, Remittances, and Out-Migration

Mobility does not take place in a void, nor is it an isolated phenomenon. Structural approaches to migration have defined migration as a one-time occurrence in which individuals go from one location to another. Out-flows happen within the context of other migration flows. In other words, human flows both belong and are influenced by flows of information, goods, money, and services (Boyd, 1989: 641). In like manner, the migration journey of an individual is concurrently affected by the social, political, and economic context. Thus, migration is a social product created by transnational networks of agents who seek profit, family members, and migrant communities worldwide. This section will expand on how literature has examined the transnational field concerning mobility, chain migration, and remittance behaviour.

2.5.1 Migration as a Social Product: Chain Migration, Strong and Weak Ties, and Migrant Networks

Mobility is embedded in networks that exist within the broader transnational social context. Networks refer to the set of interpersonal connections between a set of individuals and collective actors who share social and symbolic linkages (Boswell, 2002: 3). Migrant networks influence the migration journey (Caarls, Bilgili, and Fransen, 2020: 3). While these ties are not bound to a location, they span across different nation-states that may influence the direction, shape, and means of migration flows (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007: 144; Sharma and Cardenas, 2020: 26). Moreover, networks vary in kind, institutionalisation, and the type of linkages with migrants (kinship, friendship, businesses, and so on). Transnational networks assist prospective migrants with support during the migration journey, which can take the form of sharing information, sending remittances, and providing financial support (Bilecen, Gamper, and Lubbers, 2018: 1; Boyd, 1989: 643; Stovel and Shaw, 2012: 152).

These exchanges including that of social remittances contribute to the creation of migration cultures (or cultures of migration) that set the why, how, who, and where-to's of how communities engage with the migration process (White, 2016: 64). Successful migrants become involved with these networks in the host country as they play a role in assisting with integration, learning the know-hows of the new society, and provide emotional or financial support (Bilecen, Gamper, and Lubbers, 2017: 1; Boyd, 1989: 651). Ethnic associations that assist during the migration and integration journeys are often dedicated to auxiliary transnational activities such as sports and human rights that involve contact with the country of origin (Boyd, 1989: 652-653). Whereas the

North Korean case does not have cases in which migrant groups and home-based groups are connected to engage in sports or activism, the other aspects of transnationality are present. North Koreans migrate to the same destination countries (Japan, China, South Korea, and the UK) (Bell, 2022; Kirkpatrick, 2006; MoU, 2024; Shin, 2023). While this has practical reasons such as geographical proximity and language, migrant communities also play an important part in reducing migration costs and helping assimilation (Denney and Green, 2018). Bell (2022) reflects on the impact of emotional connection when North Koreans choose to migrate to Japan, which demonstrates the crucial role successful migrants and family members abroad have in mobility as exposed by Bilecen et al. (2017).

International migration also leads to the emergence of chain migration and transnational spaces. There is no unified definition for the concept of transnationalism. Yet,et it can be broadly described as "multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states" and across time and space (Boyd, 1989: 641; Vertovec, 1999: 447). Transnational ties vary in formality, strength, and intensity but not density as they involve contact persistence rather than fleeting or one-off communication (Faist, 2000: 189; Vertovec, 1999: 448). Kinship and personal ties are strong, while nonpersonal ties (businesses, hometown-based migration) are considered weaker. Within the former type of linkage, ties with the nuclear family are the strongest and those with friends are the weakest. Strength is calculated considering which link holds the most mutual obligation between parties. The extended family would stand between the two groups (nuclear family and friends) (Caarls, Bilgili, and Fransen, 2020: 8; Liu, 2013: 1253). Transnational networks share social capital such as financial resources (often in the form of remittances and investment), information, or human capital such as highly educated or skilled individuals (Faist, 2000: 191). This exchange facilitates chain migration, which in the North Korean context has also been described as chain-defection (Denney and Green, 2018). The type and impact of shared resources depend on the strength of the relationship between the parties involved. Stronger ties typically provide more reliable and verified information, while weaker ties are more likely to share innovative information, which is less tested knowledge passed along based on hearsay rather than direct experience (Liu, 2013: 1247). Thus, information shared through word-of-mouth in North Korea (Chang et al., 2006) would be from weak ties, as opposed to social remittances sent by family members to the household left behind which would be more reliable as it comes from strong ties.

The chore mechanisms of transnational networks vary across the literature. Reciprocity is always identified as one of the main ones alongside solidarity or sociability. The concept of reciprocity involves expectations, mutual obligations, and the social norm of returning something in exchange after the individual receives something (Elrick and Ciobanu, 2009: 101). Solidarity concerns the 'we-feeling' or 'we-consciousness' that donors and recipients exchange with the group due to common background, kinship, shared symbols, beliefs, or culture (Faist, 2000: 192-193). Lastly, sociability involves a shared feeling between the parties, including the aforementioned solidarity and (enforceable) trust (Portes, 1998: 10). These mechanisms enable and define distinct types of transnational spaces: transnational kinship groups, which are characterised by reciprocity and social norms; transnational circuits, which focus on exchanges and obligations between the members; and transnational communities, which have solidarity, collective representations, and the 'we-consciousness' at its centre (Faist, 2000: 195-196).

Transnational spaces serve as conduits for the exchange of social and financial capital, as well as the movement of people. Even though transnationalism is characterised by solidarity and reciprocity, both human and resource flows control to the sender as opposed to the receiving party (Faist, 2000: 193). Those left behind continue to gain resources and benefit from these asymmetrical relationships. The nature of these benefits varies depending on the recipients' needs and their broader impact on the country. As shown in previous sections, North Korean remittance receivers become money lenders, which can be used for the family's benefit but also have a small impact on the receiving community (Jung et al., 2018). Hence, transnational kinship groups engage in cross-border activities such as remittance flows of goods, money, and information back to the home country. Remittances, social or financial, demonstrate the existence of transnational networks across space while having larger implications for the party and the society at the receiving end. These transactions are often used as support for the family and can influence both the economy and society of the origin country. Jung et al. (2018) show how this occurs in North Korea too, and this thesis will expand on their work to observe how transnationalism also influences the informal economy. On top of the socioeconomic impact, remittances send a positive image of life standards and financial opportunities abroad, stimulating more emigration, especially since the capital can be used towards family migration strategies (Boyd, 1989: 651). Data from NKDB (2020) reveals that communication is not as commonplace as financial remittance-sending and money is not usually intended for family reunification purposes. This study will explore how these dynamics influence emigration patterns and migration drivers.

New technologies provide means to contact those left behind in real-time and at a higher frequency. Thus, these have enhanced the potential of transnational groups to promote further migration and rekindle migration chains. When addressing migrant families, Vertovec (2004: 219-220) explains: "nothing has facilitated processes of global linkage more than the boom in ordinary, cheap international phone calls" as they serve as 'social glue' between the mobile and the immobile. International calls, prepaid telephone cards, and other new technologies such as Interned-based messaging, video calls, and e-mails have introduced new ways to intensify interconnectedness and share information about what life is and what opportunities are like abroad. Rather than creating new social patterns at the transnational stage, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have reinforced pre-existing ones (Vertovec, 1999: 449) through sentiments of affiliation and belonging (Haug, 2008: 587). Shin (2023) emphasises how communication and remittance-sending have de-bordered North Korea for the receivers, successfully creating a translocal space built from contact with migrants.

Chain migration, family migration strategies, and other migratory phenomena enabled by transnational networks add another layer of concern for the origin country that simultaneously impacts remittances: brain drain and skilled migration. Faini's (2003) analysis of the two circumstances concluded that both harm the sending country, especially in the case of developing nations. Remittances can help the home country when these are sent for development, human investment, and poverty reduction. Yet benefits diminish when remittances are earmarked to cover emigration-related costs (Dimova and Wolff, 2014: 554-555).

Faini (2003: 8) finds little evidence to support that brain drain and the highly educated forward higher remittances. Skilled migrants keep their resources to spend later on bringing their families to the host country rather than sending remittances back. In the North Korean case, migration has

become gendered as women tend to become mobile to practice distance motherhood (Kim, 2020; Kook, 2018). Individuals with good social standing may become overseas workers for a time (Gyupchanova, 2018), but it is difficult to assess brain drain and skilled migration in North Korean mobility. Individuals involved with transnational spaces are motivated by solidarity and the consciousness of being 'here and there.' Vertovec (1999: 450) describes it as the "awareness of multi-locality stimulates the desire to connect oneself with others, both 'here' and 'there' who share the same 'routes' and 'roots.'" Hence, this in-betweenness creates a coherence beyond solidarity for migrants to remain close to fellow migrants and those left behind.

2.5.2 Transnational Agents and the Transformation of Migration: From the Dark Side of Mobility to Empowerment

Transnational networks are one of many factors weighed by migrants before the decision to migrate (or not) is taken. Social factors (including transnational spaces) and cultural elements also influence if and how mobility occurs (labour migration, permanent migration, and so on), which can help explain why North Koreans tend to go to destination countries where North Korean communities are already settled. These elements influence the choice of the country of destination and the migrant's experiences, adaptability, and integration in the new location (Haug, 2008: 588-589). The role of transnational social networks in mobility can be broadly described as linkages that reduce moving costs by providing information, financial assistance to cover travel expenses, and integration support. Networks enable mobility and border-crossing that can be either regular or irregular while simultaneously reducing the risks of moving. Therefore, the role of transnational spaces is crucial to enable chain migration and similar mobility strategies (Haug, 2008: 588, 599). In the North Korean context, North Korean migrants send financial remittances that can then be used to pay broker fees for the receiving household (Kim, 2016; Kim, 2020).

Family members abroad and ethnic communities are not the only agents involved in migration. The North Korean case presents an interesting context in which emigration is usually conducted informally with the assistance of brokers. Transnational agents, like these brokers, are crucial in making migration possible within certain contexts, which makes them a crucial part of the 'migration industry' (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring, 2020). These migration networks can be human smugglers, brokers, international organisations, civil society, law enforcement agents, and so on (Caarls, Bilgili, and Fransen, 2020: 4; Lindquist, 2015). When examining North Korean migration, Baek (2016) differentiates them as profit-, compassion-, and demand-driven networks. Profit-driven agents comprise the dark side of the migration industry and are often involved with irregular migration and employment, and the 'rescue' industry (Elrick and Ciobanu, 2009: 101; Hernández-León, 2013: 25-26). From these examples, we can consequently recognise a varying degree of legality across migration networks. Moreover, networks are migration enablers for those migrants that have legal migration paths closed off. In other words, the more complex and improbable regular migration is, the higher the chances are for aspiring migrants to perceive illicit support as necessary (Schwartz et al., 2016: 5-6).

2.5.3 Migrant Families, Transnationalism, and the Remittance-Mobility Nexus

On the one hand, transnational spaces with ethnic communities and migration networks have been identified as migration enablers. On the other hand, remittances, which are ingrained in transnational linkages and occur between senders (migrants abroad) and recipients (the left behind), have the potential to impact migration strategies. Are remittances always prone to promote outward mobility? Looking into the case study of this research, scholarship has examined how financial remittances cover migration costs out of North Korea (Kim, 2016; Kim, 2020), but they can also be used for the household's entrepreneurial ventures (Jung et al., 2018). Several studies have investigated the previous question and have found varying results. Remittances have been identified as migration-deterrents as they improve the welfare of the recipients and reduce poverty, consequently curving aspirations to leave (Adams and Page, 2005: 1655, 1660). However, remittances affect perceptions, too. Authors have reached different conclusions about how remittances trigger further migration (and stir chain migration): they depict out-migration as a profitable undertaking (Boyd, 1989: 651; Dimova and Wolff, 2005; Van Dalen et al., 2005: 378); they are the product of strong family ties (Rapoport and Docquier, 2005); and reduce migration costs, which contributes to sustained migration (Haug, 2008: 588; Sharma and Cardenas, 2020: 32), something that is found in the North Korean case (Denney and Green,2018).

Remittances can impact out-migration intentions in two ways. The first one is fixated on remittances as a vehicle to strengthen family ties. Migration aspirations emerge in favour of family reunification and remittances are intended to cover the move to accomplish it. This avenue is mostly taken by migrant households (Piracha and Saraogi, 2017). In the North Korean case, scholarship has observed how migrants are burdened to send remittances (Park, 2023). Yet, et remittances are sent due to requests (Park et al., 2020) and not for family reunification purposes (NKDB, 2020). The second way impacts both migrant and non-migrant households and relates to the content of remittances in connection to individual needs (Piracha and Saraogi, 2017: 103). Specifically, when recipients have specific needs (such as employment, a better quality of life, or respect for human rights) and perceive remittances as signalling that these needs can be fulfilled abroad, migration inclinations are likely to develop (Leeves, 2009). Migrant networks and being the recipient of remittances are considered to be important migration drivers (Aslany et al., 2021: 45). Leeves (2009) identifies that non-migrant households receive less information than migrant ones. Because of this, the extent to which remittances influence mobility aspirations for them is halved. Remittances have the potential to promote migration amongst individuals with no prior intentions to emigrate. In this scenario, aspirations are triggered when a migrant showcases better welfare and opportunities elsewhere. Regarding this provision, scholarship on North Korea has emphasised the role of migrant networks and not family members when it comes to finding jobs and opportunities in China (Kim, 2020).

Moreover, remittances can rekindle the mobility process of non-migrant and migrant households that had prior aspirations to migrate but lacked the ability to do so (therefore, involuntarily immobile) (Piracha and Saraogi: 2017: 106-107). Using remittances, the immobile can eventually become mobile. In this context, Carling's (2001 and 2002) concept of involuntary immobility applies to individuals who lack the resources or abilities to migrate. However, Piracha and Saraogi (2017) argue that such immobility can be temporary, as remittances have the potential to promote and support migration, thereby transforming immobility into mobility. Although remittances can curve mobility aspirations for some individuals, remittance-receivers are much more inclined to want to emigrate than those who do not (Akkonyunlu, 2009: 15; Dimova and Wolff, 2015: 557-

558; Piracha and Saraogi, 2017: 116; Sharma and Cardenas, 2020: 29; Van Dalen et al., 2005: 386). This is particularly interesting for North Korea as emigration is not always successful.

In conclusion, mobility decision-making is thus largely influenced by the individual's access to different assets. Migration is conceived as a two-step process in which individuals first want to become mobile and then realise this desire. Individual characteristics, receiving remittances, and the strength and access to transnational networks are key migration aspirations to emerge. Capital and resources provided by the transnational spaces contribute to the individual's abilities, consequently facilitating and, at times, enabling migration.

2.6 Microfinancing and Migration

Over the past three decades, microfinancing services have bolstered within the developing world. The 2006 Nobel Peace Prize winners, Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, introduced the concept of microfinancing: a banking practice that provides relatively small loans, typically in the range of hundreds rather than thousands of dollars, without requiring collateral. These loans are primarily aimed at low-income households, supporting microenterprise and investment (Bylander, 2013: 1; Cull, Demirgüç-Kunt, and Morduch, 2009). As MFIs have grown in volume and reach, they have interplayed with developing countries and their migration practices. Migrant households take microcredits as advance cash until the expected remittances from those abroad are received, while other families utilise them to cover the expenses of outmigration (Bylander, 2013: 1).

In turn, MFIs have identified migrant households as a lucrative new market due to the remittances they receive (Bylander, 2013). Existing research has proven a positive correlation between remittance-receiving households and entrepreneurial practices (Funkhouser, 1992; Massey and Parrado, 1998). Simultaneously, remittance flows (and microenterprises) ease access to these financial services to low-income migrant households (Ambrosius, Fritz, and Stiegler, 2014). Studies have shown the combination of remittances and entrepreneurship has a positive impact on poverty alleviation, development, and economic growth in developing countries as well (for example, Exeanyeji et al., 2020). Microfinancing inspires individuals to join market activities and pursue entrepreneurship, which necessarily pushes for bottom-up innovation. Hence, MFIs have a butterfly effect on planned and transitional economies by fortifying and easing the emergence of market economies (Ahlstrom et al., 2018; Ivas, 2010).

Entrepreneurship, economic growth, and development are some of the by-products of accessing financial services thanks to remittances and/or microfinancing. However, when there are no formal banking systems nor MFIs operating in the sending country, remittances are sources of capital accumulation for rural households and the means for accessing credit (Lucas, 1987; Mendola, 2008; Wamuziri and Klatt, 2006: 644). The particular financial reverberations of remittances for the recipient side can be linked to the 'migration hump' theory in which migration aspirations and realisation rates increase the larger the income gap is between the sending and the receiving country (Barnett and Webber, 2010; De Haas, 2007). The large income gaps suggest the considerable inflow of cash remittances compared to domestic incomes. Therefore, they have the potential of covering more than living expenses, which subsequently provides funding for micro-

enterprises and other entrepreneurial activities. To illustrate this disparity, remittance-receiving households in certain low-income countries like Haiti, Honduras, and Nicaragua receive more than double the annual gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (Wucker, 2004: 37).

Existing research looking into microfinancing and remittance-sending practices has shown how the lack of access to credit increases migration rates in countries as leaving is used as strategies to manage debt when domestic endeavours fail. In other words, in the absence of credits and means to attain them, people use migration as a coping mechanism when the household economy goes pear-shaped (Bylander, 2013). This raises the question of why certain individuals leave rather than access microfinancing services in their home country. The response to this query is simple enough: low-income countries (and some middle-income countries) have low outreach or no MFIs altogether due to conflict or political reasons as microfinancing services require a degree of economic and political stability (Lapenu, 2000: 2; Vidal, 2019). Since the emergence of microfinancing services in recent decades, these have flourished in less stable countries. However, the cases of Afghanistan and Pakistan show domestic outreach is limited as firstly, microfinancing services have had a slow development; and secondly, the amount of capital available has constricted access to prospective clients (Abro, 2021; Haini, 2021; Osman, 2021).

As aforementioned, microfinancing services can be used to cover migration expenses. Whilst politically and economically unstable states may have limited or no access to microfinancing services, this does not make them immune to migration. Simply put, households and individuals need to find other sources to cover the costs related to leaving the country. Financial remittances, however, have a particular after-effect within sending communities with poor microfinancing infrastructures as receiving households are provided with capital to engage in microenterprises which can include microlending (Azad, 2005). The lack of established MFIs in certain communities has created, to an extent, dependency on small moneylenders such as these migrant households (Osman, 2021). Studies examine how these lenders are the main enablers of migration in these areas as they help finance the expenses of leaving (for example, Kurien, 2002: 110).

Earlier sections highlighted how remittances can create moral hazard, where households become dependent on remittances rather than actively building wealth through employment, investments, or entrepreneurial activities (Alba and Sugui, 2011). However, the relationship between microfinancing, remittances, and microenterprises, as examined here, counters the core idea of moral hazard. In this context, access to credit allows households to generate and expand their wealth, while also contributing to broader economic development in the receiving community. What factors contribute to a household's susceptibility to moral hazard? What drives them to initiate entrepreneurial endeavours? Whereas Funkhouser (2002) observed the positive connection between remittances and entrepreneurship without focusing on any other variable, other studies have observed different instrumental variables in conjunction with remittances to examine their interaction with household behaviours.

Amuedo-Dorantes and Pozo (2006) observed how easier access to remittance houses (Western Union, in their study) had a negative effect on self-employment. Access to developed transnational networks that facilitate migration and attaining higher incomes did not affect labour activities for men at the receiving ends, yet it did for women who retired from economic activities (Acosta, 2006). Following the trail and looking at family structures, Parra Torrado (2012) observes how

remittances have a positive effect on entrepreneurship and investment only when the household head remains in the country and the remittance-sender (the migrant), is someone else entirely. Similarly, families with members with higher education maximise the usage of remittance surplus (after living expenses have been covered) to mitigate risks posed by domestic economies and support financial security (Rozelle, Taylor, and DeBraw, 1999; Stark and Lucas, 1988). What these papers present in common is that migration is first triggered by a lack of access to capital and credit options, and thus lastly migration serves the purpose of attaining it as a coping mechanism. As Rozelle et al. (1999) conclude, access to credit and developing microfinancing options (as well as the overall economy) in the sending communities, naturally reduces migration needs and aspirations.

Whether through microfinancing, remittances, or a combination of both, there is a positive correlation between access to these resources and migration, particularly in developing countries. Increased outflows of people contribute to a cycle of greater remittances and easier access to capital, which in turn fosters the emergence of microenterprises in developing countries and stimulates market activities in transitioning countries. Simultaneously, the positive influence of remittances in combination with microfinancing remark how greater economic opportunities can positively impact the household and the community at the receiving end.

2.7 Migration Theories

One of the first attempts to address migration came from Ravenstein (1885), who presented different generalisations concerning internal migration in the United Kingdom (the UK hereinafter) and proposed these as the 'laws of migration.' According to the author, adult migrants tend to move short distances unless the destination is a centre of commerce and industry, as they are economic-driven. This conclusion was later echoed by Stewart (1948) who foregrounded the migration gravity model. This theory indicates people gravitate towards areas that are more populated as they provide more chances to build relations and human cohesion. Other classic theories such as Stouffer's (1940: 846) intervening opportunities looked at what he deems the 'problem of distance' considering migrant competition and the economic chances and disadvantages between origin and destination. Lee (1966) diversified migration drivers when he introduced push and pull factors. This concept described how there are elements that pull people into a destination country, and others that push people out of the one they reside in. Moreover, he identified mobility as an irrational practice and not entirely based in logical calculations with perfect information because personal factors, such as personality, impacted aspirations and decision-making.

Although theoretically and empirically outdated, these analyses introduced the idea that migration involves a comparison between the origin and destination locations. The components identified in these early studies (such as the individual's psyche, irrationality, and imperfect or biased information) remain relevant and have been incorporated into contemporary mobility decision-making models (Lee, 1966: 51). To some extent, these factors challenge later theories, such as the rational choice theory, which conceptualise migration as a cost-benefit calculation, in other words, *the* smart decision (Harris and Todaro, 1970; Haug, 2008: 586-587). Despite early recognition of elements that blur rationality in migration decisions, existing literature has historically been

characterised by a pervasive 'mobility bias.' The rational choice theory is one of many frameworks that fall under this bias as it looks at the migration journey to explain why migration occurs. It is logical for migration theories to examine mobility drivers, or what takes individuals abroad, yet the mobility fixation leads to not paying attention to the important notion of *im*mobility (Schewel, 2019).

If residing in a different country is the better choice, why would someone not migrate? Why would individuals choose to remain immobile? Existing literature has rarely examined why individuals may be immobile when mobility could be a better option. In this regard, if one considers the case of North Korea, the following obvious questions arise: Considering the track record North Korea has in human rights abuses and the economic situation in the country, why do people stay? Is staying in North Korea a better option than emigrating? Classic migration theories, grounded in rational choice, cost-benefit calculations, and pull-push factors, are insufficient for the aims of this thesis. Instead, this study requires a theoretical framework that will consider beyond mobility drivers and also examine mobility deterrents and challenges. In other words, it will adopt a holistic approach exploring not only why migration occurs but also why immobility might be preferable or, conversely, an undesired outcome stemming from misfortune or a lack of resources.

Before migration theories are introduced, an element that has transformed mobility and the migrant experience must be mentioned. Human mobility has been re-shaped with the introduction of new ICTs which allow migrants to remain involved with those left behind and ensure remittances are received and sufficient (Francisco, 2013: 6). The relevance of distance has blurred as physical closeness is no longer prescriptive to maintain a sense of collectiveness and avoid relationship strains (Vertovec, 2004: 222-223). ICTs are a way for families to remain connected, but also tools to circulate information and deborder countries (Shin, 2022). Novel technologies soften the separation and bring positive impacts, such as letting the individuals abroad know what those back home need and giving emotional comfort to each other. ICTs are a double-edged sword as they connect the successfully mobile with those whose immobility is involuntary. In other words, transnational communication highlights the contrast between mobility and stillness, reminding the involuntary immobile of their situation in an mobile world. Moreover, information carried through ICTs can embellish migrant life, which contributes to the perception of how individuals imagine living abroad. Authors that have started examining the immobile are few, yet there is a small body of immobility literature that co-examines mobility and why individuals remain. Such theories include the concept of motility (or 'potential for mobility') by Kaufmann and colleagues (2006, 2018), Carling's (2002) aspiration and capability framework, and the 'displaced in place' by Lubkemann (2008). Before presenting immobility theories, elements that are key to mobility-focused studies must be put forward, as these are also useful for understanding immobility. Mobility drivers tend to sprout from economic-based motivations, but mobility-biased literature has identified other components veering away from that logic: family and lifestyle.

In the 1990s, when the famine struck North Korea, border-crossing became commonplace as individuals sought ways to counter that crisis. Whereas North Korea's situation improved with time, the country's economy never really witnessed anything akin to South Korea's so-called 'Han River miracle.' Just as migrant families from the Dominican Republic or Vietnam may send family members to the Global North where salaries are high to improve the household's economy, outside

information could transfer a similar idea to North Korea. This research will show how social remittances transferred through ICTs have influenced mobility in North Korea.

Literature has now broken with the neoclassical, economy-based push-and-pull logic and identified the rise of the lifestyle migration or, in other words, mobility linked to individuals seeking a better quality of life as opposed to purely economic aspirations (Bantman-Masum, 2015; Benson and O'Reilly, 2009; Croucher, 2015). Lifestyle migration does not involve individuals pursuing better human rights or freedom. Instead, it defines mobility with the aspiration of having a holiday-like style of life, which can include better weather or fewer working hours. This type of migration and the idea of enjoying better living conditions is inherently tied to the integration of the migrant at the destination and not just the act of relocating (Bobek, 2020). Whereas this type of mobility has gained attention in migration scholarship, existing literature on North Korean migration has emphasised that its main driver is necessity (Fahy, 2015; Song, 2015) as opposed to seeking holiday-like experiences. Thus, moving on, this thesis will focus on other trends within migration to examine this case study.

Other theories emphasise the role of the family in shaping mobility journeys. Research on nuclear families, for example, highlights that individual migration is often influenced by the location of family members, with findings showing that migration frequently brings individuals within a 10-kilometre radius of the family (Thomas and Dommermuth, 2020: 1469). Consequently, this reasoning becomes a 'mobility deterrent' as individuals can choose to remain still to be close to family as opposed to leaving them behind (Ermisch and Mulder, 2019; Michielin, Mulder, and Zorlu, 2008; Mulder, 2018; Zorlu, 2009). It can be argued that one should not be too quick to endorse mobility theories centred on physical closeness to the household. Earlier in this section, migrant households were introduced as migration drivers in the literature on remittance behaviour, rather than as mobility deterrents. In these studies, the family's well-being takes precedence over physical proximity when there is the potential to increase resources. Other authors add to this notion focusing beyond the household and examining the new opportunities migrants enjoy when becoming mobile, such as those involving work and higher education, which seem to be especially attractive among unmarried individuals (Ermisch and Mulder, 2019; Gubhaju and de Jong, 2009; Hugo, 2002).

Moreover, the family may be a relevant factor gauged by immobile people who voluntarily remain close to them, but it does not necessarily encompass the whole decision-making process surrounding mobility. Prospective migrants weigh more than the elementary family before they choose mobility as a goal. Additionally, relevant variables that tip the balance in favour of mobility differ from person to person as social contexts and backgrounds shape both why and how an individual would relocate. Speaking of family, North Korea's genderised migration has been driven, in part, by family as women have become mobile to become the main providers for the households, effectively practising distance motherhood (Kook, 2018; Kim, 2020).

This raises the question of what migrants seek when they choose to become mobile. The answers depend on the individual's specific characteristics and background. However, it can generally be agreed that migrants choose mobility when conditions elsewhere appear preferable at a particular time. To reiterate, this logic should not be mistaken for lifestyle migration, as this terminology describes the growing migration of relatively affluent individuals seeking a fresh start or a

recurrent 'holiday feel' (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009: 609, 613). Modern migration theories are exploring new migration drivers and components, and thus have veered away from two recurrent trends in the literature. Firstly, new theories have broken with the classical push-and-pull reasoning presented by Lee (1966). Secondly, they have moved away from the migration binary that oversimplified migration as the act of moving and settling. International mobility is a complex matter that has overgrown the neoclassical reasoning of better wages elsewhere as the individual's key element during decision-making.

Looking into other phases of the migration process is necessary to understand the decision-making step and which obstacles inhibit mobility. Moreover, as immobility has entered the stage of migration studies, new categories have been coined to analyse the outcomes of the mobility process. These are voluntary mobility, for individuals who want to relocate and are successful in doing so; voluntary immobility, for those who do not wish to move and remain *in situ*; and involuntary immobility, for those individuals who want to move but are unable to begin or complete their journey (Carling, 2002).

In recent years, new migration theories have been proposed to challenge the mobility bias in migration studies. This growing body of literature examines the factors that contribute to individuals remaining immobile in a time where mobility is often seen as the norm, even when outmigration might offer better prospects. Despite its relevance to migration research, theories addressing immobility remain relatively rare. The following sub-sections will present the three main (im)mobility theories: motility (Flamm and Kaufmann, 2006), originally introduced in connection with work-related mobility though the concept has been expanded to evaluate the 'trapped' people (Blondin, 2020); the socio-economic disruption of (im)mobility as a result of 'displacement in place' (Lubkemann, 2008: 456-457); and the Aspiration and Ability model (Carling, 2001 and 2002; Carling and Schewel, 2018) which takes a multi-level approach to dissect the migration journey and which elements disrupt and support mobility. The frameworks will be described and assessed below for their relevance to this research, which examines how social and financial remittances influence North Korean (im)mobility. This thesis aims to emphasise not only the potential for migration failure but also the reasons why immobility might be a voluntary choice for North Koreans, moving beyond a sole focus on migration drivers.

2.7.1 Displacement in Place

Lubkemann (2008) challenged the understanding of crisis contexts producing more (forced) migration by introducing involuntary immobility into the process. Wartime migration has been associated with increased mobility due to violence, disempowerment, and loss (Binder and Tošić, 2005; Melander et al., 2009); similarly, internally displaced peoples (IDPs) and those forced to leave their own countries have been linked to the contorted image of the "helpless migrant" with no other option than to leave everything behind (Binder and Tošić, 2005: 611). As forced migration literature has delved into socio-political disempowerment, losses, and physical threats as migration drivers, Lubkemann analyses a less obvious crisis within the bigger crisis: the involuntary immobile. This group of people corresponds to the individuals who share the same migration drivers and aspirations as those who successfully become mobile, but for one reason or another remain in the country.

The examination of involuntary immobility by this author concludes war and violence are not the sole cause of loss and disempowerment and, perhaps surprisingly, it is also the source of empowerment and gains. As crises drive flows of people to other locations (domestic or international), the social power and opportunities of those who remain immobile increase (Lubkemann, 2008 and 2016). Lubkemann proposes a sociological approach to studying migration in crisis contexts. In examining the Zimbabwean case, the author encounters two coexisting dynamics. First, migration creates opportunities for those that remain immobile. Second, there are households that financially rely on migration strategies but become involuntary immobile due to the crisis, which causes 'displacement in place' (Lubkemann, 2008: 464). Displacement in place is the consequence of impediments to mobility (or forced immobilisation) which constrains transnational efforts from the mobile and emphasises the disempowerment and disruption caused to the involuntary immobile. Disruption of mobility strategies hamper households that are migration-dependent for remittances which, in turn, become the most vulnerable in crisis contexts (Lubkemann, 2000: 51-52). However, the reluctant behaviour of the involuntary immobile within this new socio-economic environment does not reveal the factors and mechanisms that affect the decision-making process of staying or (re)attempting to leave (Thomassen, 2020: 2). Whereas North Korea can be regarded as a conflict location, the immobile would not be characterised as IDPs, as internal displacement would not take place, and thus new opportunities would not necessarily arise. Disruption for the immobile would be either a family member leaving the household or a failed escape attempt, which could lead to trouble with the authorities. While this would effectively challenge future migration attempts, it is not the type of disruption Lubkemman's theory observes.

The displacement in place theory examines how conflict and crises transform migration into "a form of resilience" (Stoler et al., 2021: 39) for those who become mobile. However, those who fail in the process become involuntarily immobile, and their mobility strategies are hindered. This could relate to North Korea's case as Lee (2013) identified escaping the country as the ultimate way for North Koreans to rebel against the Pyongyang regime. The disruption of migration is examined by looking at the 'package of losses' (Lubkemann, 2008: 455) that the author identifies as the loss of rights and economic and social resources caused by conflict, outmigration, and environmental issues (Sim, 2016; Lubkemann, 2008). Successful mobility implies the social empowerment of the migrant; in contrast, immobility introduces the two different outcomes of the involuntary immobile whose households' strategies (and hence, livelihoods and social positions) are hampered, and the voluntary immobile who take the social and economic roles left behind by the successfully mobile. The approach emphasises the need to look at the structures of confinement of the involuntary immobile to understand (im)mobility and how it is reproduced and negotiated through social practices and everyday life (Jefferson, Turner, and Jensen, 2020: 4). While this framework offers valuable insights into analysing immobility, its focus on unsuccessful or constrained migration limits its applicability to this study. This research seeks to examine how remittances influence migration, both positively and negatively, by exploring their impact on the family members left behind and the opportunities that emerge while the household remains immobile. However, since remittance-receiving households may remain in the country voluntarily and without an impending crisis driving them away, Lubkemman's framework would not be suitable to isolate and examine the nexus of remittances and mobility in North Korea.

2.7.2 Motility and the Trapped People

The concept of motility in migration studies borrows from its traditional use in biology to refer to the ability to move of animals, sessility being the inability to do so (Houtkamp, 2014: 20). Kaufmann, Bergman, and Joye (2004) re-conceptualised motility to observe the mobility potential of individuals and how it is distributed in society, effectively dividing people between the 'mobility rich' and the 'mobility poor' (Cresswell, 2008). Motility examines the potential of an individual to become mobile by looking at the three predominantly unmeasurable aspects of competence, appropriation, and access within a domestic physical context (Flamm and Kaufmann, 2006; Kaufmann et al., 2004). Within existing migration theory, the concept in itself is a tool to examine an abstract – a potential to do something – which is to an extent linked to mobility capabilities described as what allows individuals to do and realise what they desire (Carling and Schewel, 2018: 956; Sen, 1999); since it observes the potential of realisation, motility remains separate from migration drivers and the actual migration realisation step.

Motility was originally introduced in the context of work-related migration, but the concept has since been expanded to address the phenomenon of trapped people (Blondin, 2020). These individuals are (involuntarily) immobile due to their physical environment because of reasons like natural disasters or the lack of adequate infrastructure to facilitate movement, as well as not having the necessary skills (for example, not having a driver's license). In this context, motility has maintained its meaning of representing the potential to move, while *un*motility (as opposed to sessility) addresses why people become *trapped*. This explanation simplifies the complex and multifaceted mobility process and encloses it within a physical, geographic realm of infrastructure and environment (Blondin, 2020: 548). Ultimately, this theory in the context of the trapped people retains its abstract quality as it remains separate from the actual migration journey. Since its re-conception in migration theory, motility has focused on the economic and social structures that empower the mobility rich while restricting the mobility poor. However, its examination of access, competence, and appropriation overlooks the interaction of individuals with their social networks and broader social contexts (Ayeb-Karlsson, 2020; Blondin, 2020; Flamm and Kaufman, 2006). Given its emphasis on the physical and tangible aspects of migration, motility is not the ideal framework for analysing remittances and migration in North Korea, where the analysis will also consider emotional connections, translocality, and perceptions.

2.7.3 The Aspiration and Ability Model

The previous section presented various migration theories, each with its own limitations, most notably, the assumption of rationality or the overemphasis on a single element in the decision-making process. Carling's (2001, 2002; Carling and Schewel, 2018) aspiration and ability framework addresses these concerns by incorporating multiple factors across micro-, meso-, and macro-levels into the migration decision-making stages. Additionally, the framework's inclusion of the environment emphasises the role of space and time in shaping migration decisions. This approach allows for the exploration of different phenomena, such as how transnational networks influence both immobility and mobility aspirations, and how the disrupted socio-economic environment of the immobile impacts their mobility inclinations and living conditions.

Carling's framework takes a two-step approach to migration. Both stages look into how mobility develops and what factors place it out of reach. Firstly, there is a desire to migrate, which is the 'aspiration;' and secondly, the realisation of this desire, which is completed by using 'abilities.' Carling and Schewel (2018: 956-957) describe these abilities as elements that support mobility when the individual already aspires to leave. In the absence of this desire, these enabling elements are deemed as 'capabilities' instead. The authors, however, agree both concepts can (and should) be used as synonyms. In other words, individuals first want to migrate, and then migrate if they can. Carling's model examines which elements trigger individuals to want to migrate and what factors contribute to the realisation of this desire. Consequently, it also includes components that hinder mobility and may render the person involuntarily immobile. The two-step process is interesting for analysing how remittances impact migration because it allows this study to examine the direct effects of social and financial remittances on wanting to leave and achieving the process.

A single factor does not cause aspirations and abilities to surge. The migration decision-making process evolves as a complex interplay of macro-, meso-, and individual-level factors where each element's influence is affected by the environment. Unpacking the two-step migration process is challenging due to its complex interactions across multiple levels, involving various components and, perhaps most importantly, the individual's characteristics. Factors such as the migrant's own characteristics, resources, and available networks can prompt the emergence of both mobility aspirations and abilities. Whereas the effect components have on abilities can be traced and measured (for example, financial remittances being used to contract services from smugglers who will forge a passport for the migrant), the influence on aspirations is less clear. This is because abilities are more visible, whereas aspirations are often elusive and based on speculative ideas about what migration can entail. These aspirations can be vague, general, simple perceptions, or based on incomplete information (Carling, 2001: 129). The framework, therefore, offers a multi-level breakdown of elements, enabling a detailed analysis of the North Korean migration process and how the experiences of remittance-receiving households differ from non-receivers. The literature review addressed North Korean migration highlighting the role of different migrant networks such as human traffickers and brokers, as well as phenomena like the feminisation of migration. This framework provides an ideal opportunity to explore how remittances influence the migration paths and methods chosen, particularly in contrast to first-time migrants.

Carling's migration theory proposes three distinct mobility outcomes. In the first place, there are the individuals who desire to migrate and have the capabilities to complete the journey: the voluntary mobile; then there are those who, regardless of their capabilities, choose to remain when presented with the idea of relocating to a different country: the voluntary immobile; and lastly, the last category is for those individuals whose aspirations to leave are unattainable due to lack of capabilities: the involuntary immobile (Carling, 2002; Schewel, 2019: 334). In addition to these, Schewel (2019: 335) proposed the fourth category of acquiescent immobility for the voluntary immobile who do not have any capabilities to migrate and, subsequently, do not aspire to either. Transnationalism and globalisation have transformed the connections and experiences of the mobile and the immobile. Involuntary immobile individuals have their strategies trumped upon the realisation migration is unattainable. Nevertheless, transnational linkages can involve exchanges including financial remittances, medicine, and information. These contributions have the potential to improve living conditions and future emigration prospects for the left behind. Transnational

activities blur distance. In this new global scene, the sending country is still impacted by those who are mobile. Interconnectedness not only provides but also disrupts by making the gap between the mobile and the immobile starker. When migration is seen consecutively as a means for upward social mobility, frequent contact can cause tension (Carling, 2002: 7-8).

In addition, and most importantly for this research, the Aspiration and Ability model is Carling's break with the mobility bias in migration literature. This framework not only analyses mobility and the mobile but introduces a tool that can likewise be used to consider what comprises immobility aspirations and immobility capabilities for individuals (Schewel, 2019: 346). Following the prior example, immobility aspirations can emerge when financial remittances ameliorate the individual's life quality without the effort and sacrifice of migrating somewhere foreign (Carling, 2001: 86-87). Thus, Carling approaches immobility not only as a result of environmental constraints to emigrate, but also as a personal choice. The following section named Theoretical Framework: The Aspiration and Ability Model will go into details about how the framework will be used in this case study covering North Korean mobility.

2.8 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has examined migration, remittance behaviour, and microfinancing in North Korea, along with the scholarly examination of mobility and transnationalism, including (im)mobility theories. Remittances can be social (ideas, thoughts, cultural values) or financial (money), and they play a key role in shaping the receiving household's understanding of the migrant experience. Remittances are often sent as part of family strategies, driven by motivations that can be altruistic or self-serving. These transnational flows impact the family both as trustworthy information sources and economically by supporting the household, but they can additionally create dependent relationships. Migrants are not only providers and sources of information but transnational agents who facilitate emigration through family linkages, knowledge, and financial assistance, effectively contributing to chain migration. Financial not only support mobility and the living expenses of the migrant household but also enable households to become micro-entrepreneurs and support them through economic shocks.

Although migration as a practice occurred prior to the famine in the 1990s, the escape paths used by contemporary North Koreans became established during that time as North Koreans became mobile out of necessity. Over time, these motivations have evolved, influenced by the influx of outside information and the expansion of the informal market within the country. Today, aspirations for freedom, economic opportunities, and better education play a significant role. These changes have been facilitated by a growing body of interconnected informal networks involving smugglers, brokers, human traffickers, and remittance-sending mechanisms (including ICTs and ways to send items and money), all of which support communication, mobility, and smuggling. Transnationalism scholars have defined migration as a social product born from translocal spaces in which the immobile share strong ties (family) and weak ties (ethnic groups abroad and migrant agents such as human traffickers). These connections are not only social but include transnational transactions and knowledge-sharing, which enable migration and have traditionally fuelled chain migration around the world.

Financial remittance-sending is an established practice that North Korean migrants perform at least once after escaping the country and, on average, once or twice a year to support their families back home. This support can be essential for the household's economy not only to support living expenses but also to assist with micro-enterprises such as becoming micro-lenders for neighbours. Therefore, any surplus generated from financial remittances can be reinvested to support the family and fund further migration for the household or community members. This chapter has also shown that existing research has observed the use financial remittances in covering migration expenses, yet social remittances have remained under-researched. As outside information has seeped into the country, personal information shared by family members abroad, viewed as trustworthy, takes on a different significance compared to hearsay or fiction.

With this in mind, this study intends to use migration theory to investigate the case of remittances in North Korea and its impact on mobility. Migration theory has shifted from economically driven motivations to other projects such as family and lifestyle as mobility drivers. This shift accommodates globalisation and the increasing interconnectedness between migrants and immobile households through ICTs. Scholarship has observed how North Korean migrants have influenced mobility out of North Korea, facilitating escape routes and providing solidarity networks to help find job opportunities. But migrants who send money do not do it for reunification purposes. Scholarship on remittance-sending has uncovered its broader impacts, especially on the family's wellbeing. Traditional migration theory has a mobility bias that focuses on individuals who want to migrate and succeed at doing so. The case study of this thesis looks into the North Korean context where voluntary mobility is restricted. Therefore, this chapter has introduced three migration theories (Displacement in Place, Motility, and the Aspiration and Ability model) that address involuntary immobility and offer a more comprehensive understanding of migration. The displacement in place theory views mobility in conflict contexts as a form of resilience, driven by a range of losses resulting from the disruption of normal life caused by crises. Motility refers to individuals trapped due their physical environments and lack of skills. And, lastly, the Aspiration and Ability model looks into the elements that impact the two stages of migration (wanting to leave and leaving) and which combinations cause (in)voluntary (im)mobility. Based on this, Carling's Aspiration and Ability Model has been selected as this study's framework. Its multi-level breakdown of elements and the division of migration into two distinct stages, wanting to emigrate and emigrating, provide an ideal approach for examining how the experiences of remittance-receiving households differ from non-receiving ones in terms of (im)mobility.

The research questions stem from seeking to understand when and how remittances influence mobility. The Aspiration and Ability model has helped inspire the questions: Do financial and social remittances prompt aspirations to leave North Korea?; and is mobility enabled through social remittances? These queries address gaps in the existing literature, exploring whether financial remittances function as mobility drivers and enablers, how social remittances shape migration aspirations and abilities.

3. Research Methodology

This chapter will introduce the research methodology for this study. It will begin by offering an in-depth look at the theoretical framework that will be used to assess the effect of remittances on North Korean migration: the Aspiration and Ability model. The concepts that will be used

throughout this research will be consolidated within this piece. Then, it will proceed to deconstruct the macro-, micro, and meso-levels of North Korean migration to identify the moving parts that enable, drive, and deter mobility in this context. In this last step, the concepts of transnational networks, remittance behaviour, and scripts will be connected to North Korean migrant communities and their linkages back inside North Korea. The first section of this chapter will present how the framework will analyse North Korean mobility and immobility, both voluntary and involuntary, while addressing the temporality of the immobility condition. More specifically, it shows an immobile person can become involuntarily immobile or voluntarily immobile as the support from the meso-level shifts and/or increases. Carling's Aspiration and Ability model (2001 and 2002; Carling and Schewel, 2018) will be mapped out, its weaknesses and strengths will be identified, and a revised version will be proposed for this research as it emphasises the meso-level influence (the transnational level).

The theoretical framework section will be followed by the presentation of the research methodology and design, which will justify the choice of conducting this thesis as a case study. Furthermore, data collection methods will be explained by going through primary sources and secondary sources, including the criteria when choosing interviewees and the snowballing approach used to find participants. Lastly, the selected data analysis techniques will be explained upon presenting the multi-method approach to data analysis looking at the subjective experiences of North Koreans and their migration journeys. Another sub-section will cover this study's ethical considerations and the efforts partaken to respect North Korean participants.

3.1 Theoretical Framework: The Aspiration and Ability Model[5]

This research defines migration as a two-step approach in which first an individual wants to migrate and then this desire is realised. The first one involves aspirations in which the person sees leaving as a better prospect than staying. The second step is related to one's abilities to actually become mobile. As seen in the previous chapter, migration literature has been characterised by a mobility bias that often assumes that the second step comes after the first one. Carling's Aspiration and Ability model (2001, 2002, and 2018) veered away from this bias placing its focus on involuntary immobility. In other words, he examines why some individuals who have completed step one (aspiring to migrate) remain stuck in the original location (Carling, 2002: 8). As addressed previously in the Introduction chapter, migration theory is used for this thesis as it considers North Koreans migrants and recognises the agency they have in decision-making and enacting migrations attempts.

In relation to the research questions raised in this thesis (see Chapter 1), Carling's model is the one chosen for this study as its focus is on why individuals who want to migrate become mobile, cannot, or do not. Additionally, the same aspiration and ability concepts that Carling uses to analyse migration are versatile enough to examine *immobility* aspirations which are further linked to deterrents (for example, due to risk aversion) (Carling, 2001: 115). An example of this is how lacking abilities is a migration deterrent in itself as it can block mobility aspirations from emerging.

[5] Note for reference: The majority of the discussion in this sub-chapter builds on Carling's Aspiration and Ability model Carling's (2001, 2002, & 2018) to explore its application to the case study of North Korea.

The reasons behind North Korean mobility have changed throughout the years, moving from famine-based motivations to economic, to now North Koreans seeking freedom, rights, and liberties (Song, 2015). Infrastructures connecting North Korean migrants with those back home have transformed as well, providing more complex and efficient ways for migrants to support their families. At the same time, however, the North Korean regime has responded by imposing further challenges to communication and transnational connections, which ultimately rely on corrupt officials that can be bribed (Baek, 2016). Factors such as fluctuating conditions, changing contexts (Song, 2015), and the lack of ways to contact North Koreans residing within the country (Kang et al., 2018) challenge analysing the nexus between transnationalism and mobility in the country. Thus, this thesis necessitates a migration framework that is dynamic enough to account for a range of factors, moving beyond economic push and pull reasonings.

Furthermore, Carling's (2001 and 2022) framework is a coherent model to analyse North Korean migration as it includes involuntary immobility and voluntary immobility. As Chapter 2 has shown, theories relying on rational calculations and cost-effective calculations explain why certain migrants become mobile due to economic opportunities and aspirations (such as Le and Nguyen, 2019). Economic chances explain why households become migrant households and create kin-based chain migration which consequently triggers remittance-sending practices (Mahmud, 2020). Theories based on lifestyle are reduced to examining migrants who are comfortable with their economy and looking for holiday-style mobility (Bantman-Masum, 2015), veering away from human rights or freedom seekers (Bobek, 2020). Theories depict migration as a means for the migrant and/or their household to earn money, with the idea that once financial needs are covered, they can move on to pursue other forms of comfort.

Although this research does not intend to negate that North Korean migrants can migrate for economic purposes, it acknowledges that immobility is the centre of North Korea's migration culture and most existing theories do not explain why. Moreover, Carling's Aspiration and Ability model addresses mobility within a framework that recognises the existence of migration barriers and mobility deterrents. Another theory that addresses mobility considering its challenges is motility (Kaufmann, Dubois, and Ravalet, 2018: 201). While this method originally aimed to assess work-related mobility, it has been used to explain why people become trapped due to other circumstances such as natural disasters (Blondin, 2020). The elements that are measured through motility are inherently linked with transportation and the physical capabilities of an individual to leave the country. North Koreans are not foreign to natural disasters (Song and Habib, 2021) and challenging transportation infrastructures (Hinata-Yamaguchi, 2016) yet limits to their mobility move beyond the strictly physical and geographical realms such as punishment and repatriation (Song, 2015). A migration with North Korean characteristics needs to be addressed in a multi-level approach such as the one proposed by Carling. The aspiration and ability framework, thus, drifts away from the mobility bias and introduces a multi-faceted migration evaluation, which incorporates two levels. First, the model looks at how migrants begin to aspire and weigh which elements are attractive abroad and how their current abilities play a part in their possible migration; then, it identifies which elements deter and challenge mobility and which ones make individuals want to stay put (Carling, 2002: 12-13). This way, Carling's Aspiration and Ability model reasons why even in cases when opportunities abroad can be better for an individual, one may choose to stay or may be entirely unable to migrate.

Carling's model will be used as a basis to interpret and understand the data collected during fieldwork. The framework presents a systematic approach based on the two steps that comprise the migration journey (Carling, 2002: 13). This analysis is not general, but it identifies the main factors influencing mobility for specific countries or communities of origin. This clear approach helps identify the common elements among community members (such as emigration environment, immigration interface, migration culture, and economic structures) as well as what sets them apart (such as network connections and individual characteristics) (Carling, 2002: 21-22). In doing this, the relevance of each micro- and meso-level component can be addressed. This is useful to examine North Korea's case as the macro-level structures are similar across the country but the way in which individuals live differs (Kim and Kwak, 2021). In other words, while the regime and economic system is shared, wealth and higher classes are mostly found in Pyongyang, and the informal economy is more present in the northern provinces (Flinck, 2022: 31). Although North Korean migration can take different forms, the emigration and immigration structures are similar. This is because the first country of destination is mostly China (Kook, 2019: 11) and, whenever there is a second, most migrants go to South Korea (Kook, 2019: 12-13). The threats of repatriation or capture are shared virtually by all individuals who attempt to escape and cross the borders (Song, 2015). Hence, whereas migrants in other countries have different migration options (including irregular migration), the immigration interface is often shared among all North Korean migrants, as their targets and risks are the same. Therefore, because the macro-level components are shared, Carling's framework presents itself as a suitable method to identify which micro- and meso-level elements are common among migrants.

Carling's model, however, presents its limitations. In the first place, the framework examines the evaluation and realisation stages in the migration journey yet fails to address the key decision-making step in which the individual chooses to turn the desire to migrate into a real intention. Secondly, Carling does not address what happens after one is deemed voluntarily or involuntarily immobile – are these categories final? Once one is involuntarily immobile, can the person become voluntarily immobile or successfully migrate after? Accordingly, this study will address these queries by focusing on transnational networks and how these intertwine with aspiring migrants through remittances. Illicit networks or migrant communities abroad can offer opportunities and resources that can potentially trigger migration and turn the immobile into mobile by reducing migration costs (Haug, 2008: 588; Sharma and Cardenas, 2020). This event can occur at any time in the prospective migrant's life, yet it finds its place in-between evaluation and realisation in the migration journey.

Firstly, this research will address these questions by incorporating the opportunities created by transnational networks, which are considered migration enablers and facilitators. Linkages provide openings for aspiring mobile individuals to use their abilities to fulfil their escapes. A North Korean making a connection with a human smuggler has the potential to turn immobility into mobility if the individual has enough money (ability) to pay for the smuggling service. It is noteworthy that transnational support can improve one's socioeconomic position and, thus, a life quality increase can also lower mobility aspirations and raise immobility desires instead. Hence, networks also have the potential to turn involuntary immobile into voluntarily immobile.

Secondly, the seemingly permanent aftermath of Carling's migration outcomes and categories overlooks return migration and re-attempts to migrate when the previous intents failed. These two events can be found in the North Korean case. On the one hand, North Korean migrants rarely

return to North Korea, but 're-defection' happens (see Green, Denney and Gleason, 2015), which is a sign that the voluntary mobile journey is not necessarily permanent. On the other hand, not all North Korean migrants succeed at escaping on their first attempt. North Koreans are caught and detained when crossing the borders and, although they may succeed, repatriation from China is still a likely possibility. These risks are migration deterrents, yet they do not stop all North Koreans who aspire to escape from trying as they may reach a breaking point that finally drives them away (Fahy, 2015). These North Koreans who fail in their leaving intent are involuntarily immobile in North Korea. However, this is not necessarily the final stage for all of them since it is not uncommon for North Koreans who have failed in their first intent to re-attempt escape at a later time (for example, Song and Freedman, 2019, interview North Koreans with disabilities that needed more than one attempt). Thus, while this research will analyse North Korean mobility through the Aspiration and Ability model, it will recognise that the migration outcomes are not permanent and are dynamic as they respond to time, resources, and opportunities.

The third point to address in Carling's model is that, although it examines immobility aspirations and emigration challenges, its focus remains on what prompts mobility desires (mobility drivers). To understand why people choose immobility, this thesis will also identify migration deterrents (including migration risks and discrimination across borders) and immobility aspirations (such as socio-economic status, familiar environment, and local social and kin networks). In addressing the dynamism of aspirations and, subsequently, migrant categories, this study will show which elements are more crucial in maintaining involuntary immobility. Finally, Carling's model emphasises the importance of the individual (micro-level) under the emigration environment and immigration interface (macro-level) (Carling, 2002: 21). While Carling addresses and acknowledges the meso-level and the existing networks (Carling, 2002: 13), his case study dwells in the migrants themselves and not their linkages. This study does both with special a focus on remittances effectively intertwining micro- and meso-levels in migration.

The theoretical framework in this research is thus divided into two steps that are then analysed to observe the outcomes (in)voluntary (im)mobility. Aspirations will be investigated by identifying how different elements create mobility projects, such as individuals wanting to emigrate to improve their lives (through economic or educational opportunities), to live with their family abroad, and so on. These projects are motivated by pull and push factors[6] that come through from interacting elements at the meso-, micro-, and macro-levels to develop wishes that can only be granted by becoming mobile (Carling, 2002: 13-14). The second step will be to analyse Abilities. Abilities will be examined and identified by looking into how elements create feasible mobility paths that effectively circumvent mobility challenges (Carling, 2002: 26-27). An example of this is how, when pursuing family reunification, individuals may obtain family visas if they have family abroad (which is a meso-level element). On top of this, people require having the money to travel (which can be through their savings, a micro-level element, or remittances, which is a meso-level element). Both abilities can enable a legal family reunification path to another country.

Elements interact with each other not only as push-pull factors, but also as deterrents (Carling, 2002: 9-10). As the literature review has examined in Chapter 2, families use migration strategies with the goal of having a migrant member send remittances for the household's benefit. These

[6] The concepts of push and pull are used in migration theory to describe what elements drive individuals out of their countries (push) and what drives them to specific destinations (pulls) (Lee, 1966).

economic remittances contribute to comfort and even upwards social mobility for the family left behind (Carling, 2002: 7-8). Similarly, individual characteristics such as ethnicity or language abilities can deter migration if the destination country requires having a specific language proficiency to find jobs or the news report about racism in the country (Carling, 2001: 118). Thus, the final step of the Aspiration and Ability model will be to examine how aspirations and abilities interact towards mobility outcomes, as well as identifying what can deter or challenge mobility and therefore causing the outcomes of involuntary or voluntary mobility.

In light of this, the research will examine mobility through this two-step process in the case study chapter (Chapter 4). This chapter will present thee foundational baseline for North Koreans by looking into how they are socialised from childhood. The Aspiration and Ability model will be applied in the following three sections of this chapter by addressing how remittances impact aspirations by creating mobility projects; abilities through enabling paths; and how they may deter migration entirely. The analysis will feature themes such as political socialisation and perceptions of the outside world to understand how North Koreans see their position in the world and what their 'normal' is like; international mobility and return migration to examine how inwards and outwards migration occurs legally; North Korea's economy, the *jangmadang*, surveillance, and organisational life, to understand how North Korea has evolved after the famine and what the lives of North Koreans are like. Projects and paths emerge with the interaction of social and financial remittances with the lives of North Koreans who may want a better future for themselves or their families, they may want to reunify with family abroad or escape North Korea due to persecution. The thesis will show how North Korean mobility does not require remittances to be conducted, but those who receive them have the upper hand as they have trustworthy sources of information and capital. The themes that will be shown are chosen specifically for this research as they have emerged from the data collected during the fieldwork stage. It is important to note that migration intentions and plans, in the North Korean case, emerge from patterns and ideas that may not be seen as rational but based on imperfect perceptions, expectations, and desires (Carling, 2001: 53). The inclusion of remittances is especially important because people can receive the economic and emotional benefits of living outside (by receiving money or goods) without needing to emigrate. Yet this may still construct the idea that migrating pays back through personal messages and provisions from loved ones who are trustworthy (Van Dalen et al., 2005).

The aspiration and ability framework is a suitable, coherent model for this thesis as it assesses migration without implying mobility is the only outcome. Furthermore, its multifaceted approach moves beyond rational cost-benefit calculations, allowing for an examination of how various elements influence aspirations and, separately, abilities, without prioritising one (such as the economy, family, or human rights) over the others. While this model has its flaws, this research will examine how remittances contribute to specific mobility outcomes and address deterrents, immobility aspirations, and opportunities created by transnational activities.

3.1.1 Integration – Aspirations, Abilities, and North Korea

This research will explore how remittances affect the mobility strategies of North Koreans. To do this, the elements that influence mobility will be identified to understand how people without remittances emigrate. The first step to understand international mobility out of North Korea will be to integrate North Korea's context within the migration structure. Parting from the chosen

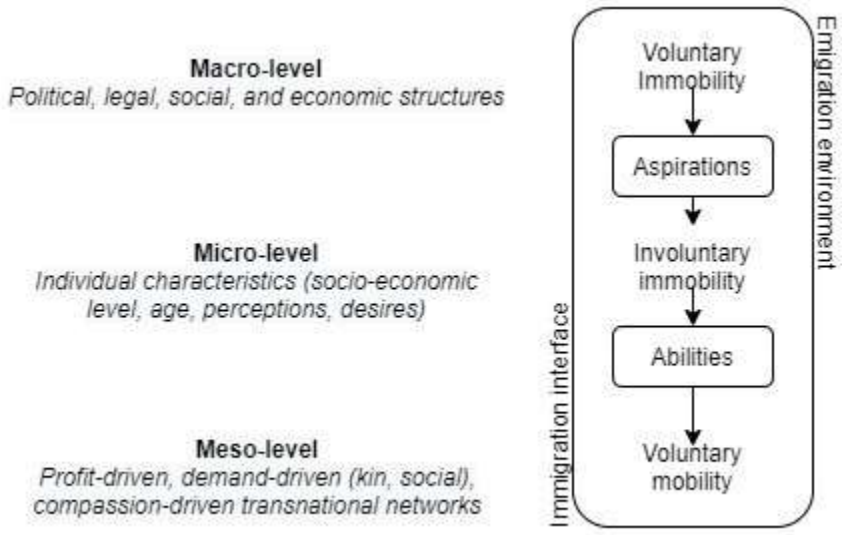
framework for this thesis, migration is a two-step process in which an individual first wants to move elsewhere and then the person realises this desire (Carling, 2001 and 2002). Nevertheless, this process results from a complex interplay of elements and characteristics at the macro-, micro-, and meso-levels. Each component has a varying degree of influence in the decision-making process and the emergence of aspirations as these are closely tied with the individual's characteristics and psyche (Carling, 2001: 27). Hence, meso- (Carling, 2002: 13) and macro-level elements (Carling, 2001: 26) can have a measurable and visible impact on migration capabilities.

The influence different components have on aspirations, however, is not necessarily measurable. Following Carling's (2001: 35) approach, this study focuses on identifying plausible causal mechanisms rather than attempting precise measurement. Whereas financial capital can be assessed against the amount of fees needed to migrate, decision-making operates at the individual level and relies on personal characteristics such as personality and social connections (Carling, 2001: 27; Carling, 2002: 22-23). Furthermore, mobility desires are inherently tied to the problem of rationality (Carling, 2001: 20). As Chapter 2 has examined, a plethora of existing migration theories assume the rationality of those who consider migration during the decision-making process. This perspective assumes a logical calculation where the quality of life in location A is deemed better than in location B, leading the rational individual to migrate from B to A. The problem with this assumption is that it does not consider individual characteristics (for example, personality, fears, health) which have the potential to solidify aspirations and turn them into migration intentions (Carling, 2001: 20).

3.1.1.1 Multi-Level Approach to Mobility

Migration is the outcome of the interplay between macro-, micro-, and meso-level components. Because of this, it requires a dynamic multi-factor explanation (Carling, 2002: 35). Which elements matter and how they intertwine is decisive for an individual to, firstly, aspire to migrate; and secondly, to realise it. These steps are not static as the relevant elements change according to the context. Components interplay in a way the prospective migrant becomes voluntarily mobile when they generate and secure aspirations and abilities. Any other setting derives into an immobile outcome: individuals are either unwilling (due to lack of aspirations) or unable (due to lack of abilities) to become mobile (Carling, 2001 and 2002).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of mobility



Sources: Compiled by the author based on the Aspiration and Ability Model by Carling (2002: 35)

3.1.1.2 The Macro-Level

The macro-level comprises the political, economic, social, and legal structures in which migration occurs. It includes the emigration culture and environment of the sending country as well as the immigration interface of the receiving one. These structures are subsequently affected by a broader international context (Carling, 2001: 28). Consequently, the macro-level operates across multiple spatial and temporal scales and are inherently time-sensitive. Macro-level structures create opportunities for prospective migrants that influence both aspirations and abilities. In the North Korean migration case, the macro-level structures are tied with North Korea's bilateral relations with the countries involved in the migration process: China and the states involved in the North Korean underground railroad (Mongolia, Southeast Asian countries, and Russia) (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Song, 2015). Broadly speaking, the better bilateral relations a state has with North Korea, the more challenging the migration journey will be for the migrants moving through it. The destination countries involved in the migration journey are also relevant in their immigration infrastructures. The most common receiving country is South Korea, as the Seoul government grants South Korean citizenship to those who can demonstrate they come from North Korea. Alternatively, migrants seek asylum in Japan, the UK, or the US (Bell, 2021; Lee and Kim, 2022; Shin, 2021).

The international context is omnipresent in the migration journey of North Koreans, yet it remains in the background. Claims from human rights advocacy groups and the United Nations, which include reports and recommendations from the Commission of Inquiry (CoI) and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in North Korea, emerge periodically yet have had little impact on the right of free movement in North Korea (Goedde, 2018). Hence, the challenges within the emigration environment in North Korea prevail. The regime justifies the limitation and removal of certain rights as a necessary sacrifice for countries that are at war (Pacheco Pardo, 2021), which is why, even if North Korea has acceded to the ICCPR (Goedde, 2018: 180), it still constraints

movement both internally and externally. On the one hand, temporary internal movement is limited to North Koreans who obtain obligatory permits to visit another province. On the other hand, internal migration is effectively non-existent and if it occurs it is in the form of forced deportation as a punishment (Han, Kim, and Lee, 2017). Migrating abroad or temporarily crossing the borders is virtually impossible and considered a crime for regular citizens (Chang et al., 2006: 18), exemptions are given to overseas labourers and diplomats who are allowed to emigrate temporarily (Gyupchanova, 2018).

Constraints and possible repercussions have undermined the consolidation of migration in North Korea (Kook, 2019). Mobility relies on information shared through word of mouth, human trafficking, and illicit networks of smugglers and brokers that occur, unsurprisingly, near the borders with China. North Korea's migration culture is reduced to a few provinces in the north of the country, which explains why 85.1 per cent of North Korean migrants who reach South Korea come from the Hamgyeong and Ryanggang provinces (NKDB, 2020: 76; Ministry of Unification, 2024). Border-crossing prevails, however, as North Korea's chronic economic crisis drives North Koreans outwards to trade, smuggle, and migrate. Given North Korea's crippling migration environment, the countries that to some extent hold close bilateral relations with the state, pose different challenges to migrants. China, often considered North Korea's closest ally, actively repatriates North Korean migrants. The country justifies repatriation and migrant detention as it identifies them as (illegal) economic migrants. This treatment and status have been challenged by human rights organisations and the United Nations (UN) organisms (Ford, 2018: 129-130; Kurlantzick and Mason, 2006: 45), yet both remain unaltered. Regardless of the challenges involved in residing or passing through countries that are sympathetic towards the North Korean government, North Korea migrants still choose the potential benefits of migration even if there are risks.

The possibility of successfully going through migration has more benefits than staying immobile since foreign countries still offer better freedom, economic opportunities, and living standards. However, the North Korean regime and the countries that have bilateral relations with it have constrained North Korean mobility. North Koreans arrested for attempting to cross the border or caught in China and repatriated have been subjected to capital punishment as mobility is deemed an act of treason by the regime (Chang et al., 2006: 18). Albeit there are risks, mobility prevails. Thus, the North Korean escape business remains profitable for small-scale illicit networks that flourish from North Koreans looking for a better place to live.

3.1.1.3 The Micro-Level

The micro-level involves individual characteristics. Measurable characteristics include age, gender, socioeconomic status, hometown or place of residence, education level attained, family ties in the sending country and abroad, and so forth (Carling, 2001: 27; Carling, 2002: 22-23). Alternatively, unmeasurable characteristics encompass values, perceptions, desires, and the individual's personality. Micro-level elements are critical factors in the decision-making process in which an individual chooses to realise the mobility aspiration and, simultaneously, individual characteristics are decisive in the migration process. Carling (2002: 19-20, 30) analyses the micro-level characteristics and how these often affect the mobility journey. The author notes that his

examination is a forecast to be integrated into the emigration and immigration interfaces of the countries involved in the process of an individual. Below, a table is presented incorporating the principal individual characteristics proposed by Carling:

Table 1. Micro-level (individual) characteristics that affect mobility

Age
Socio-economic status
Employment
Gender
Educational Level
Social networks
Family Migration History
Parenthood
Assessment of country's situation (*What are the nation's problems? Can these be solved?)*
Being a foreigner or having foreign roots (or ties)
Receiving remittances

Sources: Compiled by the author as an overview of micro-level individuals that may impact migration as examined in the literature and theoretical review, these are presented in an arbitrary order

Integrating Carling's individual-level characteristics with the North Korean mobility context requires incorporating additional elements specific to the country. This integration will be presented in the case analysis (Tables 4 and 6), where I will demonstrate how micro-level factors shape aspirations and abilities to leave North Korea.

3.1.1.2 The Meso-Level

The meso-level involves relational elements such as linkages such as social networks, kinship networks (Carling, 2001: 30; Faist, 2000), and illicit networks (Hernández-León, 2013: 25-26). Unlike macro-level structures, which are omnipresent and detached from the individual, meso-level networks intertwine with the prospective migrant and directly facilitate and shape the migration journey. Furthermore, transnational networks support mobility by lowering migration costs and providing social capital such as information and contacts. Additionally, these often finance (fully or partially) migration-related transactions with financial remittances or by contracting smuggling services. Therefore, migrant networks enable legal and illegal border-crossing by providing social capital, money, and contact information of illicit transnational networks, such as brokers (Haug, 2008: 588).

Given the challenging migration environment faced by North Koreans, successfully escaping and reaching South Korea is often contingent on transnational networks. As stated in Chapter 2, small-scale, kin-, or socially-based networks lower costs and facilitate migration by supplying the individual with information, contacts, and resources. Additionally, illicit networks of smugglers and brokers are ubiquitous in most transnational transactions (remittance sending and receiving, international communication, and so on), as well as migration by providing services to enable border-crossing and onward journeys to South Korea. Recruiters also hire North Korean women who are willing or hoping to leave the country illegally to work in China (Kim, 2020a: 99). Criminal networks of human traffickers are also migration facilitators as North Korean women voluntarily approach them for assistance to escape (Kook, 2018: 129). Moving away from profit-driven networks, NGOs and Christian groups are additional transnational networks that assist migrants who originate either from North Korea or China to South Korea. These organisations often work with illicit networks to smuggle North Korean migrants through the underground railroad. Though their presence is active and has prevailed, migrants typically reach South Korea using other means (Chang et al., 2006: 20). These networks are, however, expected to provide less support as the pandemic has impeded their activities (Jeremiah, 2021) and shrunk connections from supporters both in China and in countries throughout the underground railroad (Jung, 2021).

Chapter 4, and more specifically section 4.3 Migration Enablers, will integrate the findings within the Aspirations and Abilities framework by expanding on how the meso-level (transnational networks and practices) contributes to the North Korean migration journey.

3.2 Research Design

As mentioned in the Introduction, the aim of this study is to explore how remittances impact North Korean mobility across two key stages of the migration journey: strategic evaluation (aspirations) and realization (abilities), using a multi-level approach. It addresses a significant gap in the North Korean Studies field, where limited empirical research has examined the relationship between remittances and migration dynamics. This research takes a qualitative method approach as it is the most suitable to analyse the migrant experience, motivations, and activities from data collected both from secondary sources and primary ones. Qualitative methodologies provide a means to understand complex relationships among various actors, including their perspectives, actions, and behaviours (Suryani, 2008: 121-122). In the second place, they enable researchers find patterns amidst the relationships and actions and identify and evaluate the building blocks of what becomes a bigger picture (Berg and Lune, 2013: 19-20).

A multi-method qualitative design has been chosen for this research as it has collected various types of qualitative data. A multi-method approach refers to combining different methodologies, in this case qualitative, to gain deeper insights. In migration studies, this is also used because it offers the possibility of triangulating data (Kochan, 2016: 5). Diversifying sources and kinds of data has been done for two purposes. First, more sources translate into more options to triangulate information, which is critical in North Korean Studies as the accuracy and veracity of migrant testimonies must be cross-checked. Second, a multi-method approach is fit for producing a detailed account of North Korean mobility, how it develops, and its outcomes. The four methods employed

are the following: 1) semi-structured interviews with practitioners involved in North Korean matters (CSO and NGO workers, and researchers); 2) semi-structured interviews with North Korean migrants in South Korea; 3) surveys with North Korean migrants in South Korea; and 4) analysis of relevant documents and publications related to North Korean mobility (such as migrant testimonies, news articles, NGO and government reports, and media).

This study employs an explanatory case study method, which is particularly useful for assessing multi-method approaches while maintaining a coherent understanding of the object under examination (Kochan, 2016). As it is typical of this type of method, it draws from multiple sources of information that vary in type (media, interviews, published documents). Explanatory case studies combine well with process-tracing methods (Ulriksen and Dadalauri, 2016) and thus permit the researcher to identify which components affect a journey (Given, 2012). The case study in this thesis will take an explanatory approach while using process tracing as it follows the North Korean mobility journey. While tracing this process, the case study will trace how migration decision-making occurs by examining the foundational baseline of a North Korean person who does not have contacts out of the country and how the inclusion of remittances in the individual's experience influence migration. The aim is two define how financial and social remittances shape the migration journey for recipients as opposed to North Koreans who lack them (Creswell, 2007: 75).

3.2.1 Data Collection

3.2.1.1 Primary Sources

Migrant participation is key for this research, as it focuses on North Korean migration and cross-border remittances, involving both current senders and past beneficiaries. However, the challenges of accessing interviewees must be acknowledged. North Korean migrants who have families back in the country often stay away from social media as their escape can put them in danger of North Korean authorities. Activists and organisations that work with migrants also advise against using platforms like Facebook and other public social media, as these can disclose identifiable information such as names, locations, workplaces, or faces. South Korea's KakaoTalk remains the dominant messaging and social media platform among North Korean migrants (Shin, 2022: 167). However, not all North Korean migrants remain hidden from the media. Information about North Korea is often sought by the media, which incentivises migrants to share their stories or experiences in exchange for money (Ford, 2018: 126-129). Hence, there are migrants who are often present in North Korea-related events, shows, or interviews by larger media outlets. The so-called 'career defectors' are however treated critically amongst the North Korean migrant community as the experiences they share are often deemed as exaggerations or 'horror stories' to earn their wages (Baek, 2016: 423).

Furthermore, migrants are usually apprehensive about talking about their experiences publicly, especially if this involves mentioning people still in North Korea. To address this, this research employs the most commonly used method for North Korean migrant-related studies, which is also used broadly in qualitative research: the snowball sample approach. This method is often used as it overcomes access challenges involving hidden populations such as migrants (Ellard-Gray et al, 2015). Snowball sampling begins with identifying an initial research participant, who then refers

the researcher to additional subjects for the study. Through this person-to-person process, the number of participants grows as migrants contact new subjects to become involved.

Snowball sampling has its limitations. When individuals contact people within their circles, experiences that are shared both in surveys and interviews may be (Kook, 2018: 118). This study acknowledges that migrants often share a similar background since most North Koreans abroad are women from Northern provinces who escaped in their 20s (Ministry of Unification, 2024). However, this is not to say two people with similar origins will follow the same behaviours. The know-how of transnational activities is often learnt at Hanawon centers where migrants learn from fellow migrants (Baek, 2016: 390). Hence why most people send their first remittance the same year they graduate from the centre (NKDB, 2020: 76). Thus, since individuals learn how to contact and forward items to their families there, two individuals can share behaviours while having no other characteristics in common. This study has circumvented this limitation by finding participants through different gatekeepers. Diverse civil society groups have been reached out instead of just one, which is an approach partaken by Kook (2018: 118), Kim and colleagues (2009: 157), and Choo (2006) to diversify results. This approach ensures that the sample is not influenced by the shared characteristics of individuals sourced from a single gatekeeper. For example, relying solely on contacts from a specific church might result in participants with similar religious backgrounds or social networks, which could skew the findings. By incorporating participants that have been reached through other gatekeepers, this thesis seeks to include a broader range of experiences.

When surveying North Koreans, there may be shared characteristics, such as similar backgrounds (based on the statistics by the Ministry of Unification, 2024, this can include women who escaped in their 20s from North and South Hamgyeong and Ryanggang provinces). However, key differences also emerge, such as the year of escape, the year of arrival in South Korea, employment status, and the region where the individual spent most of their time in North Korea. In addition, since this study is looking into an activity that requires spending, another factor that is considered is the migrant's occupation to examine remittance-sending behaviour in connection to access to an income. Therefore, the snowball sampling method has been used to recruit North Korean migrants for the study. Simultaneously, practitioners in the North Korean field have been interviewed for additional information about North Korean mobility. This research understands practitioners as people who work or have worked in the field (in North Korea or with North Korean migrants, for example). This extends to NGO workers, journalists, diplomats, and other civil society workers such as UN employees (Mommers and van Wessel, 2009).

3.2.1.2 Interviews and Surveys of North Korean Migrants

The main practical challenge during the fieldwork stage was collecting data from primary sources due to limited access to North Korean migrants in South Korea. As explained previously, this study has used the snowballing approach to contact migrants for interviews and to distribute surveys. This was achieved by reaching out to CSOs, such as North Korea Social Research (NKSR)[7], as

[7] NKSR is a South Korean-based organisation affiliated with NKDB. It was established in 2013, and it keeps a panel of North Koreans living in South Korea. The organisation regularly conducts research on resettled North Koreans and the political, social, and economic spheres of North Korea.

well as individual researchers. The snowball sampling approach allowed the survey and interview questions to be shared by the main researcher's initial contact with a North Korean migrant, along with the relevant contact information for the research team, consent form, and information sheet. This process resulted in 398 survey responses and three interviews with North Korean migrants.

The three interviews with North Korean migrants were conducted in South Korea. The interviewees were contacted through the snowballing method with the assistance of civil society organisations and a scholar, and the interviews took place face-to-face in Seoul and Pusan. The interviewees were part of the second generation of North Korean migration, or in other words, those who escaped between 2006 and 2019 looking for freedom and opportunities as opposed to survival (Song, 2015). The group included two females and one male born in the North Hamgyeong and Hwanghae provinces. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, covering basic questions related to migration and remittances, such as: What are some of the main purposes why North Koreans send remittances? Do remittances facilitate migration? What are the main assets when escaping North Korea? Other questions were prompted by the conversation with the interviewees as well as their experiences and preferences. To ensure anonymity, the researcher limited the scope of the questions, avoiding sensitive topics such as the details of the participants' migration journeys or how specific networks were contacted, to maintain confidentiality and the interviewee's comfort. Likewise, interviewees exercised their right not to be recorded and to not respond to certain questions for the same reasons.

During the fieldwork and data collection stages of this thesis, the decision to conduct a survey was taken. The original conception for this study had been to collect data through in-depth interviews and published material. Following the first initial literature review and the first months of fieldwork, the opportunity to conduct the survey arose and it was decided to follow it up to supplement the data collected. Surveys were conducted with the assistance of the organisation NKSR for a fee, which has been conducting research on North Korean migrants in South Korea for over 10 years and conducts studies annually with hundreds of them, including those who escaped illegally to China or overseas labourers. NKSR circulated the survey questions along with the research team's contact details, consent form, and information sheet to those North Korean migrants who would be interested in providing answers, regardless of their remittance behaviour (the surveyed thus included senders, receivers, and those who had no experience whatsoever).

NKSR was first recommended by a researcher and then the organisation was contacted with a brief introduction e-mail about this study and the possibility of conducting a survey. In August 2022, the first meeting with NKSR took place in which the preliminary set of questions were presented. NKSR requested a survey that could be completed in under five minutes and included a total of ten questions (demographic questions such as gender and place of birth inclusive). The initial set of questions presented was 20 and NKSR advised it should be reduced to 10. During the meeting, the NKSR team explained that more questions would require a larger fee and that in their experience, shorter surveys had more engagement. The short survey was selected after this and considering the available resources for this study. Because of the short and quick demographic questions, it was agreed to have 13 questions in total. After this meeting, the board members of NKSR approved the survey project and questions (length and content), and the survey was circulated starting September 2022. The survey results were received in November 2022.

The survey results comprised 398 responses, 230 participants had experience sending remittances, 12 had experience receiving, and 32 had both sent and received remittances. The majority of respondents were born in North Hamgyeong, South Hamgyeong, and Ryanggang provinces Following the advice of the NKSR team, respondents were not asked about their hometown or last place of residence. 298 of the survey participants were women and 100 of them were men. The participants were informed of the topic of the survey as well as their voluntary and non-remunerated involvement with this research. There is no conflict of interest to declare. It should be noted that while there are 'no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry' (Patton, 2002: 244), surveys of between 50 to 100 responses are deemed fit for a study of this scope (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 48-49). The present survey significantly exceeded the conventional range enhancing the robustness of the data collected.

The survey included quantitative and qualitative questions regarding remittance behaviour by North Korean migrants. Besides the receiving and sending practice, the questions also sought data on how remittances impacted the household. This was done to follow up on information gathered during interviews concerning the amount of money sent, how remittances piggyback on the informal economy, family strategies, and escaping possibilities. The questions were developed after the first nine interviews. Whilst the interviews aimed to gather data on how remittances impacted migration aspirations and abilities, the surveys sought to exemplify what interviewees had reflected on. Examples of this include demonstrating that the financial flows to North Korea are limited and showcasing what is sent to North Korea that can be monetised by the families. This draws an image of how remittances can improve living conditions for the family but also increase abilities to migrate.

The surveys are intended to support data introduced in interviews or fill gaps in existing published research. It is important to note that predicting which data and elements would be significant before finalizing the interviews proved challenging. However, the surveys have been particularly impactful in areas such as household economy and the role of remittances impact marketisation. Despite this, the questions have provided valuable background information as well as data to triangulate the veracity of the responses, something covered later in the section Trusting Migrants and Trustworthiness of this Research.

3.2.1.3 Secondary Sources and Additional Forms of Data Collection

As mentioned above, conducting interviews and collecting data from North Korean migrants can be challenging due to issues of access and trust. Testimony legitimacy will be addressed in the following section, while this section will introduce secondary sources and written testimonies that were consulted for this study.

This research has consulted a variety of documentary sources on North Korean mobility from researchers and practitioners with background in North Korean affairs. In addition, publications and reports from NGOs and CSOs working with North Korean migrants such as NKDB, Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG), the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), Liberty for North Korea (LiNK), The Committee for North Korean Human Rights (HRNK), or the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR) have also been reviewed. These

organisations have extensive experience[8] researching North Korea and producing reports that have been used, for example, for the United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry Report or the UN's Universal Periodic Review on North Korea's human rights. Their reports are often available in English. They also have a track record on working with North Korean migrants in different stages of migration (migrating and/or resettling), and they research includes their lives in and out of North Korea. A database comprising North Korean testimonies has been accessed, this being NKDB's Visual Atlas[9] covering human rights abuses. Additionally, events hosted by CSOs, think thanks, and research institutions have also been part of the data consulted for the research, these have included webinars, conferences, and recorded interviews or podcasts. Furthermore, memoirs and presentations by North Korean migrants sharing their experiences of escape and transnational activities were reviewed, with their validity assessed through triangulation.

Additionally, previous experience from an internship at the NGO NKDB offered opportunities to learn and observe their work with North Korean migrants and how the CSO community in South Korea works with and for them[10]. Participation and attendance in North Korean human rights activism events during the fieldwork period in South Korea led to further chances of informal conversations with those involved in the topic of human rights, escaping North Korea, and transnational networks involved in the smuggling process of both information and people.

3.2.1.4 Interviews with Practitioners

In-depth interviews with practitioners and researchers working on North Korean affairs are the principal data sources for this study. The interview pool includes practitioners and researchers working on North Korea or with North Korean migrants at a regular basis and thus have knowledge about North Korea and escaping the country beyond their personal experiences. Similar to the interviews with North Korean migrants, semi-structured questions were selected for these interviews. The choice is made for two different reasons. Firstly, migration is a phenomenon that goes beyond the confines of family, economy, society, or human rights. Rather, it is a process partaken due to an amalgam of factors. Because of this, interviewees were selected based on their areas of expertise so they could touch on different disciplines to paint a better picture of migration decision-making and North Korea's socioeconomic sphere. Semi-structured interviews are ideal as they enable the researcher to have limited rigidity while having both versatility and flexibility (Pietila, Johnson, and Kangasniemi, 2016). Secondly, semi-structured interviews are good for reciprocity between the participant and the researcher, meaning follow-up questions and improvisation are possible (Galletta, 2012).

In light of this, the interviewees were selected considering their knowledge about three different areas: North Korea's marketisation, economy, and society; North Korean migrant communities and transnational activities; and escaping North Korea, including human rights. The interviewee list will be provided at the end of the References and detail the roles, dates, and locations of the interviews.

[8] The youngest organisation amongst the cited ones is TJWG which was founded in 2014. The oldest ones are KINU and NKHR which were founded in 1991 and 1996 respectively.

[9] http://www.visualatlas.org/eng.do

[10] My own internship at NKDB from the 2nd of March 2018 to the 2nd of September 2018.

Semi-structured interviews on North Korean migration and transnational activities with interviewees enabled practitioners to discuss changing trends in the economy and politics of North Korea over the years. These interviews provided valuable data for examining how both social and financial remittances impact the realities of receiving households back in North Korea, as well as the communities left behind. Annex 2 of this study will include a list of sample questions. As mentioned above, certain rigidity was kept during the in-depth interviews, meaning that some of the questions were asked in virtually every interview, such as: What are some of the main reasons why North Koreans send remittances back home? Besides money, what else do North Korean migrants send to their families? and How important is money when escaping North Korea? Other than money, what else contributes to a successful escape?

3.2.2 Data Analysis Strategy

This research will follow a data analysis strategy delineated by Wolcott (as cited by Creswell, 2007) often used for explanatory case studies. This strategy involves identifying patterns and regularities within the data, contextualizing it within the research framework, and displaying the findings (Creswell, 2007: 180-181). The computer software NVivo has been used to manage, organise and process data through coding and classifying it into themes, and interpret to the findings. NVivo has been chosen as it allows the researcher to assign codes (research context, description, themes, and similarities/differences) to each case (interviews, survey results, and data from sources).

Data collected both from interviews and surveys and other sources (including but not limited to memoirs, published work, and reports) has been organised, memoed, and classified with the software. The data analysis stage involved direct interpretation to construct a clear picture of what the findings, aligning with Creswell's (2007: 187) emphasis on finding. This process entailed looking at and making an in-depth picture of the North Korean mobility process by pulling it apart into the two steps of migration (evaluation and realisation) and analysing the factors that affect and comprise each part. Following this stage, the focus of the research turned towards examining remittances within the mobility context and, consequently, aspirations and abilities Patterns identified during this process informed the development of naturalistic generalisations that can be applied to the North Korean case. Finally, the data analysis presented in Chapter 4 will present the results in a comprehensive format, complemented by narrative examples of individual participants. The examples that will be shown illustrate identified patterns found and exemplify the generalisations derived from the data analysis stage.

3.2.3 Ethical Considerations

This research has obtained ethics approval from the University of Central Lancashire was received for data collection activities involving people in the UK and data protection (BAHSS2 0234, August 2021). Additional approval for international data collection was granted later on with an

amendment (BAHSS2 0234 Phase 2, April 2022)[11]. Throughout the research process, steps have been evaluated to ensure no wrongdoing or harm was inflicted on research participants. Wrongdoing is described as the "failure to treat research participants as important in themselves, researchers instead viewing them as a means to an end" (Bell and Bryman, 2007: 68), and harm involves physical damage to the individual.

This study prioritised informed consent to ensure this research was not using research participants. Efforts have been taken to respect the participants privacy; keeping the participants identities anonymous; avoiding physical, psychological, and emotional harm; to ensure the data collection methods have not exploited participants or attempted to coerce specific or exaggerated responses; and to be sensitive of cultural, gender, or religious-based differences (Cloke et al., 2000: 135). Respect for participants and their well-being is demonstrated through the use of pseudonyms and the careful exclusion of identifiable information that could cause harm or distress.

Additionally, although this research does not intend to focus on human rights abuses, examining mobility entails the issues of repatriation, detention, and other potentially traumatic experiences that can be reminisced during interviews. This research has taken the following risk minimisation strategies. First, the main way in which migrants were contacted has been through NGOs working with the North Korean community. Therefore, not only do NGOs have experience with them, but they can also assess which individuals are fitter for the interviews and they would not recommend individuals who could be further traumatised in any way. Secondly, migrants were thoroughly informed about the topic of the interviews. Thirdly, North Korean migrants had absolute freedom to skip, remove, or change questions, as well as stop interviews altogether in case of distress. If any emotional distress was sensed during interviews, these were paused.

Here, the questions of 'hierarchy' and 'strangeness' towards the research participant are addressed. North Korean migration is under-researched and the few studies involving transnational linkages focus on motherhood. This study expands the current literature and in doing so, benefits from the data collected from research participants. This research 'takes' but it has also attempted to 'give something back' to the participants. As Cloke et al. (2000: 151) discuss, as it gives participants the opportunity to share their story and break from victimisation, exaggerations, and media dramatisation of the North Korean experience. In this way, the participants were able to articulate what their reality is (and was) to provide an accurate picture. Moreover, the study has avoided forcing certain answers (and thus, exploiting the participants) to create a specific image of North Korea. This study has not intended to be the cause of harm or wrongdoing to any participant, nor it is its focus to cover human rights abuses and other negative experiences. However, given the sensitive nature of the research context, the measures outlined above were implemented to mitigate any potential risks of harm or wrongdoing to the research participants.

3.2.3.1 Trusting Migrants and Trustworthiness of this Research

North Korean migrant stories are often considered inaccurate due to memory fading, inconsistent, and lacking credibility (for example, see Lim, 2023: 6-7). Simultaneously, the media's demand for

[11] Due to COVID-19 policies, international data collection could not be approved in 2021. This was later on amended in 2022 when it was possible.

North Korean 'horror stories' has played a part in the emergence of the so-called 'career defectors' who make a living out of exposing North Korea. However, their stories are often challenged as exaggerated and untrue, and their activities may be cut short if the migrants are questioned due to inconsistencies in their stories (Song, 2015). Migrant credibility is a priority for any research concerning North Korea. Migrant validity has been attained by focusing on testimony reliability. That is to say, this research has considered the testimonies to contain truth if information shared matches information and themes found in other interviews or sources. To assess this, interviews and data were triangulated with available data. Triangulation is described as 'the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon' (Jonsen and Jehn, 2009: 125), and it is used for validation in qualitative studies. This approach involves three steps or cross-referencing points including the informants' views and understanding (in this case, the migrants), the researcher's comprehension as a participant-observer, and data and information published separately (including reports, papers, or practitioners in the field) (Jonsen and Jehn, 2009: 129-130; Korstjens and Moster, 2018: 121). It should be noted that this method is also used by organisations, such as NKDB, and researchers working not only with North Korean migrants and their testimonies but also with media sources covering North Korea (Choi, 2013: 659; Kim et al., 2009: 158; Yeo, 2020: 649).

Moreover, none of the participants for the interviews and surveys for this research were paid. And the identities of those participants remain anonymous in this research. Hence, none of the participants can seek personal gain by participating in this project. Furthermore, neither the questions asked to migrants nor the study itself aimed to portray a specific image of North Korea or seek out exaggerated, sensationalised narratives. Qualitative validity is one of the priorities of this research. Trustworthiness of this study has been attained by focusing on four criteria: credibility, which entails that the findings have introduced coherent information and analysis; transferability, which involves the degree to how the results can be transferred to other settings or respondents; dependability, which refers to the reliability of the findings (during data collection and interpretation) among other related work in the field; and confirmability, meaning how other researchers or a similar study could confirm similar interpretations (Creswell, 2007: 244; Korstjens and Moster, 2018).

3.3 Research Limitations

The main limitation of any study aiming to examine topics about North Korea is the limited access to information and the reliability of what little is available. Moreover, due to the fundamental lack of information from and about the country, the age of data is another concern. North Korea's hermeticism often translates into a chronic lack of official data. Official information is mainly published occasionally through the Central Committee of the WPK's news portal *Rodong Sinmun* and the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA). However, their integrity is questionable.

Other accessible data is unofficial information outpouring from 'experts' on North Korea or watchers with informants in North Korea, visits to the country (often as tourists on guided tours), expertise in satellite imagery, and contact with migrants (Lim, 2023). Each approach has its caveats. Firstly, informants are often anonymous due to their physical security and while they can provide crucial data about North Korea, it is difficult to assess its validity. It is often the case that

the media utilises anonymous sources to share saleable information about the country (such as news about Kim Jong-un ordering citizens to eliminate cats due to COVID-19 concerns or the infamous ban on certain haircuts and blue jeans) (Lee, 2021). While this is not to say anonymous insiders cannot be trusted, it is important to check the reliability of the media outlet and the solidity of the information. Secondly, guided tours frequently assign North Korean minders to supervise the tourist group as their movement freedom is, to an extent, limited – and, for the most part, visits are often in the capital city of Pyongyang and thus do not necessarily offer an appropriate picture of how life in North Korea is like (Kulesza, 2021). An additional concern about guided tours is that tour destinations are often pre-designated by North Korea and, at times, visits to certain spots have been staged to promote an unrealistic image of the country (Kulesza, 2021). Thirdly, experts infer and interpret what they see through satellite imagery of North Korea (for example, see Bermudez, Scarlatoiu, and Ha, 2024). Snapshots of the country, without proper evidence or the possibility to visit the locations, allow recognition of what is in the pictures but the information provided is more of a probability than a certainty. And, fourthly, migrant trustworthiness needs to be put in check before it can be considered valid. Organisations and researchers that triangulate information and have the experience of working with migrants should be trusted over media outlets that may be looking for exaggerated migrant accounts of what life in North Korea is like.

Additionally, fieldwork within North Korea to research migration would not be possible. This is due to a variety of reasons including the borders being closed due to pandemic concerns, tourism was expected to re-start in 2023 (Kulesza, 2021) but it only began tentatively in 2024 when the fieldwork stage had been completed; the impossibility of travelling freely within the country as a foreigner (specifically to Northern provinces where there is something akin to a 'migration culture'); and the challenges and troubles of speaking sincerely with North Koreans about sensitive topics like escaping the country or transnational linkages (Kook, 2019: 55). Because of this, analysing immobility has been done through the eyes and experiences of the mobile, as interviews or data collection with people who stayed in North Korea voluntarily has not been possible. Access to North Korean migrants is also limited. As mentioned in an earlier section, North Koreans are rarely on social media nor is there a database with public information about them. This is due to privacy and personal security concerns. Moreover, North Koreans may not be inclined to participate in a non-remunerated study about how they escape the country or how and if they maintain ties with others in North Korea for similar worries. Furthermore, fieldwork in China would also not be possible as it would put participants at risk due to their vulnerable statuses as illegal immigrants.

Due to the abovementioned challenges to access data and participants, a multi-method approach involving multiple data sources has been pursued. North Korea watchers and practitioners were interviewed as, although data is limited, they have the expertise and experience to identify what information is legitimate. Because of this challenges and time-constraints, time limits are also a challenge not only due to the potential of reaching out to more individuals with more time but also since the pandemic has affected the number of migrants escaping and reaching South Korea (Jung, 2021). Additionally, COVID-19 restrictions and concerns limited and challenged the sample size in Korea. Due to the low number of North Korean interviewees, the interviews and surveys that involve them have been used to exemplify, support, and interpret findings from practitioner interviews and other published sources.

The sample profile from research participants is another limitation as the inherent difficulty to of accessing North Korean migrants removes, to an extent, the research's ability to recruit specific profiles. It was highly likely that the migrants who may participate would have similar backgrounds (women from Northern provinces who escaped around the same age) and differ in crucial characteristics such as how and whether they engage in transnational activities, their escape year (and thus, generation[12]), and how they got out of North Korea. On the one hand, similar profiles would not permit the drawing of a complete picture of North Korean migration. On the other hand, although patterns across the experiences of individuals with dissimilar backgrounds can be identified, these can also be anecdotal evidence or exceptions to what can be deemed as 'normal' North Korean mobility. Due to the challenges of access to participants and sampling, this study has taken a qualitative approach to interpret how mobility is perceived and explore how the migration journey is experienced.

Another limitation regarding the profiles of the participants is that immobile North Koreans are not reachable for the research. The participants are migrants who have migrated successfully and may have shared their experiences about their mobility evaluation and realisation steps. North Korean migrants have also been participants as agents of transnational activities and refer to how these affect mobility aspirations and abilities of their networks back in their origin country. Because of sampling matters and the challenge of accessing participants from the same 'escaping generation,' this study contributes to current North Korean migration literature by comparing the role of remittances in first and second migrant generations.

Limitations of the research framework have been introduced and assessed within the Aspiration and Ability Model section. These challenges include, in the first place, the permanence of mobility categories (or the aftermath of the outcomes), which have been addressed in the case study and analysis as North Korean mobility has proven that a category does not end the mobility journey. In the second place, the limited focus and relevance given to meso-level elements, immobility aspirations, and mobility deterrents in the original framework have been examined to include these. This research fills the gap between mobility evaluation and realisation by including transnational elements looking into the under-researched social remittances. Yet, the absence of the step in which aspiration turns into intention is a limitation that must be noted. An additional challenge with the framework and interpretation is that certain non-material elements and the crucial mobility step of evaluation (and consequently, aspirations) are unmeasurable and unquantifiable with the resources available for this thesis. Because of this, the impact of remittances on aspirations has been interpreted through the factual experiences of the participants and anecdotal cases will be mentioned as examples. These anecdotal insights are a result of data collection limitations and highlight an avenue for future research to explore more robust and comprehensive methodologies.

Finally, Korean being a foreign language is another limiting factor that must be noted for this research as it limited interaction with participants during the interviews. This also challenged access to existing literature and documents without translation into English or another familiar language to the researcher.

[12] First generation North Korean migrants are considered to be those who left during the famine; second generation migrants are those who left after with motivations such as seeking freedom or/and economic opportunities.

4. Case Analysis on Remittances and North Korea's Mobility

Emigration from any country is determined, deterred, and inspired by a plethora of interplaying elements. Whereas North Korea is, at times, presented as an exceptional case in different contexts, mobility is not one of them. This is mostly because outflows are comprised of people and, while everyone may have a different hierarchy of needs, physical and emotional requirements tend to align. This chapter analyses the case of North Korean international mobility with or without remittances by looking into the many elements that impact mobility by examining mobility drivers, enablers, and deterrents. The sections that follow will start with an introduction to the pre-migration context to present the foundational environment in which North Koreans are socialised. Then, the chapter presents how remittances affect and interact with the migration process through the two-step process presented by Carling's model. Mobility drivers will be linked to aspirations; mobility enablers will be related to (cap)abilities; and lastly, voluntary/involuntary immobility will be addressed by examining mobility deterrents. The analysis will be using data collected from interviews and other sources, this precedes the analysis chapter. The components considered belong to the three levels of mobility previously introduced: the macro-level observing the larger social context and politico-economic infrastructures; the meso-level looking at the transnational elements and agents involved in mobility, including migrants; and the micro-level dissecting how the individual's characteristics, such as whether they have direct contact with people outside, interact with migration decision-making and enactment.

Figure 1 presented earlier in this thesis serves as the theoretical framework of how the interplay of elements at the three mobility levels (macro-, micro-, and meso-) can potentially trigger aspirations to become (im)mobile and make it possible. Aspirations emerge when the individual identifies projects they want to accomplish through migration. Mobility may be enabled once the prospective migrants have the abilities to follow paths outside of the country. In contexts like Europe, a path could be being hired by an American company and obtaining a work visa, for example. This research examines aspirations and abilities, but the case study will also observe migration challenges and deterrents to identify why North Koreans may prefer staying in their home country, and what challenges may frustrate mobility attempts.

As stated in the methodology, the case study will use process tracing to understand North Korean mobility. The very first step in the following chapters will be to understand everyday politics and life in North Korea. Then the concept of remittance-receiving will be introduced to further expand on how it affects mobility drivers, enablers, and deterrents. The beginning of the case study examines the legal and political interfaces impacting mobility for all North Koreans. This study will combine these semi-permanent frameworks with individual characteristics, which are presented in Table 4 below, and include gender, age, and whether the household receives remittances as key elements for addressing mobility.

Table 2 Elements that impact North Korean mobility

Age and gender

Socio-economic status and educational level *(songbun*, social status*)*
Employment
Social networks
Personality traits
Breaking points (Fahy, 2015)
Assessment of country's situation (What are the nation's problems? Can these be solved*?)*
Access to outside information
Family ties (migration history, foreign roots, links to the North Korean elites, parenthood)
Remittance-receival and contact with individuals outside
Organisation membership (party membership or affiliation to other groups)
Legal frameworks (mobility, economy, criminal)

Sources: Compiled by the author as an overview of micro-level elements that may impact migration as examined in the literature and theoretical review. These are presented in an arbitrary order

4.1 Foundational Environment and Baseline Socialisation: The Pre-Migration Context

4.1.1 Political Socialisation and the Disruption of North Korean Normalcy

Migration occurs within the semi-static structures of legal infrastructures such as immigration laws and economic and political systems. North Korea is, for its citizens, a country like any other. However, compared to other contemporary states, be it Western democracies or authoritarian regimes from Asia or Africa, there are striking differences ranging from civil and political rights and freedoms to economic systems, and societal structures and organisation. The introduction to this chapter denotes that this study does not look at North Korea as an exception that requires custom methodologies. Rather, it places the country's emigration intents and practices as it would with any other society, meaning that mobility decision-making considers similar elements such as physical and emotional needs (closeness to family, job location, better climate, and so on).

Having said this, just as any country has its particularities, North Korea also has them. If these characteristics are compared with the homologous ones from contemporary democracies such as Denmark or South Korea, North Korean policies can be described as limiting in many regards: politically, economically, socially, or migration-wise. Media has been inclined to determining North Korea in an antagonistic light in defining how their subjects are 'brainwashed' into believing such restrictions and policies are normal. It must be emphasised, however, that North Korean citizens are not generally aware of how their conditions diverge or conform with other countries, and that is because they are politically socialised into the North Korean environment.

Socialisation can be broadly defined as the process in which humans grow and learn to perceive and organise the world and society surrounding them. This includes absorbing social values like being polite to strangers; spoken and unspoken rituals such as waiting for traffic lights before crossing the road; and learning how to classify elements of their world about their culture through

different dichotomies ('normal' and 'strange', 'clean' and 'dirty', and, amongst others, 'safe' and 'dangerous') (Hendry, 2019: 57). *Political* socialisation stands for a similar process about the political arena where "citizens in established political systems learn unconsciously to support and accept the system, as they are socialized into it throughout their lives. Early in their adulthood they develop political ideas and attitudes that are supportive and consistent with the system [...] These attitudes remain in turn as a basis of system support in succeeding life passages" (Neundorf, 2010: 1098).

North Korea's isolation and hermeticism add an interesting layer to the socialisation of North Koreans. Whereas newer migrant generations have been able to contrast their cultures with other countries just by reading the news online or accessing their social media, the general North Korean population does not have easy access to any of this. On the one hand, older North Korean generations were especially cut off from outside information. On the other hand, there has been a considerable inflow of outside media getting into the country in the last 15 years. Studies that have conducted surveys of North Korean migrants indicate that the vast majority of those leaving the country have consumed it at least once if not regularly (for example, Lee, 2013). Regardless of the pre-pandemic increase in the availability of foreign media, it remains illegal.

Simply put, North Koreans are culturally and politically socialised into believing their daily routines, their economic system, and their regime are 'normal.' This is in part because they lack any experience growing up anywhere else, but also because of their lack of in-depth information about other countries. To put the situation in contrast, a teenager in Europe can type the words 'North Korea' on a search engine and be overwhelmed with the information that comes back. They can have a deep dive into their Wikipedia page, watch videos of tourists in Pyongyang, and even check the latest known updates on the news website NK News. North Koreans are, to an extent, limited to maps and general descriptions in their textbooks, published works pre-approved by the government such as Russian science fiction in translation (Berthelier, 2018), and what is shown in the media.

North Korean media, be it cultural productions or news, orbit around the same issues involving other countries and ideological and political themes. Regarding cultural productions from North Korea, authors and academics have traditionally reduced North Korean art to being a vehicle to regurgitate the Regime's guidelines that lack any creative voice, akin to a conveyor belt feeding political discourse to the masses. Immanuel Kim (2018) identifies the state's attempts to impose a teleological narrative in cultural productions through Kim Jong-il's 'seed' (*jongja* in Korean) theory. The seed theory poses that "North Korean literature prescribes the way individuals in the narrative ought to speak, think, and behave according to state directives, which reinforce and privilege the singular discourse of the state" (Kim, 2018: 4). The scholar finds that literary value and creative voices maintain their authority within the productions, albeit political discourse remains within it with limited dominance (Kim, 2018). Similarly, de Ceuster (2021) points out the impossibility of separating art and propaganda as it is both things at once. In other words, art is conceived because it has a function in North Korea. Likewise, if not contrived domestically,

foreign productions (mostly Soviet) were translated and published in North Korea to reinforce state priorities such as promoting science (Berthelier, 2018).

Consumption of cultural productions that combine storytelling with a politico-ideological component is yet another element that contributes to political socialisation. North Korean movies, books, and so forth are consistent with the state narrative and the values of *juche*, which further reaffirming that they are 'normal' and 'safe.' Books, theatre, and movies are 'just' fiction, however. Thus, while they can help develop and reinforce the ideas of normality and dichotomies of what is good or bad, another key element is mass media itself. In North Korea, this refers to news and radio broadcasts and the press. North Korean official channels are the only source of domestic and international news and so the events that are shown and highlighted are the ones absorbed by the masses. Akin to cultural productions, the seed theory is used as a guideline for mass media in a way that acts as an ideological tool that transpires into how people interact with society in tune with the regime's narrative (Boadella-Prunell, Swash, and Lim, 2022; Song, 2005). The effort is warranted by the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the WPK, which manages North Korea's media to ensure productions follow the regime's ideology (Williams, 2019: 17-18).

Mass media is also one of the main sources where the regular North Korean person learns about the outside world. Regarding antagonistic news, the usual suspects are the US and Japan (Boadella-Prunell et al., 2022). South Korea is held in ambiguity depending on the news, yet it is safe to say that the countries that North Korean media has observed in a better light have been China and Russia (Fisher, 2018; Zhang and Zinoviev, 2018). Events hosted by and visits of members from the Spanish Korean Friendship Association (KFA henceforth) and other international branches have also received good regard in the news (KCNA, 2013 and 2014). Whereas it can be controversial to define certain countries as North Korea's allies, the media does share occasional news about countries that have KFA branches in them or that do not often, if at all, condemn North Korea. The news ranges from negative updates about these states, such as Spain's reaction to the Catalan independence referendum causing social unrest (Naenara, 2017), or news that aligns with North Korean politics, including Uganda supporting Cuba against the US embargo (KCNA, 2012).

The general restrictions to access external sources of information drastically limit the repertoire of what North Koreans can consume. North Korean content is, as seen, heavily ideological and a tool to reframe reality so it aligns with regime priorities. Simultaneously, this shapes how North Korean citizens see life, interpret what is normal and safe, and adhere to spoken and unspoken rituals. In this learning process that begins in any North Korean's childhood, they are for example taught about life in South Korea and the US. South Korea is described as a poor country devastated by the alliance with the Americans. The US is also seen in a negative light with special emphasis on rampant crime. Interestingly, international stereotypes and clichés are also part of North Korea's common knowledge. Interviewee 20 (2022) pointed out how North Koreans joke about European technology and how Germans are always on time, as well as how the Chinese have low-quality products. Whereas this is quite obviously not factual information, international clichés being regularly used amongst North Koreans further demonstrates that North Koreans are not as isolated as it is sometimes implied. It also shows how no country is regarded in the same light and, even if

European countries are jokingly praised for their technology, the press seldom mentions their victories and concentrates on their crises and highlights North Korea-related events (mostly by the KFA). Countries that are mentioned such as South Korea and the US receive an antagonistic treatment. Then, who would want to live there? In a way, notions about the outside world distort reality and denote that living in North Korea is preferable to residing in other countries. This contributes to how North Koreans learn and perceive what is 'safe' and 'normal,' tilting the 'normality' scale in favour of North Korea.

North Korea has been under three North Korean regimes – Kim Il-sung's, Kim Jong-il's, and Kim Jong-un's – and, while they share similarities, North Koreans living under each leader have experienced a very different country. At the same time, they have interacted with the economy and the outside world in various ways. The main state news channel of North Korea, the KCNA, has switched their stance on countries whenever North Korea's international relations improved, namely when the ties with the Soviet Union turned sour once Gorbachev began favouring South Korea; occasional tensions with China; Kim Jong-un's summits with Donald Trump; or whenever a liberal party has ruled in South Korea and initiated a rapprochement with Pyongyang. These changes have been time-sensitive and episodic.

Illicit foreign media distribution is introduced below yet its usage by the regime must be noted. South Korean shows that depict the less attractive sides of the country become tools for the regime. For example, on North Korean propaganda websites such as *Arirang Meari*, the TV show *Squid Game* is used to epitomise life in South Korea (Smith, 2021). Shows like Netflix's *D.P.* (Deserter Pursuit) are shown to the North Korean army to display the brutality and inhumanity manifested by South Korean soldiers (NKDB, 2022a). Both instances display that there is a degree of distortion in how the country is portrayed by weaponising South Korean media against them. While the portrayal has the potential to be effective considering the isolation and political socialisation North Koreans go through, Interviewee 19 (2022) stated North Koreans can tell when something "is just a movie" and not reality.

Moving away from state-sanctioned information, another element must be addressed: outside information trickling into North Korea through loudspeakers near the border, flash drives, and balloons. On the one hand, smuggler networks bring in flash drives, microSD cards, and DVDs with foreign media for North Koreans to consume in secret (Williams, 2019). Similarly, North Korean migrants and civil organisations have joined the effort by forwarding different data storage devices filled with hand-picked media that is either requested by those in North Korea or sent over due to the potential impact of the contents. The logic behind each of the involved groups is different. Smuggler networks think of profit that can be made; North Korean migrants want their families to be entertained with the media they want to watch; activists from North Korea and civil society organisations such as the Human Rights Foundation's (HRF) Flash Drives for Freedom (FDFF hereinafter) send movies, Wikipedia entries, and news reports to teach North Koreans about human rights and the 'real' North Korea beyond the regime's narrative (HRF, 2021).

It is practically impossible to quantify how much external information and media is smuggled into the country as both border-crossing and circulating and consuming the media are illegal. Up until the pandemic, HRF (2020 and 2021) divulges that the FDFF initiative has reached over a million North Koreans through disseminating 59 million hours of reading material (including Wikipedia pages, data on Seoul's economic trends, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and 2.5 million hours of visual media (Korean and English-language movies and shows). One cannot pinpoint the exact year when the phenomenon of outside information being smuggled in began, but its origins started in the 1980s with Japanese VHS getting into the country (Williams, 2021). The practice regained a new strength as the *jangmadang* grew and solidified its presence in North Korea. Hence, outside information dissemination had been a concern for Kim Il-sung at a time when owning televisions and VHS machines would not have been common across the country (Lankov, 2007: 56-57). It became a bigger problem under Kim Jong-il's rule as border-crossing became the 'new normal' during the early 2000s and the bulky VHS was gradually replaced by microSDs and flash drives (Williams, 2019).

Smugglers do not come out to disclose their trade nor how many North Koreans they have dealt with. However, there are infallible signs that outside information dissemination unsettled the North Korean regime, and it is possible to surmise the extent of it by the government's reactions. For starters, North Korea watchers have looked at how, if at all, consuming and sharing foreign media has been punished. Consuming foreign media is defined as a 'decadent act' that is punishable under North Korean criminal law and, as time has gone by and foreign media dissemination has continued, laws have been changed to reflect this. Table 3 below showcases three articles in chapter six of North Korea's Criminal Code, titled "Crimes of Impairing Socialist Culture" (Hawk and Oh, 2017: 108). Foreign media can be put under the labels of decadent media as well as enemy broadcasting and propaganda. The table also notes the amendments that were in the revision of the Criminal Code in 2015 compared to the articles from 2012. Whereas consumption, possession, and circulation of foreign media had been punishable under North Korea's Criminal Code and heavily chastised under Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il (Williams, 2019 and 2021), Kim Jong-un has been the one to attempt a more serious crackdown on the practice (Interviewees 6 and 12, 2022) with the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea enacted in 2020 (DailyNK, 2023).

Table 3 North Korea Criminal Code articles concerning outside information (consumption, possession, and dissemination) in 2012 and the 2015 revision. This also includes the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act of the DPRK enacted in 2020 and amended in 2022

Article	Text
Article 183 - Importation and Distribution of Decadent Culture (2012)	"A person who, without authorisation, imports, makes, distributes or illegally keeps drawings, photos, books, video recordings or electronic media that reflect decadent, carnal or foul contents shall be punished by short-term labour for less than one year. In cases where the foregoing act is a grave offense, he or she shall be punished by reform through labour for less than five years."

Article 183 - Importation and Distribution of Decadent Culture (2015)	"A person who, without authorisation, imports, creates, distributes, or illegally keeps drawings, photos, books, or electronic content like video recordings which contain decadent, carnal or foul contents shall be punished by labour training for less than one year. If one imports, creates, or keeps such content frequently or in large quantity, one shall be punished by reform through labour for less than five years. In cases when the gravity of the nature of the acts specified in the immediate foregoing act is severe, one shall be punished by reform through labour for five years or more, but not more than ten years."
Article 27 - Crime of Distributing South Korean Ideology and Culture (2022 amendment)	"Any person who views, listens to, or possesses South Korean movies, video recordings, compilations, books, songs, drawings, or photographs, or who brings in and distributes South Korean songs, drawings, photographs, or designs shall be sentenced to 5 to 10 years of reform through labor. If the severity of the crime is deemed high, the offender shall be sentenced to reform through labor for 10 years or more. Any person who brings in or distributes South Korean movies, video recordings, compilations, and books shall be sentenced to reform through labor for life."
Article 28 - Crime of Distributing Ideology and Culture of Hostile Countries (2022 amendment)	"Any person who views, listens to, or possesses movies, video recordings, books, songs, drawings, or photographs of hostile countries, or who brings in and distributes songs, drawings, photographs, or designs of hostile countries shall be sentenced to reform through labor for up to 5 years. If the severity of the crime is deemed high, the offender shall be sentenced to 5 to 10 years of reform through labor. Any person who brings in or distributes movies, video recordings, compilations, and books of hostile countries shall be sentenced to reform through labor for 10 years or more. Any person who brings in or distributes a large amount of movies, video recordings, compilations, and books of hostile countries to a large number of people, or who supports or encourages other people to view or read them in a group shall be sentenced to reform through labor for life or the death penalty."
Article 30 - Crime of Distributing Absurd Ideology and Culture (2022 amendment)	"Any person who views, listens to, or possesses movies, video recordings, compilations, books, songs, drawings, or photographs of foreign countries that go against socialist ideology and culture and our own lifestyle, or who illegally brings in and distributes songs, drawings, photographs, designs, or clothes of foreign countries shall be sentenced to short term disciplinary labor. If the severity of the crime is deemed high, the offender shall be sentenced to up to 5 years of reform through labor. Any person who illegally brings in or distributes movies, video recordings, compilations, and books of foreign countries shall be sentenced to 5 to 10 years of reform through labor. Any person who brings in or distributes a large amount of movies, video recordings, compilations, and books of foreign countries to a large number of people, or who supports or encourages other people to view

	or read them in a group shall be sentenced to reform through labor for 10 years or more."
Article 184 - Conduct of Decadent Acts (2012)	"A person who watches or listens to drawings, photos, books, video recordings or electronic media that reflects decadent, carnal or foul contents or who performs such acts himself or herself shall be punished by short-term labour for less than one year. In cases where the foregoing act is a grave offense, he or she shall be punished by reform through labour for less than two years."
Article 184 - Conduct of Decadent Acts (2015)	"A person who looks at drawings, photos, books, listens to or watches songs, or movies that reflect decadent, carnal, or foul contents or who reenacts or reproduces such acts shall be punished by labour training for less than one year. If the acts addressed/specified in the immediate foregoing paragraph are repeatedly conducted, one shall be punished by reform through labour for less than five years. In cases when the gravity of the nature of the immediate foregoing act is severe, one shall be punished by reform through labour for five years or more but no more than ten years."
Article 185 - Listening to Hostile Broadcasting and Collecting, Keeping or Distributing Enemy Propaganda (2012)	"A person who, without anti-state motives, listens to an enemy's broadcasting or collects, keeps or distributes enemy propaganda, shall be punished by short-term labour for less than one year. In cases where the foregoing act is a grave offense, he or she shall be punished by reform through labour for less than five years."
Article 185 - Listening to Hostile Broadcasting and Collecting, Keeping or Distributing Enemy Propaganda (2015)	"A person who, without anti-state motives, listens to an enemy's broadcasting or collects, keeps or distributes the enemy's content/ material, shall be punished through labour training for less than one year. If one frequently conducts the acts addressed/specified in the immediate foregoing paragraph or if one collects, stores, or distributes large quantities of the enemy's content/material, one shall be punished through reform by labour for less than 5 years. In cases when the gravity of the nature of the immediate foregoing act is severe, one shall be punished through reform through labour for five or more years but no more than ten years."

Sources: North Korea Criminal Code translations by HRNK. The articles from the 2012 Criminal Code are taken from Hawk and Oh (2017: 108) and those from the 2015 revision are from Williams (2019: 2-4). The articles concerning the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act are from (2022: 10-11).

Kim Jong-un's crackdown has been stricter but less actionable than his predecessors'. Before Kim Jong-un came to power, the consumption and distribution of foreign media were not only illegal but also actively enforced through punitive measures. NKDB's Visual Atlas (2023) holds testimonies about executions and physical assault after individuals had been caught performing any of the two activities during Kim Jong-il's rule (for example, cases E17-I-0332 and E19-I-0609). After 2011, penalising has become less frequent with the last reported execution date due to watching it being between 2013 and 2014 (TJWG, 2019: 33). Interviewee 2 (2022) explains it has fallen under one of these categories of 'crimes' that become so common the authorities lack capabilities to pursue them. Having said this, just as other interviewees reiterated, the regime's

interest in persecuting such crimes oscillates with time. A clear example of this is the change in multiple laws in 2021 concerning using South Korean slang, watching foreign media and pornographic materials, and owning Chinese cell phones (Williams, 2021). Thus, punishment continues to a degree though, as noted by Williams (2021) and Interviewee 2 (2022), disciplining is 'less harsh' and reserved for when the regime needs to put up a show. While less harsh, executions have taken place for consuming decadent/enemy materials (NKDB's Visual Atlas, 2023: case E19-I-0786; Kim, 2014: 20), though data collected by NKDB (2023) shows the extreme measure to be much rarer than other forms such as illegal detention or internal deportation.

Interviewee 6 (2022), when asked about information dissemination and punishment, spoke about the reports about the 8th Party Congress in January 2021. These put forward the "proclamations put out by Kim Jong-un and the regime that they would crack down harder like South Korean dramas and American movies. It sounds like the punishment has become stiffer, at least the penalty; but it seems like the enforcement level waxes and wanes over certain periods. But we're at a period where things seem to be stricter." Interviewee 2 (2022) commented on the fluctuation of how the way the regime goes after foreign media consumption. He noted that the authorities can no longer punish everyone who watches foreign media because it has effectively become a common practice for North Koreans across the country. Whereas, in the past, DVDs and flash drives were localised in the borders, in the latter years prior to the pandemic they reach any part of North Korea. The interviewee emphasised that, in North Korea, if there is a will, there is a way, thus foreign media can reach the southern provinces of the country regardless of how distant they are from the border with China where the smuggler networks are more established. This being said outside information is more accessible in the border areas.

4.1.2 The Limits of Legal Mobility in North Korea

Can North Koreans legally migrate internationally? On paper, the answer is yes, and, before the pandemic, it was possible. Other than the perhaps more obvious need to send North Korean diplomats abroad for embassies and UN missions, North Koreans leave the country legally in a variety of ways: as overseas labourers (Gyupchanova, 2018); families of diplomats (Interviewee 10, 2022); hackers (Kim, 2013); artists (Kirkwood, 2013); exchange students in countries such as Bulgaria (Gyupchanova, 2021: 275); and entrepreneurs (See et al., 2019: 9). Officially, every North Korean is eligible to go abroad under the right circumstances (meaning that one needs to be a student to do an exchange programme abroad), yet reality translates differently. North Koreans officially and legally abroad are subject to a prior and thorough ideological examination before being dispatched. The selected 'usual suspects' tend to be Pyongyang residents from high social class and with a favourable *songbun* status who, at the same time, have a proven record of being loyal to the North Korean regime (Gypuchanova, 2018).

Not all eligible North Koreans may be considered part of the political elites, yet they belong to the higher social classes. At first glance, one may infer eligible individuals are one step closer to permanent international migration than their compatriots belonging to lower social classes, yet this

is also not the case. North Koreans abroad, similarly to any other individual attempting to migrate, require visas and work permits that are time-capped. In other words, exchange students leave for one or two semesters and overseas labourers leave for the duration of their contracts. Leaving does not mean they are removed from the North Korean surveillance machine. Rather, students are required to check in at the North Korean embassies in whichever country they are sent to; diplomats are meant to remain within their compounds; and overseas labourers are to stay where they are stationed and their passports are kept by North Korean authorities at the location (Gyupchanova, 2018: 199).

Being abroad, thus, still does not entail freedom of movement for those North Koreans who become mobile through official means. Even for elites who reside abroad with their families and have their children attend domestic schools, leaving Pyongyang's grasp behind is not easy. Interviewee 20 (2022) explains that North Koreans who are dispatched abroad find it tempting to take flight as, to a degree, it is easier for them, "but there are higher risks for their own and their families' safety if they are caught planning or attempting to escape." As an example of this, Pyongyang-born Lee Hyun-Seung (2022: 43:20), who escaped with his family while living in China, has divulged his grandmother, aunt, and uncle were put on a North Korean TV broadcast to threaten them after having left to South Korea.

All in all, North Koreans who reside abroad legally in the eyes of the regime, do so temporarily. There are very few exceptions to the case other than migrants. One of them is Lee Yeong-heul, who started a relationship with Pham Ngoc Cane, a Vietnamese exchange student in Pyongyang, and promised to wait for him to marry her. The reports indicate that, after 31 years, Kim Il-sung permitted Lee to leave the country for her wedding and, ultimately, live in Vietnam from then on (Lankov, 2007: 278). These cases are, however, rare, and most who leave through North Korean legal ways do so for a set period and without leaving the watch of North Korea's authorities. Hence, the concept of permanent migration is mostly alien to North Koreans.

Temporary international migration is highly coveted. Multiple human rights organisations research and advocate for the rights of North Korean overseas labourers due to a plethora of reasons that range from having a high percentage of their real salaries taken from them to excessive working hours (Scarlatoiu, Ha, and Lee, 2022; Yoon and Lee, 2015). However, the income a North Korean can receive as a worker in Russia is considerably larger than what they can obtain in North Korea. Because of this, many put their efforts to and spend resources on bribes (including not only cash but also cigarettes and dining coupons) to be selected for an overseas contract regardless of poor working conditions (Scarlatoiu et al., 2022: 3). As the opportunities to be a diplomat, be a labourer abroad, or attend a prestigious school to become an exchange student are restricted to the elites, the only feasible way for North Koreans to leave is by escaping.

Temporary illegal migration can be done by simply border-crossing. Returning, however, is the problem. Households that have a member abroad illegally making money need to mask their absence to avoid issues with the authorities and the *inminban*; bribes go a long way (Interviewee 18, 2022), especially during the years that North Koreans caught in Northern China received lesser

punishments since they were out for money and not escaping (Interviewee 15, 2022). However, the simplest way to mask permanent migration for individuals who have escaped indefinitely is to report them as deceased rather than missing (Interviewee 17, 2022). A striking difference between those who leave legally and those who do so taking illicit steps is returning. Whereas regular migrants worldwide go back to their homes for visits or engage in return migration, North Koreans cannot do so. Going back to North Korea renders the individual under punitive actions from the state (Interviewee 14, 2022). And while many North Koreans dream of returning home and many would, the punishment restricts them from doing so (Interviewee 14, 2022). Reports indicate that in the past ten years merely 30 North Koreans have returned, and they may have been sent into forced labour camps (Seo and Hollingsworth, 2022). While North Korea has televised returnee Jeon Hye-sung (who identified as Lim Ji-hyun in South Korea) as she spoke negatively about being used as a TV personality to shame North Korea and her life in the South (Uriminzokkiri, 2017). Little is known about what happened to the individual after the broadcast and, likewise, there is a lack of factual evidence about the whereabouts and well-being of other returnees (Interviewee 15, 2022). Rapoport and Docquier (2005) investigated remittance behaviour and its connection to the migrants attempting to improve their social standing prior to returning to their home country. Because of the aforementioned challenges in returning to North Korea, this motive does not seem to be present in the North Korean case.

This study investigates international migration. However, a brief note should be made about internal migration to understand why people choose to engage in international migration rather than domestic. Individuals move away from their hometowns for a wide variety of reasons that can correspond to why they may leave their home countries entirely: to attend university, better job opportunities in the capital, elope with a partner who is based somewhere else, and so on. The key question is why North Koreans consider international migration before domestic migration. The former is, for all intents and purposes, illegal, expensive, and risky to take on. The latter is also difficult to perform due to the restrictions on freedom of movement in North Korea. Travelling or moving elsewhere entails having permits that may be given or not according to the individual's *songbun*, bribes that can be paid, and party membership, amongst other matters (Han et al., 2017). This mobility may be both permanent and temporary. For example, individuals in North Hamgyeong who want to visit the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, take a city trip to Pyongyang, or simply visit their grandmother in a different province, need a said permit. Travel permits and limits to domestic mobility may be meant to prevent widespread mobilisation against the regime (Yeo, 2021), yet they effectively limit the capacity of North Koreans to relocate internally. "Short-term travel outside one's county or city requires authorisation from local authorities. (…) To travel across different provinces, North Koreans must obtain a travel permit from the Office of the People's Committee. They must then report to the village head upon arrival at their destination, register their names on a travel roster, and obtain a Ministry of People's Security (MPS) stamped travel pass (Yeo, 2021: 23).

As will be further analysed in a later sub-section, North Koreans with lower *songbun* have managed to move permanently to Pyongyang. Still, they do not have the same treatment and consideration as born-and-raised Pyongyangites. Moving abroad can potentially be more

appealing because of the outside media transported within North Korea. Simultaneously, something to consider, is that the North Korean regime has used internal relocation as punishment. Article 50 of the Civil Law of North Korea notes that the 'private home' of North Koreans is a state-owned property designated for North Koreans to use. While it guarantees a residential place for North Koreans, it also entails that the state can forcibly displace individuals (Han et al., 2017: 31). NKDB has reported over 2,500 cases of forced displacement from urban areas to the countryside, many of them being a punishment (for example, the cases E09-I-2656 and E17-I-0612 in NKDB's Visual Atlas, 2023).

All in all, state-allowed migration is heavily restricted both temporarily and in freedoms North Koreans enjoy outside. At the same time, only elites can take advantage of the opportunities and economic benefits of this type of mobility. For the rest of North Korea, namely those outside of Pyongyang, mobility is reduced to be illicit. Temporary mobility takes the shape of border-crossing and permanent is where individuals remain in China or move on to another third country (South Korea, the US, or the UK, amongst others). Returning to North Korea for those taking the illegal way is difficult. Prior to Kim Jong-un, those caught in Northern China would get lesser punishment as they were seen as leaving only to earn money. Still, his new attempts to staunch any sort of mobility standardised the repercussions for those who were spotted in China or in any other country (Interviewee 15, 2022). Hence, the elites who have chances to migrate temporarily are very restricted, as leaving would jeopardize the safety of their families back home. Similarly, regular citizens who attempt to border-cross temporarily or permanently not only put their families at risk but may not be able to return back and ensure their own safety when doing so.

4.1.3 North Korea's Shifting Economy: Regime Interference, Benevolent Negligence, and the *Jangmadang*

The survival of the North Korean regime, even amidst sanctions, is intrinsically tied to the political and economic systems of the state. The end of North Korea's economic golden era was followed by a spiralling economic crisis that resulted in the Arduous March, a famine combined with what would ail the rations system and North Korea's economy for the years to come. Regardless of the chronic deficiencies and lowering expectations toward what the regime can provide for the citizens, the WPK has maintained its dominance within the national system (Lee and Seo, 2019). Following the timely death of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il commemorated his legacy by putting forward *songun* politics. The approach built upon the *juche* ideology minted by his father emphasised North Korea's self-reliance and, in this new scheme, organisations were reshuffled to reinstate that the priority of the country was to put the military first. Kim Jong-un then, in 2018, redirected the national strategy to follow the *byungjin* line which shifted toward prioritising socialist economic development. The new state approach was solidified through the demolishment of military grounds that were replaced by economic construction sites and mobilising military resources for the economy (Lee and Choi, 2019: 10). Weaving the regime's narrative bestowed the title of *suryong* (supreme leader) to the leadership and, with the beginnings of the *suryong* economy in the 1970s, handed the reigns of the economy to the Kim family in a hereditary fashion

(Park and Choi, 2014). Legitimacy and power were kept partially through periodical purges conducted to keep the WPK clear of factions (Interviewee 20, 2022), the Kims solidified their grasp on power and bolstered their legitimacy.

The party-oriented governance of the Kims has solidified the relations between the "ruling party, the government, and the military" (Lee and Seo, 2019: 3), and by keeping legitimacy and their rule strong, the leaders have kept their hands on the reigns of the national economy. The underground marketisation that sprouted from the famine was a bottom-up change that went against the North Korean Constitution: "The means of production are owned by the state and social cooperatives" (Article 20), which specifies that the ownership of the means of production is divided into the state and social cooperative organizations (Article 22)" (Yoon, 2014). North Koreans were producing and selling (or exchanging) privately, and that was not in line with the socialist economy of the country. Regardless, the measure was needed.

The *jangmadang* contributed to the survival of the people and, by doing so, to the survival of the country and the North Korean regime. The informal economy has been formalised to a degree through the 5.30 Measures from 2014 and other ensuing decentralisation measures that partially recognise the operation of the markets (Lee and Seo, 2019). Andrei Lankov (2016 and 2018) further examines how Kim Jong-un's benevolent negligence toward the markets is because they are the best chance for economic growth while, simultaneously, he will have better support from the people if they are maintained. This attitude is not synonymous with turning a complete blind eye to the operations, however, as authorities keep a close eye on how rich individuals are getting (Interviewees 6 and 20, 2022) and may expect timely gifts to let business function (Interviewee 9, 2022). Decentralisation in North Korea remains incomplete, with the economy still 70 per cent planned, while markets account for the remaining 30 per cent (Lee and Seo, 2019: 3).

The informal markets that sprouted during the Arduous March first did so in the true spirit of self-reliance with North Koreans selling what they owned or had grown. As the years progressed and the markets evolved, they grew to have everything a North Korean needed, including Chanel bags, Chinese medicine, and South Korean makeup (Interviewee 7, 2022). They have also expanded. Whereas the *janmadang* are more vivid and mostly concentrated in the border areas, the regime has sanctioned the establishment of over 400 general markets (Cha and Collins, 2018). This is the result of the emergence of trade and smuggling networks in the Sino-Korean borderland which employ *Joseonjok*, Chinese, and North Koreans (in and out of their home country). What does the North Korean economic system have to do with mobility aspirations? For starters, North Koreans involved in the markets, networks, and the transportation sector tend to be more mobile. Interviewee 4 (2022) explains that it is not uncommon for North Koreans working in the transportation sector, particularly as train conductors who facilitate both official and unofficial trade, choose to leave the country due to their access to cross-border networks and other transnational opportunities:

> "… trains going back and forth. They [North Koreans in the train business] were already very mobile for North Korea. In North Korea, domestic travel is not open

> or free, so they were already different. Because of their location and business, it's easy to get information. That is why some of them got to learn things that made them more inclined to make the move." (Interviewee 4, 2022).

The illicit networks involved in remittances, escaping, and transnational communication piggyback on the networks that deal with the markets. In essence, all these networks qualify as profit-seeking and necessitate agents that are either located inside or can easily travel from one side or the border to the other (Baek, 2016). Network interaction supports the establishment, development, and continuity of the unofficial practices they conduct. At the same time, they are helpful for mobility because they bring information from the outside and how to border-cross, agents are often in contact with agents involved in other networks. An example of how networks interact is how smugglers are in touch with both brokers getting people out of the country or in the business of trading and bringing cash remittances into North Korea.

This being said, becoming rich does not require connections abroad. One can amass wealth only by dealing in domestic transactions without becoming involved with illicit trade and smuggler networks, let alone having family outside and potential remittance inflows. In contrast with the famine years, domestic demand has grown exponentially. Many products require international trade such as taxi businesses or phone manufacturers who can purchase components, resources, and cars more cheaply from China than locally. However, the new enterprise management system incorporated under Kim Jong-un has made it more profitable and easier to purchase supplies in the domestic market without mingling with the central system. Transportation, logistics, and mining have become three of the bigger businesses in the country that do not require obtaining resources from abroad. However, to make bigger profits it may be best to sell to Chinese buyers (Interviewee 10, 2022). For this, there are services such as miners who monetise gold found by selling it into China, sometimes running an on-demand type of business (Interviewee 9, 2022). This practice relies on smugglers or outside customers, and while having family outside can help by putting the individual in contact with relevant agents, remittances do not come into play.

Becoming wealthy does not require international customers or partners either. Domestic consumption and demand have grown and adapted to the local necessities, such as sanitation. Because of the water issues across the country, another big business with high profits domestically is the mineral water industry. Interviewee 10 (2022) explains why it has become so big in liaison to why domestic production and demand can create wealth.

> "Sanitation is a problem in North Korea. And so, people buy bottled water because it's safe. Not everybody does. It's a luxury product, but it's a luxury that more and more people can actually afford. So again, we talk about the domestic market, where production and consumption are both domestic, and this is how you can get rich in North Korea. So yes, of course, it helps if you have a rich uncle or a relative in China where you can have your export-import business. But North Korea has become like every other country in the world where you can also sustain a business

> that you can continuously grow in size by simply relying on a domestic supply chain and on domestic customers for everything." (Interviewee 10, 2022).

Wealth, regardless of where it has sprouted from, has led to the emergence of a new social, the *donju*. They have not remained solely tied to the *jangmadang*, but connected directly or indirectly with the state, something that facilitates the continuity of their business and cross-border activities (Hastings et al., 2021). Hence, a considerable rise in capital can lead to being more politically connected, which raises obvious questions regarding money and political power, and whether the former can trump the latter. In the late 2010s, capital seemed to tilt the balance in its favour, yet never fully. Money gave North Koreans the possibility of buying the way up as long as the individuals had the right *songbun* class, to begin with. Interviewee 9 (2022) exemplifies this with the case of a *donju* who bought her way up after being successful in her business and managed to get permits to move to Pyongyang with her family. In this case and, as Interviewee 10 (2022) defines, Pyongyang serves as a 'domestic Xanadu' that keeps individuals loyal, to a degree, as they imagine the city as a domestic paradise rather than fantasising about life in towns abroad (such as New York, Seoul, and so forth). As an example, Jang Young-jin's memoir notes the reverence both he and his childhood friend Sun-chul received when they were permitted to leave Chongjin to study and live in Pyongyang (Jang and Cha, 2022). The permit to live there was purchasable yet, in this case, she never managed to send her child to a good university even if they were Pyongyang residents. The scholar explains how money is a double-edged sword that allows individuals to buy military ranks, living permits in the capital city, or official positions (Interviewee 10, 2022). Still, it remains unclear if one can automatically transform their *songbun*. Since the disappearance of a member of a family can trigger alarms of defection, which can tarnish its image and *songbun*, some migrants provide remittances to support and maintain the social status of the households left behind (Kim, 2021, as cited in Lim, 2023: 55).

Money, thus, can buy a sense of freedom, such as the freedom to reside 'anywhere' within North Korea and do things that the lower strata and those without higher capital cannot afford. However, the aforementioned glass ceiling remains in existence threatening repercussions if the *donju* become too rich. The *donju* are also limited regarding how much power and status can be bought; in other words, they can look and act like Pyongyangites but cannot become one (and neither can their offspring). At the same time, as marketisation has advanced there have been groups of people who have become wealthier in money and political connections and others who have remained without assets or with fewer assets. The lives of these latter groups with lower *songbun* and little resources still drive these 'crickets' to make money by locating themselves near the markets and selling what they have foraged from nature. Since the regime has become more involved in the markets, only those with assets and money for bribes can buy their spot in the *janmadang* (Collins, 2021: 46:11).

4.1.4 Organisational Life and Surveillance in Everyday North Korea

Andrei Lankov (2013: 39-40) defines one of the key components of North Korea's social control as 'organisational life' that holds "that every North Korean has to belong to some organisation that both controls and directs his/her social activities." In other words, when North Koreans are not at work, the free time they enjoy before sleep is not so free. In practice, North Koreans are expected to join different groups such as the Youth League organisation; the Agricultural Union (for farmers); the Trade Union; the KWP; the Women's Union; and so forth. Joining them is seen as mandatory until death (UN Human Rights Council, 2014: 51). Membership involves participating in community-organised activities after work or class, which are often demanding and exhausting, and unpaid (Interviewees 1 and 2, 2022). Additionally, it includes long weekly meetings that are held multiple times a week which include 'Weekly Life Review Sessions' (or 'Self-Criticism and Mutual-Criticism Sessions') and ideological lectures (Lankov, 2013: 41). Hence mass associations go beyond monopolising the free time of North Koreans since, as they are state-directed and controlled, they also possess a strong ideological component.

Organisational life, thus, structures the lives of North Koreans to reduce free, private time. Instead, this time is spent working gratuitously for the regime or conducting activities for its benefit with the company of others. A key point about the daily life of North Koreans is that the time they spend on their own is limited as, regardless of employment, they are mobilised to work or expected to attend the weekly meetings of the organisations they are members of. This is one of the areas in which gender becomes important. Whereas both women and men were expected to and assigned a job in the first years of Kim Il-sung's regime, the famine put a halt on the matter as the emerging *jangmadang* became increasingly feminised. Women could take days off from work by excusing themselves because of having their monthly periods or they could register as housewives and skip the labour market entirely (Gyupchanova, 2021). This being said, being a housewife or staying home due to sickness did not equal freedom; the threat of the *inminban* looming around for their watch would still hold (Lankov, 2013). Under Kim Jong-un's North Korea, men were no longer forced to have a job (Lankov, 2016a: 24:50). Concurrently, starting on 3 August 1984, employees of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were allowed to pay a deposit to be exempted from work obligations. These workers became known as the '8·3 workers' who became involved in the markets rather than the official economy (Lee, 2018, as cited in Lim, 2023; Lim, 2023: 49; Lim and Yoon, 2011).

For remittance-receiving households, the story has been slightly different. Whereas men and women still need to be accounted for at their workplace (if they have one) and are required to be present at weekly meetings, bribes take care of the absences, just as is the case with other infractions. Financial remittances are thus used to pay bribes to skip certain activities and to avoid one's absence being detected.

> "Many people use remittances to escape these sessions [self-criticism sessions, ideological sessions, and mobilised labour activities] and bribe their way out of them. Even if you have to go work on a farm and you're a student, your mom just uses remittances to pay the teacher off, so you don't have to go. They're not going to know that you're not there, because they are being paid off. But, at the same

> time, they won't really know you're missing [if you have left the country] because you haven't been coming to school or activities anyway." (Interviewee 19, 2022).

North Korea's society has been described as Orwellian (for example, Dalton et al., 2016) due to the country being authoritarian; persecution of 'anti-state and anti-revolutionary' attitudes or activities (UN Human Rights Council, 2014: 64); repression and potential imprisonment or execution for infringing laws (Dukalskis and Lee, 2020); 'brainwashing' its citizens (Interviewee 20, 2022; Shim, 2013: 125); and its surveillance apparatus (Interviewees 5, 11, and 20, 2022). In part due to the mutual-criticism sessions, in which North Koreans judge their co-workers and neighbours of anti-revolutionary inclinations, North Korean society is examined as a place where building trust is convoluted. Interviewee 15 (2022) connects the Pyongyang case to other authoritarian regimes as limited freedoms and persecution drastically reduce the circle of trusted people for individuals. In light of this, this 'circle of trust' is often comprised of the household, though it can be expanded to include people North Koreans do business or those who are closer to their age (Interviewee 6, 2022).

The regime is thus examined as deliberately attempting to exhaust people-to-people trust because if "people talk, people will start to see the truth. And after a while, they will fail to obey the regime. Trust challenges brainwashing because it adds information that goes against the regime's narrative, so it is regarded as a threat" (Interviewee 20, 2022). Regardless of the surveillance, trust exists (Interviewees 11 and 19, 2022), and North Koreans circumnavigate the system. Even in legal remittance-receiving where the North Korean State Security Agency checks incoming and outgoing parcels and letters for information that would damage North Korea, there are ways to send ideas through. 'Non-threatening' elements such as pictures can easily go through while conveying ideas of freedom or opportunity outside (Park, 2023: 34). Since the 2000s, remittances have been mostly sent through illegal transnational networks. People involved in receiving outside information from loved ones, consuming foreign media, or simply existing within the North Korean context and its restrictions have relied on different forms of trust. Interviewee 11 (2022) notes that "there is a sophisticated network of pressure on people to betray one another. But you hear lots of stories about self-criticism sessions and how best friends will plan that this week you criticise me about this minor thing, and next week I will criticise you with something similar" (Interviewee 11, 2022).

The surveillance system does not rely only on organisational life, *inminban*, and individuals telling on their neighbours. With the advancement of telecommunication technology in North Korea, particularly through the establishment of Koryolink, mobile phone usage has expanded and developed, enabling activities such as domestic online shopping (for example through platforms like Okryu, which offers products produced nationally and delivers them to the buyers) (Lee, 2015; Lim, 2023), while also serving as a key component of state surveillance (Williams and Schiess, 2022: 8). North Korea's surveillance tactics have moved on to include mobile phone usage not only to monitor local communication and Intranet usage but also to snoop what files go inside the devices. Academics examine how the North Korean MZ generation compiles foreign media in their phones to consume freely on the go. Thus, cell phone surveillance allows the regime to keep

track of whom engages with foreign media. While it goes unpunished at times due to how largely standardised the practice has become (Interviewee 2, 2022), there have been cases where individuals have been sent to labour camps as punishment (Kim, 2014: 20). Trust is, thus, a delicate bond to form people-to-people but also between individuals and their devices.

Examining North Korea's surveillance system requires recognising the existence of subversion and the consequences a North Korean can face for acting against the regime. The political liberalisation that emerged within authoritarian regimes, such as during the decline of communist rule in Eastern Europe (for example, Romania) or in contexts like Iraq, triggered localised mobilisation against the incumbent regimes. Pyongyang remained unaffected by such protests due to society's homogenisation as well as the state's all-encompassing surveillance and social control that effectively eradicated the emergence and survivability of civil society (Lankov, Kwak, and Cho, 2012; Szalontai and Choi, 2014). Scholars have investigated the shadowy resistance against the regime and noted that it exists even though it remains disorganised and small (Lim, 2023), closer to what can be described as everyday resistance (Yeo, 2021). The type of resistance is defined by Scott (1985: xvi) as the weapons of the weak and includes tactics such as foot-dragging and smaller forms of non-compliance. In the North Korean context, Lim (2023: 70) puts forward the case of doublespeak to mask when North Koreans speak of matters that should not be disclosed in the public sphere. These expressions, which are also used to talk about illicit activities in private, are similarly used to mask jokes about the Kim family (Cha and DuMond, 2016). Resistance is thus more passive (Interviewee 20, 2022). Yet, some interviewees mentioned anecdotally how North Koreans who leave the country behind sometimes show attributes of being less accepting of being told what to do (Interviewees 11 and 20, 2022).

Lee (2013) examines leaving North Korea behind as the ultimate act of resistance against the government as other forms of opposition leave the individual liable for punishment, which can include execution or labour camps (for example, NKDB's Visual Atlas, 2023, collects cases with these ends including the events E13-I-0748 and E17-I-5108. Another example can be found in TJWG, 2019: 37-38, which notes how 80 North Koreans who had been caught attempting to escape or while in China were forced to watch a public execution of three women involved in brokering escapes as a warning). This type of resistance or individual choice to leave the country behind is not commonly shared with circles of trust. Interviewees explained how trust is formed with common bonds such as family ties, business partnerships, work, or connections built with those similar to one's age (Interviewees 6, 11, and 19, 2022). Yet the act of escaping the country or choosing to become involved in human trafficking are decisions kept to the individual and at times not shared with the family (Interviewees 4, 6, and 16, 2022). Similarly, Interviewee 4 (2022) posed an example of how a North Korean planned the household's escape in secret and kept it hidden until the day of. Lee Sungju's escape story includes the case of North Korean minors who are visited by 'uncles' who take them to their parents. In this event, Lee was brought all the way across the river and to South Korea, showing how children are kept in the dark while parents can plan the escape from outside the country (Lee and McClelland, 2016).

Having said this, data from the survey revealed that 25.87 percent of respondents (89 individuals) had not informed their families about their plans to escape, while the remaining 74.13 percent (255 individuals) indicated that they had shared their intentions (Boadella-Prunell, 2024: 13). This suggests that escape is not a matter openly shared, even among close circles of trust, as noted by interviewees with experience working with North Koreans. Yet, the survey shows that there is more diversity to it, and, at times, even remittance-sending plans are discussed (Boadella-Prunell, 2024). The contrasting data arise from different methodological approaches, sampling techniques, and levels of interpersonal interaction between researcher and participants. On the one hand, the survey anonymised data collected from migrants who voluntarily chose to participate. On the other hand, the interviewees' responses stem from their personal and professional connections, reflecting varying levels of interaction and familiarity with North Koreans. In this case, the interviewees who noted the lack of communication regarding escaping North Korea are practitioners working directly with North Korean migrants and scholars looking into North Korea. The divergence can also sprout from the sample chosen for the survey (North Koreans who potentially have previously been involved in research about human rights) and the type of questions academics/practitioners asked when working with the migrants.

Ward and Denney (2023) observed that North Koreans are more likely to share outside media with family and friends in private settings. However, the data collected on who is trusted with information about one's migration reveals that such details are rarely disclosed. There are two potential reasons why circles of trust are not tested when it comes to escaping North Korea. The Pyongyang regime partakes in collective punishment through guilt-by-association whenever certain crimes are committed. One of the activities that can be persecuted is attempting to escape or successfully fleeing North Korea to reach South Korea (Interviewee 20, 2022). If a household is suspected of having a member who has left the country, the entire family or people close to them, such as neighbours, may be held accountable and punished (for example, NKDB's Visual Atlas, 2023: cases E13-I-0996 and E13-I-0997). This has, such as other crimes, fluctuated across the years from being less or more persecuted. In the late 2010s, Kim Jong-un was more severe in judging anyone caught outside actively attempting to reach South Korea (as opposed to trading in China, which has a lesser penance). At the time, border-crossing had become quite common and, as the regime has attempted to staunch the numbers of North Koreans travelling back and forth, bribes have still managed to let many circumvent security (Interviewee 15, 2022).

The afore-referenced NKDB's Visual Atlas (2023) case E13-I-0997 presents the event in which a North Korean woman (identified as victim 131416) was illegally detained in Hyesan due to her neighbour having fled to South Korea. This shows the scope of guilt-by-association and individuals' desire to keep escape plans secret as, even when they successfully leave North Korea behind, repercussions can affect anyone familiar with the plan or too close to the person. By keeping the family deliberately uninformed, potential escapees can aim to protect them from the repercussions to make it look like a disappearance instead of showcasing an individual's (attempted) permanent crossing and move to South Korea. Conversely, as Interviewee 18 (2022) points out, if the household is aware of the escape, they can set money aside for bribes to keep people who may keep people involved quiet (such as co-workers, neighbours, or *inminban*).

Similarly, rather than the individual being simply missing which can lead to suspicions, if the family *knows* the person is not returning, they may register them as dead (Interviewee 17, 2022). Bribes may not be necessary to register the individual as missing or deceased, as Interviewee 18 (2022) notes, "people are just registered as disappeared or dead *per se*. I haven't come across any data showing history of bribing being necessary to register them as deceased." In his memoir, Jang Young-jin recalls his experience talking to a close friend about wanting to leave North Korea and 'fly away to no man's land.' His friend, Jong-chul, responds: "Why do you think such awful thoughts? Look at the rest of us. We live in misery, too. Do you think we live the way (we) do because we like it? [sic] What happens to your family when you leave? Did you think about that?" (Jang and Cha, 2022: 239). Eventually, Jang escapes. However, he does so after surmising that his disappearance could have consequences for his mother and the worst punishment that could be imposed on her would be for her to be sent to a labour camp (Jang and Cha, 2022: 241).

Filing people as such can thus be a way of circumventing punishment. However, if the individual abroad starts sending money, communicating, or forwarding any other type of remittance into the country, neighbours or other North Koreans may take notice of changes within a household after an individual has died or disappeared. For this reason, North Korean migrants balance what is sent to their families from abroad to maximise what is provided to support the family while simultaneously minimising the chances of their families being noticed. Usually, financial remittances are kept small, so they are easier to conceal and estimate the average wealth of a North Korean household (Interviewees 18 and 19, 2022). As a reference, NKDB (2018: 187) estimated that the average remittance per person amount forwarded to North Korea in 2018 was 2,778,800 KRW. In 2019, it was estimated that the total annual amount reemitted by North Koreans was 299.78 million KRW (NKDB, 2019: 187). Financial remittances are typically sufficient only to cover living expenses, as indicated by 50.78 percent of the survey respondents (Boadella-Prunell, 2024: 11). Having said this, it is not rare for remittance-receiving North Koreans to spend the money quickly rather than keeping it for the future (Interviewee 16, 2022), which can serve, as a measure to hide the new income.

4.2 Migration Drivers

4.2.1 Transforming Perspectives Through Remittances

The previous section has defined the baseline socialisation of North Koreans and, thus, how they understand their reality. Socialisation involves defining parameters of what is normal, safe, and familiar, and what does not fit within the standard is perceived as the opposite: abnormal, unsafe, or alien. Baseline socialisation builds onto the pre-migration context and environment by contributing to how other countries are perceived. This is shaped by available information about other countries, including local media. In the case of North Korea, information dissemination through foreign media, word-of-mouth information, border-crossing, and remittance-sending have been on the increase since the 1990s. Building ideas about life outside is vital for to migration

decision-making as individuals compare their lives in their location with the prospective destination country and, if the balance is in favour of the latter territory, mobility aspirations arise.

While information coming through letters and other remittances from Japan influenced migration (Bell, 2021), outside information dissemination became bigger in the 1990s (Lee, 2013). The phenomenon did not only shape perceptions about other countries but sowed seeds of doubt against the reality they have been socialised in. As exposed so far, North Koreans are, to a degree, isolated from the outside world. Their exposure to information about other countries (be it daily life characteristics or international relations) is distorted or limited. Foreign media and information combat what is spread by the regime and state media, effectively instilling cognitive dissonance (Baek, 2016). Interviewee 3 (2022) explains that her sister was the first person in her family to become mobile and reach South Korea. When she would contact the family and share stories about her new life, they would struggle to understand.

> "We have a vague idea [of what living in South Korea is like] and, even if my sibling told me about life in South Korea, I think I thought it was not real, because I didn't have much. Even if I was okay and I had money in North Korea, I didn't have much in comparison to what South Korea or China could offer, but I don't think I knew all of it. At the time, it was impossible for me to imagine, I just knew it was more." (Interviewee 3, 2022).

As such, various interviewees and published research emphasise the leap of faith quality of those who finally border-crossed without having a network and outside information before the 2000s. The migration scene changed afterwards with the rise of the inflows of foreign media. Interviewee 7 (2022) emphasises how, especially since the 2010s, the expansion of media is considerably deeper than ever. While the number of migrants reaching South Korea has been thwarted to almost half after Kim Jong-un came to power, signalling stricter policies and border patrols, K-dramas (South Korean soap operas) are now everywhere. Because of this, most North Koreans are now familiar with how life looks like in contemporary South Korea. One academic declares 'K-pop culture' (South Korean pop culture) has contributed to "make their desire to leave stronger" (Interviewee 7, 2022). Interviewee 7 (2022) cited the tell-tale signs that a North Korean watches K-dramas: they use South Korean slang or use their accent; they emulate the hairstyles they see on the soap operas; they buy Chinese clothes or tailor their clothing to be similar to what they see in the media; if they have connections abroad or access to the *jangmadang*, they ask for South Korean make-up to look like South Korean celebrities; and so forth.

North Korea has banned certain types of clothing or fashion styles. Yet the policies go beyond the simple premise of limiting the scope of Western influence in the country; they also attempt to crack down on North Koreans delivering outside media inside their borders. In a way, style choices attempt to look like people from the outside, if not live like them, in a country where an emigration culture is largely absent. Lee (2013: 133-134) states that exposure to outside information and the ensuing cognitive dissonance can trigger resistance in the form of small-scale civil disobedience. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether larger-scale acts could derive from it. What it has

undeniably done, however, has been causing the ultimate act of resistance against the regime by inspiring people to escape the country.

Foreign media has been linked to inspiring emigration in North Korea. Another vehicle for outside information comes from radio broadcasts, speakers located near the border, and balloons carrying leaflets from activists and books that are thrown into North Korea from the Chinese side. These initiatives have caused friction between the governments of Seoul and Pyongyang on multiple occasions. The friction was lessened to a degree with Moon Jae-in's 2020 enactment of the so-called 'anti-leaflet law' which effectively bans South Korean citizens from sending or throwing anything to North Korea. The policy restricts the activities as long as they are conducted from South Korean territory and, since the vast majority of them happen on the China-North Korea borderland, activists and NGOs from South Korea have continued their work (Bremer, Kim, and Jung, 2022; O'Carroll, 2020). For the most part, these projects are dedicated to educating North Koreans about what the 'real' North Korea does (as opposed to what they are told by state media), human rights, democracy, and the outside world (Park. et al, 2021) including South Korea's professed superiority (Choi, 2015).

Radio broadcasts have become a source of tension between the two Koreas. National Endowment for Democracy (NED), as Interviewee 6 (2022) identifies, has been one of the major actors in providing grants and assistance to different South Korea-based groups in broadcasting international news analysis and lessons about democracy to North Korea. While not the only foundation looking into inspiring change in North Korea and opening communication channels, they support radio programmes and transmission from Save North Korea, Unification Media Group, and the North Korea Development Institute (White, 2022). A growing trend amongst radio broadcasts has been to veer away from simply sharing news and hosting educational reports to including North Korean migrants in their programmes. The reason for this decision is simple, migrants are better messengers for their North Korean target audiences as they communicate in a familiar accent and a more approachable vocabulary (Baek, 2016).

In combination with this familiarity, there is a vital characteristic to emphasise here. If a North Korean is hosting a radio broadcast that is coming from South Korea, that means this individual has successfully border-crossed and lives outside. For a country that is ordinarily labelled as a hermit kingdom due to being physically and figuratively cut off, it is rare to hear from members of the community residing outside. A myriad of reasons contribute to the difficulties for regular North Korean citizens to hear from others that reside or have been outside such as the illegality of doing so, the 'impossibility' of return migration without persecution, the lack of access to international free press, and so forth. They all can be encapsulated with the explanation that there is no translocal space for the North Korean mobile and those who remain in-country to interact. Hence, there is no migration culture (Núñez-Madrazo, 2007: 2; Peth and Sakdapolrak, 2020). Radio broadcasts along with leaflets thrown in by migrants are, for those who do not have personal contacts abroad, the closer thing to this translocal space in which one can passively come in contact with those who have become mobile.

In these radio shows, migrants not only discuss educational topics related to democracy or business tips, but they also speak about their daily lives in South Korea. While not direct communication, Vertovec's (2007) connection between new technologies and the creation of a transnational connection is relevant here as outside information shapes outside perceptions. Interviewee 19 (2022) explains these broadcasts attempt to impart a specific message or mission statement where they raise awareness over something or attempt to inspire revolution. The researcher articulates how these organisations do not intend to drive people out of North Korea, but to inspire resistance (Interviewee 19, 2022). However, she concludes that broadcasts are achieving the opposite reaction, "the result is that more people are leaving rather than attempting to change what's there" (Interviewee 19, 2022).

Interviewee 10 (2022) puts the case of information dissemination in East and West Germany in contrast to North Korea. He exposes how those who grew up in East Germany consumed West German television and radio broadcasts on a daily basis without the need to fiddle with the device settings or the antennas, something that is needed in North Korea. There were five TV stations, two East German stations, and three West German ones. Through West German radio and television, East Germans were permanently exposed to the idea of an outside world and knew how to imagine what it looked like. "That doesn't exist in North Korea and the few smuggled-in soap operas on a USB stick will not change this in the same way as that permanent supply of information did in East Germany." Hence, North Korea's access to outside information being liminal and the complications of consuming it frequently due to surveillance has a direct impact on how North Koreans perceive domestic and international reality and, thus, their political socialisation. Cognitive dissonance arises due to the contrast between what they have grown to believe and the information some of them find in flash drives and leaflets. This psychological tug-of-war arises from the contradictory information of both sources and the added layer that, while 'movies are just movies,' it is undeniable that there are many cars and hundreds of tall buildings in South Korean productions.

What is shared on radio broadcasts can, in a way, be considered word-of-mouth information. Yet there is a slight difference when the individual in the show sharing their experiences or a lesson on democracy is a fellow North Korean who lives outside. Interviewee 17 (2022) offers a sensible explanation as to why migrants speaking about their own accounts about life abroad trigger migration aspirations instead of resistance: in a way, what they offer, is propaganda *à la* North Korean migrant. The activist states that outside experiences of people 'showing off' their freedom have an Instagram effect.

> "It's some kind of propaganda, it's always better than reality. It shows a kind of lifestyle that is free, fun, and abundant. People take photos of themselves travelling to other countries and these get back to North Korea. (…) If anything, North Korean migrants in South Korea are probably portraying things better than they actually are" (Interviewee 17, 2022).

This decentralised propaganda has huge potential in providing a reference of what the life of a North Korean outside can be, and it creates something akin to a utopic idea of what territories like South Korea can be as a destination country. The experiences shared in radio shows and so forth romanticise freedom and life outside and they do so because, most of them, are attempting to emphasise the wrongdoings of the North Korean regime to cause resistance (Interviewee 19, 2022). Interviewee 17 (2022) re-affirms that, even if North Koreans come to know some of the hardships of capitalist democracies (for example, difficulty in finding jobs or the cost of higher education), the information is more positive than anything. Even with the challenges, it's more of a pull factor regardless of how things are spined, "because, even if you exaggerate the bad things and tone down the good things, that information still acts as a pull factor in the vast majority of cases." Interviewee 2 (2022), explains that North Koreans, ultimately, cannot fully understand the hardships their compatriots experience abroad simply because they have no personal experience of such societies.

Broadcast communication is, however, nonpersonal, meaning that the speaker is not directly divulging information to a known listener but to a general audience. Because of this, none of which is shared can be defined as a social remittance. The drastic difference between one and another is that social remittances are provided by individuals who have ties with the receiver. Whereas familiarity degrees are unquantifiable, scholarship has broadly divided kinship linkages and nonpersonal linkages as strong and weak, respectively. Weaker ties still require a degree of closeness between the parties as they must hold some sort of mutual obligation between them (for example, being truthful amongst each other) (Caarls, Bilgili, and Fransen, 2020; Liu, 2013). It can be argued that meeting an acquaintance for the very first time at the market and being told information about someone they know who lives outside has more weight than hearing a faceless North Korean through illicit audio receivers. This is because of the faint linkage built upon that first encounter with one party as opposed to the anonymity of the radio broadcast host.

The strength or weakness of personal ties opens the door to discussing trust in North Korea. The development of trust and personal relationships is hampered by surveillance, organisational life, and the *inminban* system. Multiple participants, such as Interviewees 5 and 6 (2022), spoke about North Koreans communicating with family members using certain keywords to guarantee that contact or remittances sent came from the migrants. This is because some are approached by strangers who speak to them about having received remittances or border-crossing only to report them back to the authorities if they show interest in the topic. None of this is new in the authoritarian arena. North Koreans abroad, even if they are strangers and even when they are just voices in a broadcast, are a strong pull factor. Interviewee 15 (2022) defines how simply knowing about their existence becomes key to decision-making, it's 'commonsensical' for individuals with limited freedoms and no trust to move where others with their shared experiences reside. The scarce information that is shared about the South Korean system or freedoms in other countries are enough to dilute the 'leap of faith' quality of attempting to leave North Korea. As posed by Interviewee 17 (2022), North Koreans may think about other countries as utopias, but it is challenging for an individual to leave without having limited knowledge about which steps to follow or what their lives may look like when they step on the other side of the border. Thus, broadcasts, media, and outside information hugely contribute to building up aspirations in a way

that becomes tangible, even if they are not information that comes from a trusted source or personal experience.

K-dramas, for example, simply provide a sense of things of South Korea and not the full picture of what freedom means, but that is enough for some (Interviewee 2, 2022). In other words, the desire to escape North Korea can turn into an active search for leads about how to leave and what to do after. "Most North Koreans have plenty of encounters with foreign media and so on, in which case the decision [to emigrate] is more informed. It's more strategic. It's possible to plan it better than it used to be" (Interviewee 11, 2022). Interviewee 12 (2022) puts this into contrast by identifying the first generation of North Korean migrants, those who escaped with no knowledge about the outside and little leads to strategise their mobility. They had only experienced life near the border and thus the three options were border-crossing blindly or putting their trust in other people's hands (including human traffickers and brokers) by following them to the other side.

As Collins and Zimran (2019: 6) pose, uninformed mobility occurs in periods characterised by widespread death and social collapse, both of which occurred in North Korea at the time of the famine (Fahy, 2015). The migrants that followed were more informed. Whereas information that seeped through the borders was characterised for being word-of-mouth and, at times, having a rumour quality to it, it effectively made 'the outside' more real. This breaks the idea that escaping or living in another country is a mere fantasy, a key step that tilts the mobility status of a person from simply immobile to aspiring migrant (or involuntary immobile). Simultaneously, the expectations of the prospective migrants have changed considerably throughout time. Interviewee 17 (2022) puts the first generation of outflows in contrast with those who followed:

> "That's [the Arduous March] when things were so desperate for so many North Koreans inside of North Korea that they would just cross to China and try to live as illegal migrants; that was attractive to a lot of people. But now that there's more information about being able to get all the way to South Korea, it's not seen as such a feasible option to live in China in that way." (Interviewee 17, 2022).

A different, more indirect way in which outside information seeps in is through how non-remittance-receiving households perceive migrant households. The section Migration Enablers coming next will expand on this, but remittance-receiving households can become considerably more affluent than they used to be after a family member migrates. Whereas the migrant is usually registered as dead or missing (Interviewee 17, 2022), neighbours may easily understand that there is an additional income coming in. This may prompt jealousy and/or ideas of also sending a family member abroad as a family strategy (Interviewees 2 and 19, 2022). This may prompt aspirations to emigrate for non-migrant families, which are created indirectly by seeing the benefits of remittances in other families.

As outside information availability has expanded, three mobility patterns have ensued. With no information, those who became mobile crossed out of desperation. Rather than pulls that drew North Koreans out of their home country, the pushes of the famine and its aftermath led them to

leave. With little information, the outflows took a new shape of people with a vague idea of what life outside was like; how to get out; and what to expect as a North Korean abroad. And, finally, those North Koreans who left in the latter decade up until the pandemic, left with more tacit knowledge of the process as border-crossing was, to a degree, normalised and more individuals had family or neighbours abroad. Many scholars have examined the impact of information dissemination within North Korea considering the potential for resistance (Byman and Lind, 2010; Kim, T., 2017). Outside information has yet to cause tangible resistance from citizens themselves (Interviewee 19, 2022), yet it has sparked queries such as "Why are we the only ones who are poor? Why are we the only ones who are not free" (Ishimaru, 2018: 67). Whereas resistance has remained limited to engaging in economic marketisation and jokes about the government in non-public spheres (Cha and DuMond, 2016), the ultimate act of resistance has been identified by Lee (2013) as leaving the country itself.

This section has observed how the influx of outside information has challenged the way North Koreans perceive other countries. Authors like Lee (2013) concluded that cognitive dissonance goes beyond changing perceptions by also influencing the expectations North Koreans have in their own country, which leads to the ultimate act of resistance to escape it. Future sections will examine the impact of social and financial remittances of migration, yet it is noteworthy to present how outside impersonal information coming from media has influenced people who had been politically socialised in North Korea. Prior to and during the early stages of the famine, migration sprouted due to political reasons or desperation (Song, 2015). As information about China and other countries has come through the border, mobility has become more informed, even if it does not come from personal, trustworthy sources such as family members' remittances. The following sub-section will examine migration under Kim Jong-un.

4.2.2 From Economic Mobility to Criminalised Escape: Border Dynamics Under Kim Jong-un

This section, so far, has examined how diverse sources of outside information have reached North Koreans. While these have increased throughout the years, emigration has not. In fact, the number of North Koreans escaping seems to have declined. Whereas it is clear that since 2011 the total of migrants entering South Korea has reduced, there is no official data on how many may have crossed to China and stayed there. Scholars believe that the number is still considerably lower today than in previous years (for example, Interviewee 7, 2022). If there is more information coming in, and this seems to be 'good' for mobility, why is the number of migrants lower? The answer seems easy enough, Kim Jong-un has made it more difficult to leave the country (Interviewees 7 and 15, 2022). The process in which the path to escape has been made more complicated requires a nuanced explanation.

The practice of border-crossing, be it temporarily or permanently, became to a degree commonplace in certain border areas such as North Hamgyeong province during the Arduous March and after. Prior to Kim Jong-un, those who were caught were identified as border-crossers or individuals attempting to reach South Korea. Border-crossing is an offense, yet the real

punishment lies on the latter determination as it is identified as a crime entailing hard punishments that include execution and being sent to a Political Prison Camp (NKDB, 2023). The working assumption was that if a North Korean was caught in Northeast China, they were 'illegal economic migrants' who had crossed only to make money. This was ruled as an offence, but it was not a crime. However, if a North Korean was captured elsewhere (such as other regions of China, Vietnam, or Laos) it was determined they were attempting to reach South Korea and, hence, committing a crime that had to be punished.

In front of these rulings, it is obvious why border-crossing for economic reasons became 'ordinary' in the border areas (Interviewee 15, 2022). Chinese and more particularly Korean Chinese who may even have family within North Korea are very involved in the border economy (Interviewee 9, 2022), potentially giving North Koreans more opportunities. In addition to this, the punishment is less severe, and it is possible for North Koreans to bribe their way out of a reprimand (Interviewee 15, 2022). In light of this last point, many individuals involved in smuggling and trade in the North Korean border area considered paying bribes part of their *modus operandi* (Interviewee 8, 2022). Kim Jong-un changed the mechanics as control was tightened and rulings changed: North Koreans caught anywhere were from then on seen as attempting to go to South Korea, regardless of where they were caught (Interviewee 15, 2022). If it were not for the toughening of policies surrounding mobility, the number of North Koreans leaking out of the country would have continued to increase and, to this degree, the markets would have continued flourishing.

4.2.3 Remittances and Aspirations

Communication brokers facilitate their services to North Koreans in North Korea to contact the migrants abroad so they can then ask for remittances (Interviewee 19, 2022). And, once the communication link is made, contact can transform into recurring downpours of financial remittance requests (Interviewee 17, 2022; Park, 2023). The requests come in part from the way North Koreans imagine the life of a North Korean migrant in another country. Whereas word-of-mouth iterates the experiences of migrants in China, South Korea, and (in the past) Japan after the 2010s North Koreans know that living in the UK and the US can be slightly better – even if moving there is more complicated (Interviewee 2, 2022). The image North Koreans have built around the idea of a migrant is that of an individual who lives where things are plentiful. They know other countries have plenty of food options, for example, eating at night or having access to over twenty types of potato chips. Interviewee 15 (2022) draws this contrast speaking for how a North Korean migrant in South Korea sees the situation:

> "…[if hungry in South Korea] you can just go buy snacks, and there's so many to choose from. But if you wake up in the middle of the night and you want food, you can even get *chimaek* [the words *chikin* (fried chicken) and *maekju* (beer) combined in Korean] and it is quickly delivered to you." (Interviewee 15, 2022).

North Koreans are also made aware of smuggled media, word-of-mouth, or information shared by North Koreans abroad about elements that are linked to the idea of freedom: civil rights, human rights, political rights, economic rights, and so forth. Yet, due to a lack of personal experience in enjoying them, it is virtually impossible for people who have not left North Korea to imagine what living outside is like (Interviewee 3, 2022). This includes the easiness with which a person with a Chinese passport can travel the world freely; being able to gossip with co-workers or complain about politicians in power without using double-speak and in the absence of a looming threat of repercussions; or simply using an app in one's cell phone to message someone in another country without needing a foreign device[13]. What is more easily understood is the proposition of a variety of jobs being available, access to education, and the large availability of different varieties of entertainment and food products (Interviewees 2 and 15, 2022). Partly because of this, many North Korean parents do not see mobility as a way that will bring them happiness per se, but as the means by which their children can have a better life (by either sending them outside or going abroad themselves to make money) (Interviewees 7 and 13, 2022; Kook, 2018).

In essence, what complicates imagining life outside of North Korea is the plethora of choices individuals make in other countries. If one was to put it simply, North Koreans have everything decided for them from the moment they are born. Things have changed to a degree with the underground marketisation and domestic corruption, yet the factual possibility of upward social mobility remains a question mark (Interviewee 9, 2022). Mainly because, while members of the wavering class can, for example, become part of the police, more political positions that can obtained through higher education or party membership could lead to faction-building, which the regime wants to avoid (Interviewee 20, 2022). An example of the decisions that are pre-made for North Koreans includes the job they are assigned to, the universities they can access regardless of school grades, and their living arrangements. Similarly, North Koreans with lower *songbun* statuses have difficulty becoming party members (Lankov, 2013). Outside, it is different. While, of course, individuals are limited in what they can opt for, there are plenty of choices to take. Interviewee 3 (2022) explains that North Koreans think of life in South Korea as if it was fictional because of all the opportunities one can pursue in there. In contrast, North Koreans do not have many choices in their lives. She infers that the migrant life "seems like a movie. (…) I don't think you can understand all of it while you are in North Korea."

Information from the outside comes from different sources, yet North Korean migrants are perhaps the most reliable and effective communicators of how people can imagine the outside. Interviewee 17 (2022) deems these social remittances as propaganda by North Koreans for North Koreans and

[13] North Koreans near the border areas can potentially access Chinese networks with their phones. Whereas North Korean phones have a pre-installed app called *Mirae* (future in Korean) which locks and restricts the device so it can only connect to the local Intranet (Williams and Schiess, 2022: 3), individuals with Chinese cell phones can use them to make short calls or use (mostly Chinese) apps like WeChat to contact people abroad (Interviewee 17, 2022). Chinese cell phones are smuggled into the country or sent by North Koreans abroad (Baek, 2016), it may also be the case that Chinese tourists drop them within North Korea and local citizens retrieve them (Lim, 2023). With a North Korean device international communication is blocked and monitored, hence a foreign device is the only way in which contacting people outside is, to a degree, possible and safe (Williams, 2021; Williams and Schiess, 2022).

often, the way migrants present their lives is akin to how contemporary TikTok or Instagram influencers romanticise their lifestyles.

> "In terms of examples of material differences, the standard of living, and freedom in the communication that goes back, I've heard, for instance, of people receiving photos of their family who defected to South Korea and how they can see and almost feel the freedom. They can see that they're enjoying South Korea and they can see the fashion, how they change their hair colour – even now, you have a lot of North Koreans who come to South Korea, and the first thing they do is dye their hair brown or yellow, because you can't do that stuff in North Korea. So, if you have photos like that of people who are outside showing off their freedom, these photos have an 'Instagram effect.' It's some kind of propaganda, it's always better than reality. It shows a kind of lifestyle that is free, fun, and abundant. People take photos of themselves travelling to other countries and these get back to North Korea." (Interviewee 17, 2022).

The surveys for this research examined which items North Korean migrants had forwarded to their families as well as what North Koreans had received from their family members abroad. Goods that are sent over have various effects. On the one hand, the household may take the product for personal use, for their businesses, to sell, or to give as presents or bribes. On the other hand, that a migrant sends something means that the product is not freely available in North Korea and the family may need it (or the family has requested it directly). These goods may exist in North Korea but are considered as being of lesser quality and whereas the markets may receive these products from China, they are often seen as fake or counterfeit (*kajja* in Korean) (Interviewee 7, 2022). The items sent to North Koreans by migrants fall into three different categories: technology, essentials, and personal goods. For technology, items that are sent are TVs, radios, cell phones, laptops, DVDs, and cameras. The essentials delivered are medicine and food items. And, lastly, the personal goods are clothes and make-up. Upon receiving these goods from outside, the idea that there is a large supply or availability of good quality products there is transferred to North Korea.

North Korean propagandists or influencers share romanticised images of life in South Korea and, through sending goods, pictures, and money, there is proof that outside there is availability of things and more opportunities. This contributes to the imagery of life abroad, on the one hand, something that crafts an idea of other countries having utopian qualities (Interviewee 17, 2022). On the other hand, these are also used by North Korean migrants to show their families that they are okay and to keep the emotional connection alive even though the possibility of reuniting is low (Interviewees 2 and 19, 2022). Interviewee 1 (2022), for example, explains how she communicates with the loved ones she has left behind in North Korea but not because she seeks any sort of reunification or to convince her parents to come to her to South Korea.

> "I speak with my parents, but I haven't told them to come. I miss them. In Korean when we say, 'I miss you', we say, 'I want to see you,' but I don't know if I would

> want them to come. I think they would like South Korea, but it's a long trip and North Korea is their home, everyone they know is there." (Interviewee 1, 2022).

North Koreans not only share positive aspects of life in other countries but also the challenges they face. However, these messages often fail to fully communicate the reality of their situations. Even if communication is at times cut short to avoid detection in North Korea (Park, 2023: 107), there are North Koreans outside who regularly contact their families in longer calls (Interviewees 13 and 19, 2022). Hence, if the families are close, they share back-and-forth information and update each other about what everyone is up to frequently. As Park (2023: 145) exposes, "although remittances sent to North Korea have economic and social value, sustaining livelihoods and reestablishing family ties, the receiving family members also directly shape the lives of resettled North Koreans in South Korea through their economic dependence and demands. (…) [remittances are] carriers of intimacy, but also [of] duty and burden." As such, migrants facing the practice as a burden may share the struggles they face finding a job, making ends meet, facing discrimination in China or South Korea, and so on, but this is never fully understood (Interviewee 2, 2022). This is because there is the looming belief that, regardless of how bad it can be *outside*, it must be better than being in North Korea (Interviewee 19, 2022). Hence, social remittances providing ideas about how bad it can be outside do not really meet the target. Because of this, households in North Korea can start asking for financial remittances or continue to do so.

This sub-section has examined how remittances, social and financial, influence migration aspirations by creating an imagined migrant life. Remittance recipients are influenced both by outside media and stories shared by migrants (through calls, messages, letters, items, and pictures) that romanticise their lives abroad. Outside of North Korea, there is freedom, an abundance of items that are scarce or too expensive within the country (such as medicine or beauty products), and a wide variety of job and educational opportunities. Whereas North Korean recipients may lack the first-hand experience to truly grasp the meaning of better civil liberties and wider opportunities, the imagery of life abroad created through remittance-sending raises aspirations to emigrate. The way in which migrants share stories or send financial remittances to their family members in North Korea can influence these aspirations, this is presented in the following section.

4.2.3.1 Migration as a Family Strategy

An important individual characteristic is the person's household and family dynamics. As part of the survey conducted for the thesis, multiple North Koreans indicated that they had left North Korea following their parents, because of their family being abroad, or to provide for their children. Family strategies and having family abroad are crucial elements that enable emigration, which is why these will be further examined in the following section, Migration Enablers. Yet it is noteworthy to mention that having household members abroad does prompt migration strategies focused on family reunification (Interviewee 6, 2022) or economic reasons (Interviewee 2, 2022). Information coming from outside, be it from social remittances or impersonal information, build into ideas of how living abroad can be. This is used to create migration strategies for the

household's well-being. This phenomenon is observed in other countries such as Thailand (Khamkhom and Jampaklay, 2020) and Vietnam (Le and Nguyen, 2019) through the idea that there are benefits to emigrating (Van Dalen et al., 2015). Interviewees emphasised what North Koreans expected from migration, including providing a better future for the family or improving the prospects of the household's children in a country that is freer and provides better education (Interviewees 7, 13, and 19, 2022).

Family dynamics also contribute to emigration. Interviewee 13 (2022) mentioned cases in which a migrant moves and never feels the inclination to contact those left behind. Similarly, family dynamics can push someone out of North Korea. One of the survey respondents replied that they escaped due to having issues with their stepmother, in contrast to other answers that indicated wanting a better future or being hungry. These family dynamics not only influence why individuals may leave North Korea but also affect how they interact with their family afterward. As Park (2022) emphasises, sending money and items to the family in North Korea is a burden. Thus, remittance-sending, while often examined as a duty or obligation, may not be a practice migrants engage with if they do not have a good connection with their relatives (Interviewee 13, 2022). This lack of remittance-sending leaves the household in North Korea without any link to the migrant, which leaves them without that personal, trustworthy source of outside information and financial remittances.

4.2.3.2 The *Jangmadang* Generation is Disenchanted

The influx of outside information has changed how younger North Koreans interpret North Korea. North Korean millennials, also called the *jangmadang* generation, have become less satisfied with North Korea as they have grown accustomed to the informal economy, border-crossing, and family migration strategies. Demick (2009) writes about a case in the early 2000s when a North Korean woman with good grades who could not attend university due to her low. She then became disenchanted with her work as a schoolteacher seeing how ragged the children looked and how many only showed up for the meagre lunch at the cafeteria. The discovery of having a low *songbun* often comes as a surprise to many of her interviewees, as it can significantly hinder future opportunities in education and employment. While families are generally aware of their songbun status, individuals often have little clarity about how it may impact their prospects. For members of the *jangmadang* generation it is potentially more complicated because they have been raised within a somewhat capitalistic context that keeps getting interfered with by the government (Interviewee, 17, 2022). They are more aware of the world outside and want to dress like the celebrities they see in K-drama, but the resources available for the *jangmadang* beauties may be limited to what can be smuggled into North Korea. Some North Korean women get magazines from South Korea to make their own 'K-dresses' (Interviewee 7, 2022). Living with this freedom has become a pull to leave North Korea (Interviewees 7 and 17, 2022).

Social remittances and, thus, trustworthy information distort how an individual perceives North Korea and can lead to discontent towards their life and prospects. When talking about what pulls

and pushes North Koreans outside of their home country, Interviewee 19 (2022) explains the following:

> "It depends on who I am talking to. A lot of the people that were talking to have had their rights violated in some form or another, whether it's extreme civil and political rights violations in relation to torture, or sometimes something like economic, social, and cultural rights. Sometimes this irks people the most, the fact they cannot go to university due to their background, which is something out of their hands. They know they have the right to it, to a degree. So, the idea of equal opportunities in South Korea, this equality, is a good selling point that plays a part in their decision-making. Another one would be related to money, but I don't know if money in itself is a pull factor for North Koreans. We hear about money a lot, but I think it's the idea of capitalism. Getting paid for your work and being rewarded. North Koreans always say they don't care about censorship or freedom of expression, if they got paid for what they do, that'd be just fine. So, I guess, [the pull is] capitalism?" (Interviewee 19, 2022).

Living abroad offers opportunities such as diving into economic ventures freely without the hassle of paying bribes. Interviewee 4 (2022) who has conducted research with numerous North Korean women abroad who are the vivid image of a successful entrepreneur. She shares her experience with groups of North Korean women entrepreneurs in South Korea. "They are very into plastic surgery because they want to present themselves better and improve their appearance to be successful. They want to learn everything to be successful. (...) Women entrepreneurs are bossier and usually have more money." Similarly, Interviewee 19 (2022) anecdotally commented on a North Korean friend who could come up with little economic venture ideas whenever they met. Whereas it is difficult to assess and measure an individual's personality, it is clear that people raised in a pseudo-capitalistic environment and know how the outside world functions may struggle to be content under an authoritarian regime like North Korea. The opportunities a fully capitalistic country offers are a strong pull for newer generations.

4.2.4 The Cross-Border Economy: Networks, Remittances, and Risks

Informal transnational networks have survived in North Korea because there is demand for international media, items, and remittances (including communication). These networks include frequent border-crossers such as traders and brokers that assist with emigration. In the early days of North Korean mobility, brokers would take North Koreans to China or South Korea and let them pay later with hefty interest. In the past, brokers tried to recover the money from migrants in South Korea, even if it meant resorting to violence. Be it due to ethical grounds or the looming threat of brokers wanting the money back, North Koreans who owed the brokerage fee would often reimburse the service with the resettling money received upon arriving in South Korea.

> "North Koreans have this 'ethical mindset,' so they always pay back. I am not sure what, but there must be consequences if the brokers don't receive the money back; so yes, they use the resettlement money. Brokers are businesspeople. I have been told before that "if the escapees are caught, that's it." North Koreans know there are risks of repatriation. The brokers won't shed tears if things go South, they just move on to the next job. You don't want to mess with them, it's a dark business" (Interviewee 15, 2022).

Yet, this has changed. Similarly, the risk of individuals sending remittances by paying a high commission without ever knowing if the money or items would get to the receiving hands of the household has now been reduced. The reason is that brokers operate like a business. Whereas there is nothing akin to a North Korean Yelp website in which individuals can review services, North Korean word of mouth amongst migrants, North Koreans, and individuals involved in transnational networks (such as trade or smuggling) serves a similar purpose. If they provide a good service, they build a good reputation, and it all plays in favour of previous customers, relaying good feedback to new prospective ones (Interviewee 13, 2022).

Simultaneously, if a mobility broker simplifies the escaping process by putting the client in contact with a remittance or communication broker, this improves their service. And, at the end of the day, mobility brokers are the main promoters of what they do. Border-crossing is often promoted by escape brokers. "First, North Koreans only think they are going to China to make money. Then, brokers are sent to China to meet them again and these same brokers promote further mobility to South Korea" (Interviewee 4, 2022). The only key matter in the arrangement is how North Koreans who have been approached by the broker (or have approached on their own accord) remunerate the service, whether it is done from the get-go or upon arrival at the destination. The costs involved in leaving rely on the individual's point of departure. The farther away one is from the easier escape hubs, the more expenses are involved as there are fees involved with internal moving (such as bribing checkpoints) (Interviewee 15, 2022).

Remittance-receiving makes a difference for individuals who do not have enough to cover their expenses independently. It is much easier if North Koreans aspiring to leave have family in South Korea since it is not uncommon for them to compensate the brokers for the service from the start (Interviewee 15, 2022). This element contributes to chain migration in certain areas such as North Hamgyeong where individuals can not only benefit from the economic benefits of remittances for their life in North Korea but also get first-hand information and contacts to escape. As such, Interviewee 19 (2022) points out that "they say that, in these regions, there's one defection for every seven households, and then the families follow through." The survey asked North Korean migrants how remittances had contributed to their emigration: 82 respondents reported that remittances helped pay escape brokers, 76 used them to obtain contact information for smugglers or brokers, 32 found that knowledge of life abroad influenced their decision to escape, 58 used remittance-sent items and information to earn additional money for their journey, and 37 found remittances helpful in covering bribes (Boadella-Prunell, 2024: 18).

All in all, financial remittances contribute to the household's economy. Capital can be used to escape yet its main purpose is to support the family's well-being. As Interviewee 16 (2022) explained, most North Koreans do not receive enough to strategise, invest, or craft a long-term plan to disburse the money received; the cash is spent as soon as it is received. Currency obtained through remittances fuels the economy in ways that can potentially enrich the receiving household if not the community overall. On the one hand, money remittances are real cash used to pay for services or in markets (immediately or eventually), which increases the supply of money in circulation (Interviewee 8, 2022). Similarly, items sent from abroad to the family can be sold in North Korea with substantial return rates (Interviewee 18, 2022). This contributes to the overall supply of items, in this case, such as is the case with South Korean medicine or make-up products (Boadella-Prunell, 2024; Interviewee 7, 2022), the latter of which have fomented the rise of the '*Jangmadang* Beauty' as women can find outside fashion in the markets (Kim and Park, 2019, as cited in Lim, 2023).

On the other hand, remittances contributed to the household's economic activities. The Arduous March changed North Korea's economy by introducing a bottom-up marketisation. The informal economy swiftly became feminised as, before Kim Jong-un, women could easily register as housewives. In contrast, for men it was illegal to be unemployed (Lankov, 2016a: 24:50). Women took over the economy at first and, as mobility (temporary border-crossing and permanent) increased throughout the years, remittances have become the ensuing bottom-up economic transformation, particularly in the Northern provinces of the country. Remittance research has examined the concept of the 'moral hazard problem' about members of the receiving households choosing to rely on the inflows of outside money and quitting their jobs (Alba and Sugui, 2011: 2). However, the problem is a rare occurrence in North Korea as migrants report household members do not stop working to rely on financial remittances flows (Boadella-Prunell, 2024: 18).

Whilst interviews did not determine the practice to be spread amongst receiving families, some participants revealed that North Korean recipients are closer to research signalling how remittances and access to credit drive receivers toward entrepreneurship (Funkhouser, 1992; Massey and Parrado, 1998). Money is used to pay for business staff, purchase products from or outside of the country, rent or buy vehicles (for example, for taxi businesses), or purchase resources needed for production (Interviewee 8, 2022). Other North Koreans utilise remittances received with long- to medium-term benefits in mind. Interviewee 17 (2022) explains how remittances strengthen the economy:

> "Something else interesting about remittances having economic effects is that some people who are receiving remittances actually become lenders themselves. So, some people will get a thousand dollars, and they will go and spend it, and some people will invest it into business activities. Or if some people don't have outlets themselves, they might have people in their community who want to do business but lack the capital, and so the remittance-receiver becomes a micro-lender in that community and lend out whatever, 100 USD, and then they get the money back

> with interest. So, remittances have an outsized effect on providing start-up funds for entrepreneurial activities in those regions." (Interviewee 17, 2022).

Therefore, micro-enterprises such as micro-lending entrepreneurs are one of the by-products of remittance-sending and improved access to credit for North Koreans, leading to an improved economy in their communities (Jung et al., 2018; Kim, 2020b: 3). Thus, in the absence of microfinancing institutions, remittance-receivers assume the role of informal micro-lenders (Osman, 2021).

In light of this, one can infer that those inflows of remittances, be it money, elements that can be transformed into profit (items to sell or information about networks), and transnational networks can substantially contribute to the receiving household's wealth. Yet individuals can enrich themselves by relying on the domestic market and local resources (Interviewee 10, 2022) and, thus, become *donju* through exclusively North Korean ways and means. These *donju* similarly have become moneylenders in exchange for a commission (Lim, 2023) expanding the micro-financing pool and consequently contributing to the economic health of their local communities within North Korea.

Wealth must be used in less conspicuous ways than investing and enriching the household. Expanding the pool of beneficiaries by passing parts of businesses off to other family members is a course of action that helps conceal the unit's growing capital (Interviewee 11, 2022). Money sent is usually not enough to start a business on its own, but rather enough or barely enough to cover living expenses (Boadella-Prunell, 2024: 11) including housing-related fees, fuel, food, or market products (Interviewee 18, 2022). The reason for this is both the caveat of having inflows of cash and one of the bigger causes for North Koreans to reach a mobility 'breaking point.' Sandra Fahy (2015: 126) puts forward the concept of breaking points to explain the event or sequence of events leading to a North Korean's ultimate escape. These are not only economic in nature but can sprout due to other reasons such as struggling with personal relationships or persecution. An example of this is offered by Interviewee 20. He explains individuals who become enriched due to remittances or business are rapidly noticed by the authorities.

> "You are investigated - if you are a party member - by the *bowibu* [the Ministry of State Security], the cops, or any other ministry. It's all in the eye of the beholder whether you get one punishment or another, or none at all. They investigate the sources of income to see if you have people outside. But the punishment that you can get is always fluctuating. Sometimes they just jail you for two weeks, sometimes you and your family end up at a political prison camp" (Interviewee 20, 2022).

Due to the, to a degree, normalisation of having family members abroad in certain areas (such as Ryanggang and North Hamgyeong), the glass ceiling and repercussions of becoming rich extend to those who do not receive remittances too. Interviewees 5, 6, and 20 (2022) explained how authorities repress individuals who become too wealthy by taking their possessions and money.

As richer individuals tend to be better connected, it is not uncommon for the person to be advised of the authorities investigating them which leads to a breaking point to avoid repercussions (loss of money or possessions, imprisonment, or jail) (Interviewee 6, 2022).

Thus, remittances can help individuals amass enough money to pay for brokers, and for some individuals, knowing that they have enough to escape can trigger the idea of leaving. However, becoming rich results in having a better life quality and more freedom because of being able to pay for bribes (for example, skipping 'mandatory' self-criticism sessions or organised labour activities) (Interviewee 19, 2022). Yet, becoming too rich can raise a flag for the authorities and lead to either a breaking point that takes them outside of the country or they can be reprimanded and lose everything.

Moving away from the economic aspects of migration aspirations, there are two other breaking points related to individual characteristics. These two different elements that can contribute to migration are tolerance of the country toward LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and more) communities and religion. While anecdotal because there is little data about sexual minorities in North Korea, the case of Jang Young-jin (Jang and Cha, 2022) shows an example of that experience. News reports painted his escape from North Korea as being prompted because he was homosexual and attempting to leave his marriage with a woman (Jang and Cha, 2022: 322). Whereas North Korea does not criminalise homosexuality or other inclinations per se, it has, in the past, negated the existence of LGBTQIA+ people in the country (Sanders, 2015: 128), which could be a push factor for many who may feel discriminated against.

Similarly forcing discrimination, religious individuals in North Korea often have to practice their faith in hiding. While North Korea has five state-controlled churches, one of them Catholic, three of them Protestant, and a Russian Orthodox church, religion is profusely persecuted in North Korea. Interviewee 20 (2022) exposes how the North Korean regime has built a cult of personality akin to a religion that equals Kim Il-sung, if not the Kims in general, as gods. Christianity and other religions are a threat to it because of this and, thus, persecution entails from here on. Christian organisations are very active in supporting North Koreans to escape their country or reach safety (Interviewees 5 and 12, 2022). This is not done to convert them, but they are taught the Bible while they are hiding in China and on their journey to South Korea (Kim, 2008). Christian families attempt to leave North Korea behind because of the persecution they face. Whereas many churches and Christian groups tend to help North Koreans while they are in China, they can become involved from the moment families want to leave if they are already Christian and fear danger. Kim (2008: 132) explains cases in which his organisation, Crossing Borders, collaborated with other Christian groups such as Voice of the Martyrs to collect funds and rescue these individuals. It has been reported that 70 per cent of North Koreans identified themselves as having a religion when entering South Korea for the first time, 62.3 per cent of them being Christians (Jun et al., 2022: 445).

This section has examined the evolution of informal networks in the North Korean border areas and how the demand for illicit services and business practices by brokers have made them survive

and evolve. These networks include profit-seeking individuals such as escape brokers and remittance brokers, which have become crucial for transnational families and chain migration in North Korea. Compassion-driven networks, such as Christian groups, assist North Koreans in their escape by paying for escape brokers. These transnational groups have contributed to the new normal in the North Korean border where, before the pandemic, border-crossing and informal trade happened frequently. While escaping remains rare in this context, individuals who reach a breaking point may turn to broker networks if such resources are accessible to them. These individuals include those who may be desperate to escape due to falling out with the authorities (Interviewees 6 and 9, 2022), religious persecution, sexual orientation (Jang and Cha, 2022), or struggling under the regime's social control (Interviewees 3, 11, 13, and 20, 2022).

4.2.5 Emigration Projects

So far, this chapter has introduced the foundational environment and baseline socialization of North Koreans and, through tracing the emigration process, has moved to examine how outside information and interferences (personal and non-personal) affect mobility. Foundational aspects, outside information, and remittances collide in an individual's emigration environment. The emigration environment is the context in which mobility occurs. It incorporates the economic, legal, political, and social levels within the sending country and the destination country (or, at the very least, what the individual knows about the prospective destination). As Carling (2001: 26) notes, the mobility decision-making process is not only necessarily constructed by facts, but rather it is conceptualised through "imperfect information or discursive constructions." As the Aspiration and Ability Model (Carling, 2001 and 2002) exposes, the emigration environment crafts perceptions based on data that may or may not be reliable and includes different pull and push elements depending on the individual. These elements lead to the emergence of mobility aspirations through creating what is defined as a blueprint of an emigration project. These projects can generally be upward social mobility projects, life-making projects, or family reunification projects. Based on the previous sections, the mobility projects this thesis has identified to be impacted by remittance behaviour are life-making projects involving seeking freedom and better work and educational opportunities (in this case, life-making can be comprehended in two different ways, it may be for the individual and their children to live better abroad, or for the individual to provide for the family back in North Korea); family reunification projects; and projects encompassing escaping persecution or avoiding the North Korean authorities.

4.2.5.1 Life-Making Projects

Prior sections have observed how non-personal information and social remittances shape how North Koreans perceive life outside of the country. The regular North Korean citizen is socialised within a political and socio-economic system challenged by outside information seeping in with ideas of freedom and better opportunities abroad. The experiences of other countries show that, even when other countries show better job opportunities, people may choose to stay in their home

country due to familiarity, social circles, or to remain close to their family (Ermisch and Mulder, 2019; Mulder, 2018). In Spain, for example, citizens in areas with fewer job opportunities choose to move to different areas of the country instead of internationally to remain more connected to their households (Mulder et al., 2022). North Koreans do not enjoy the same amount of freedom. Internal migration is used to punish citizens (NKDB, 2023) and mobility to different areas requires temporary travel permits (Yeo, 2021). Thus, even though North Koreans do consider Pyongyang a domestic Xanadu, there are no clear paths for citizens to move there and enjoy the same rights as other locals who have been born and raised there (Interviewee 9, 2022). When North Koreans want more economic opportunities and better prospects for their future (for example, the chance for their children to attend higher education), they may look for these abroad. This is what is understood as life-making projects. As opposed to lifestyle migration in which people migrate for better weather and life quality enhancement purposes (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009), these life-making projects are set to improve life prospects by considering rights, work opportunities, and access to education.

How do remittance-receivers differentiate themselves from non-receivers? Is their mobility the same? The data presented in the case study has shown that mobility pathways out of North Korea are limited, but remittances impact migration patterns and expectations. For the average North Korean, information about countries like South Korea primarily comes from state-sanctioned media, school textbooks, and smuggled content such as K-dramas and K-pop. Some individuals near the border or with radio equipment tweaked to receive international radio broadbands may have access to broadcasts hosted by South Korean or American NGOs (with a number of them being hosted by North Koreans who have escaped). All these elements can be categorised as hearsay with imperfect information. It is noteworthy to emphasise that information does not need to be perfect to be relevant to mobility as it can still pay with the person's psyche and impact aspirations (Lee, 1966).

It all comes down to how trustworthy information can be. Desperate individuals may take leaps of faith based on dire situations yet, as outside information has become more widespread, North Koreans have a general understanding of how life in North Korea compares to how it is across the border. The basic understanding comes from hearsay or information from what Liu (2013) defines as weak ties, relationships that are not as strong as those with the nuclear family. As the author explains, the nuclear family has stronger ties because of the reciprocity individuals owe and expect from each other. With friends and co-workers, for example, reciprocity is not necessarily an assurance. As Liu (2013) mentioned, individuals who want to know trustworthy information about matters (such as living abroad or which steps to follow to become mobile) should ask the nuclear family, the stronger ties.

Weaker ties will most likely share innovative information, which may not be as reliable (Liu, 2013: 1247). In the North Korean mobility context, this translates into weaker ties sharing information that may be hyperbolic in exaggerating the positives or negatives of life abroad. The unfavourable elements can include emphasising the many ways in which North Koreans may be exploited when working in China or the downsides of being trafficked. On the opposite, the better elements include

amplifying how rich one can be when they are abroad by, for example, overstatements about the lump sums of money North Koreans get as relocation packages in Japan or South Korea. Information from weaker ties such as friends and acquaintances is, to a degree, more trustworthy than hearsay from K-dramas or radio broadcasts hosted by unknown North Koreans. Radio broadcasts, especially those hosted by North Koreans, can be reliable and honest. Yet popular culture tends to idealise destination countries (Orgad, 2012). This being said, information coming from weak ties is far less dependable than what comes from stronger ties (Liu, 2013: 1247), but still impactful (Lee, 1966).

Social remittances are first-hand sources of the North Korean migrant life and, as Interviewee 17 (2022) points out, they are akin to propaganda. This is propaganda from North Koreans to North Koreans and it is effective in creating an imagery of what living abroad is like because the individual who is sending pictures is a family member or an individual North Koreans know. In other words, North Koreans are more likely to be convinced by a photo of their own cousin in Italy than by a radio broadcast featuring a stranger talking about their trip to Rome. This reliability translates from imagining what life abroad is like to trust in other matters including the path to leave North Korea.

Hearsay and word-of-mouth from weak ties and acquaintances create an idea of how a North Korean migrates and lives outside and what this other destination looks like. This conception may be close or far from the truth, but it is for North Koreans who receive social remittances that this mental impression becomes more tangible. The 'Fantasyland' becomes less than a fantasy and reaching it is less than a leap of faith but a process with different risks that can be weighted and calculated. Remittance receivers can understand how to get a job in China, for example, or what it will entail. There is a certainty that comes when individuals can visualise and prepare for what is to come. Similarly, receivers can be put in contact with relevant migration agents, from the 'dark side' (human traffickers) or the compassion-driven networks, such as Christian NGOs, human rights NGOs, human traffickers, and so forth.

The positive correlation between receiving remittances and the emergence of mobility aspirations comes from social remittances. Financial remittances, that is hard cash, contribute to comfort and purchasing power, the ability to live better *in situ*. But, as it is, money itself provides abilities more than it does for aspiration. This being said money is not just money. Money received from the outside means different things: it means the person who is sending the money has a job or the ability to get and spend cash; it also means that the individual has an additional flow of income; this cash can contribute to one's affluence, which can make the person feel they have the economic power to make things possible. This latter element deals with the understanding and belief that comes with having money and leads North Koreans to think they will have enough money to pay bribes (to avoid problems with the authorities or to buy permits, for example) or broker fees – the starting point of leaving North Korea (Interviewee 13, 2022).

As interviewees such as Interviewees 2 and 3 (2022) explained, it is difficult for North Koreans to comprehend life outside. The good things, to a degree, are unimaginable in a way North Koreans

simplify the idea of living in China and South Korea as having 'more' (Interviewee 3, 2022): more job opportunities, more money, more food, more freedom, and so on. Simultaneously, some North Koreans may receive messages from outside that do not put destination countries in a good light. North Korean migrants may tell their loved ones not to ask for money because 'money doesn't grow on trees' and that making a living and dealing with expenses abroad is not easy (Interviewee 17, 2022). Others may choose to mention discrimination or isolation. Still, the negative sides of mobility are not well understood by North Koreans because they do not necessarily have a comparable experience to them (Interviewee 2, 2022). Instead, whatever negative elements of life abroad may be brought up are still perceived as better than what the North Korean context (Interviewee 19, 2022) and, thus, emigration pulls.

Some migrants or media may portray life outside as negative; this is not the norm. As Interviewee 17 (2022) points out "[i]f anything, North Korean migrants in South Korea are probably portraying things better than they actually are." Thus, immobile North Koreans with connections abroad receive positive, trustworthy notions about life abroad. This 'propaganda' shares images of North Korean migrants travelling the world (Interviewees 2 and 19, 2022); selfies that have filters and make the North Koreans look younger and healthier than they may have been while they were in North Korea (Interviewee 17, 2022); they may be business savvy entrepreneurs (Interviewee 4, 2022); or just migrants that want to demonstrate their family that they escaped and they are okay and safe (Interviewee 19, 2022) and thus, in a way, proving that migration can lead to a good outcome. These conceptions translate into a comparison of country A and country B where, if country A is North Korea, country B can offer *more* of what the individual wants or can get compared to remaining stationary. Upward social mobility in North Korea is rare and remittance-receivers who invest their money well enough and are lucky to buy themselves a better life within the country. But even so, there is no straightforward path to becoming a *donju*, nor is it necessarily a common one.

After the famine, maximising opportunities and improving the chances for a better life for individuals or their children have become a big push factor (Interviewee 13, 2022). As Interviewee 19 (2022) noted, North Korea does not necessarily lack opportunities, but it lacks the equality to access them. South Korea and other countries offer better chances regardless of the family's background. Whereas this logic North Koreans follow may be flawed as one's background (ethnical, socio-economical, and so on) does affect what education you have access to and how you are socialised into life, they perceive countries like South Korea as offering total equality. Therefore, migration can be understood as a journey to a land of opportunity.

Interviewees 7, 13, and 19 (2022) identify a better future for the individual's children as one of the key elements that drive migration and, thus, create the aspirations to become mobile. Interviewee 19 (2022) also shares that with remittance-sending, North Korean migrants think of the family's survival. Similarly, Interviewee 14 (2022) notes that a considerable aspect of those who leave North Korea is that they are mothers with children in North Korea. Leaving North Korea with the knowledge that you can remit to your family to support their expenses, and well-being is an element that promotes aspirations. So, in this case, the North Koreans are still thinking about giving

a better life for their children that may or may not involve a future escape from the husbands, but rather than sending that family member out first, mothers choose to leave first to become breadwinners and providers while abroad. Mobility aspirations here are not necessarily born from remittance-receiving. Later in this section, projects where people emigrate due to political persecution will exemplify this. Furthermore, a survey question presented earlier in Section 4.2.4 The Cross-Border Economy: Networks, Remittances, and Risks, asked migrants how remittances helped their migration; only 32 respondents indicated that information from other countries influenced their journey. However, this aspect may contribute positively to it and the decision-making process, they emerge from the possibility of becoming a remittance-sender.

The perception of a migrant's prospects varies between remittance receivers and non-receivers, as those who receive information directly from loved ones tend to find it more trustworthy. Research has shown that remittance-receivers around the world are more likely to emigrate than those who do not due to hearing personal stories and receiving financial backing from migrants (Dimova and Wolff, 2015: 557-558; Sharma and Cardenas, 2020: 29). In this case study, those who do not receive remittances rely on hearsay and word-of-mouth information that can potentially be hyperbolic and emphasise the positive or the negatives too much. Similarly, the lack of factual details such as information that is appropriately shared (such as which broker was used by someone to escape, which part of the river was crossed, and so forth) or what life outside looks like by receiving pictures, videos, or communication about day-to-day life in South Korea highlighting the leap of faith aspect of mobility. In other words, non-receivers can choose to cross but how to escape and what to do after one has escaped is, to a degree, a question mark. This negatively impacts the decision-making process as North Koreans are not specifically aware and knowledgeable of the steps and options to take after crossing the river. This is important because one of the things they do know is that leaving is not permitted by the government. Hence, taking a leap of faith decision with minor details that are not necessarily trustworthy when they know they can be punished is a difficult choice that negatively impacts aspirations to leave the country.

4.2.5.2 Family Reunification

In a multiple-answer question, North Korean remittance senders who participated in NKDB's 2020 Social and Economic Integration of North Korean Defectors in South Korea (2020) divulged that 29.7 per cent of them sent them to their parents; 39.6 per cent sent them to their siblings; 13.2 per cent send them to their children; and 13.5 per cent sent them to other relatives (such as grandparents, cousins, or aunts). Only four per cent of the participants said to send them to friends or other individuals who are not family members. For evident reasons that have to do with data collection and lack of access, there is no data about what remittance receivers in North Korea feel about their family members abroad and the money they send. Interviewees such as 4, 17, and 19 (2022) mention how family members may be the ones requesting the money directly. These requests can be material and emotional burdens (Park, 2023: 115) yet the money continues to be sent as if it is an 'unquestionable duty' (Baek, 2016: 156).

This research however does not intend to dwell on motivations behind remittance-sending nor will it attempt to infer whether the North Korean family left behind feels entitled to receiving with funds from the person who has left. The reason behind this decision has to do with the segmentation issue in remittance-sending. As the Literature Review addressed, Carling (2014) defines different remittance scripts to explain remittance behaviour. These scripts are multilayered as he finds a migrant may send remittances as a present and guilt at the same time. However, scripts are segmented because the recipients may associate a different meaning to what they receive (for example, duty or repayment). Inconsistent communication between North Korean migrants and receivers inevitably means that remittance mediation is infrequent. Therefore, rather than delving into remittance-sending motivations or family expectations, this thesis shifts focus to examine how remittances themselves shape migration journeys. The interviewees pointed out that financial remittance-sending motivation comes from a sense of duty but also from guilt (Interviewees 4, 7, 11, 12, 18, 19, and 20), an argument that is also shared by multiple scholars (Bell, 2022; Kook, 2019; Park, 2023; Shin 2022). This guilt sprouts from leaving the household behind (perhaps one's children, husband, or even elderly parents) and making them lose an income. In some cases, and depending on how the regime is choosing to deal with potential escapees at the time of one's migration, the households left behind may have been punished (NKDB, 2023), sent to a labour camp (Jang and Cha, 2022), or put under surveillance (Interviewee 18, 2022).

The queries here involve how family members react to the remittances. It can be understandable for families to be upset about their family members leaving, be it with or without notice, and dealing with the consequences. Remittances can potentially be a balm salving the wound of neglect, punishment, or loss of an income, but they are not a perfect replacement for the loss of a son or a parent. In 2020, NKDB asked North Korean migrants whether they had considered returning to North Korea. 20.1 per cent of the surveyed individuals confirmed that they had. Out of them, 47.5 per cent said the motivation for return migration would be due to missing their families (NKDB, 2020: 90). Whereas data collection poses a problem if one were to ask immobile North Koreans if they miss their family members, it can be inferred that the missing goes both ways. An element that supports this is how certain families have casual and ongoing communication between the household in North Korea and the migrants; how some send pictures back and forth to maintain the connection; and that communication happens not only to check remittances but also to check on each other's wellbeing (NKDB, 2020). The future section 4.3.4 The Genderisation of Migration out of North Korea will introduce how gender plays into mobility abilities and shapes the paths available for individuals, which are in favour of women. This has led to many North Korean women to practice distance motherhood and provide remittances for the family left behind (Kook, 2018). It is noteworthy to mention how filial piety is an important part of remittance behaviour in East Asia (Chan, 2017; Tu, 2016). However, interviews conducted for this thesis reveal that the sense of duty among migrants is not primarily rooted in traditional ideas of filial obligation. Instead, it stems from the recognition that migrants, having access to better opportunities abroad, are in a position to provide support (Interviewees 13 and 19). In this context, feelings of duty and guilt often coexist (Park, 2023), creating a dynamic that goes beyond traditional family roles. For example, Interviewee 1 (2022) explained she connects with her parents because of loving them and missing them, rather than by a sense of obligation.

The previous sub-section presented how North Koreans form perceptions of life abroad through social remittances that they receive from family members. The reciprocity individuals have with their relatives entails that North Koreans place a higher trust in this information and they can rely on it for decision-making exercises when it comes to mobility. Pairing up life-making objectives with the additional incentive of meeting a family member you miss makes family reunification projects emerge. As Interviewee 13 (2022) explained, North Koreans want a better life for themselves and their families when they decide to migrate. And, while individual characteristics and family dynamics impact this, in general, they do not prevent their families from coming to them. If they wish for family reunification, they work on easing the fears related to escaping with information.

North Koreans do not always report to their families when they will escape. The survey showed 25.87 per cent of the respondents did not inform the family. In contrast, 13 per cent of migrants had told the family they were leaving and discussed remittance-sending, and 61.34 per cent had told their family they were escaping without mentioning remittance-sending (Boadella-Prunell, 2024: 17). Remittance behaviour-wise, it is not common for migrants to provide money specifically for escaping purposes (NKDB, 2018 and 2020). They rarely ask their families to leave the country to be with them (Boadella-Prunell, 2024). Earmarking the use of remittances, however, is not a practice that can be easily done when a migrant lives far away and has little opportunity to return. Carling (2014: S244) denotes that remittance scripts include earmarking practices that lead to disputes between receivers and senders all around the world, with receivers taking it as the provider 'giving advice' and then reaching a 'breach of trust.' In the North Korea case, families are expected to use the money sent to cover living expenses. And while this money contributes to abilities, aspirations are not impacted per se.

Migration aspirations emerge from family members telling their loved ones to leave with them in liaison with data and information about their lives outside. For instance, a father in North Korea might receive a photo of his migrant daughter enjoying her holiday in Rome, followed by her urging him to leave North Korea to join her on her next trip. Photos, messages, and calls play a crucial role in shaping the image of the migrant lifestyle. However, as Vertovec (2004) highlights, ICTs serve not only to convey such imagery but also to sustain emotional bonds, acting as a form of social glue. These links are in itself mobility pulls in favour of family reunification. Living close to family has been examined as a deterrent to mobility (Ermisch and Mulder, 2019; Mulder, 2018), but in a context where it is virtually impossible for those who have left to visit you, a desire for reunification can spur migration aspirations.

4.2.5.3 Escaping Persecution and Other Breaking Points

North Korea watchers and researchers began observing the rise and establishment of the *jangmadang* during the famine and have continued to examine how they evolved and transformed North Korea's society (for example, Lim, 2023 and Yeo, 2020 and 2021). As the interviews have

showcased, the *jangmadang* have been the cradles for new social classes, particularly near the border with China. The *nouveau riche* or *donju*, and the poorer individuals named crickets (Collins, 2021: 46:11) or cloaked society (Lim, 2023). This being said, there are layers in between who live more or less comfortably without falling into these two categories. As Interviewee 13 (2022) explained, it is not a conventional route for North Koreans to attempt to become entrepreneurs or *donju*. While it happens for some, many are content with their lives, or they do not want to or know how to take this approach. Thus, remittance-receivers who are not involved in market business and want to become mobile may fall into the family reunification and life-making projects.

Remittance receivers involved in markets, trade, and other potentially illicit activities may aspire to become mobile because of projects related to persecution. As interviewees disclosed, not everyone wants to leave North Korea when they do. Some get in trouble with the authorities due to the regime's sporadic clamping down on trade or outside media consumption or making too much money and hitting a glass ceiling (Interviewees 5, 6, and 20, 2022). Interviewees reported that these cases can lead to two different results. One is that the authorities do their job and either take the individual's money or punish them. The other is that it leads to a breaking point (Fahy, 2015: 126). Migration is not necessarily planned but something that happens because there is something the individual does not want to experience and cannot escape from it. While, of course, this can have something to do with family dynamics or relationships, in the North Korean context it can involve facing persecution from the authorities.

Interviewees explained how North Koreans they were acquainted with were told that the police would come for them, and they had to escape. Those in this situation and manage to escape tend to be richer individuals with the means to escape and the connections to be informed about potential reprimands (Interviewee 6, 2022). In this context, aspirations for mobility arise from reaching a critical juncture where remaining immobile could result in the loss of freedom and/or capital. As Bylander (2013) finds, migration is a coping mechanism for individuals facing financial instability.

How do remittances impact this mobility project? They do it in a similar way than in the earlier cases. The difference is that remittance-receivers have wiggle room to receive information from abroad and use these transnational networks in their favour. For example, by allowing the individual in North Korea to contact the remittance senders to arrange their urgent escape. It is particularly beneficial when the person belongs to a family with other members abroad, especially in China, as they can be picked up or be offered a safe haven once they have crossed.

North Koreans who are confronted with such ultimatums of losing their possessions or imprisonment if they do not escape have little time to plan. Those facing breaking points, particularly through involvement in illicit activities, may fall into the *donju* category, which affords them better connections. Yet, for many North Koreans, this may not be the case. As Interviewee 11 (2022) states: "The breaking point doesn't necessarily mean anything unless there's an opportunity that follows. And that opportunity might never come unless you have the means or someone else has them for you to set up a brokered escape. How many people have experienced

the wrecking point and have not been able to leave?" Remittance receivers, *donju* or not, not only know more about the outside to have a more accurate perception of other countries and what escaping would look like, but also know that they have connections and networks of individuals who can help them. Interviewee 13 (2022) explains that these individuals did not want to become mobile at first and only had the need and desire to do it because of their situation. Yet it is important to emphasise, like in the previous sub-sections, that aspirations can arise from certainty and information in the decision-making process of escaping. In this case, when remittance receivers are faced with an ultimatum, this certainty takes the shape of knowing a family member outside can arrange things for them or put them in contact with the appropriate person (such as a broker or a sympathising *Joseonjeok* or Chinese person across the border that can offer aid). In short, with certainty comes resolve.

4.2.6 Chapter Conclusions

Migration is a complex phenomenon influenced by an individual's personal traits, the conditions and experiences they face in their home country, and their perceptions of opportunities or challenges in other locations (such as better jobs or civil rights) (Carling and Schewel, 2018). Voluntary mobility occurs when a person chooses to leave their own country and succeeds at doing so. This decision arises from the interplay of various factors that shape individuals' aspirations and the goals they seek to achieve (Carling, 2001: 16). If these objectives require emigrating, the person will develop mobility aspirations due to having migration projects. Identifying migration objectives as Carling (2001 and 2002) does challenges the notion of the 'helpless migrant' (Binder and Tošić, 2005: 611) by framing migrants as empowered actors who leverage resources, transnational networks, and aspirations to pursue transformative migration projects. As Carling (2002) notes, individual characteristics (the micro-level) can impact migration aspirations. The table below shows how personal traits can influence the North Korean mobility journey, which includes being a remittance receiver.

Table 4. Aspirations and micro-level characteristics in the North Korean context

Individual's characteristics	**Aspirations**
Place of residence	Being from North or South Hamgyeong or Ryanggang may have a positive effect in aspirations (higher mobility areas, mobility is used as a family strategy)
Songbun (social classification)	Probably higher effect on aspirations if lower *songbun* class.
Socio-economic status	Lowering effect on aspirations if individual belongs to the *donju* class.
Employment/education level	If the individual does not have access to higher education or a job they like, this increases aspirations.
Family ties in the country (including parenthood)	Probably higher effect on aspirations (migration strategies, better perception of migrant life)
Family ties abroad	
Receiving remittances	

Sources: Compiled by the author adapted from the selected individual characteristics from Carling (2002: 120) for Cape Verde and changed to include elements that may influence North Koreans

This section has examined why North Koreans engage in migration by exposing how remittance-receiving challenges individuals who have been politically socialised in North Korean society and prompts them to become mobile. Political socialisation shapes how citizens understand what normal life is like to shape their expectations of daily lives and state provisions. The perceptions and expectations of North Koreans have been recently challenged with the entry of foreign information that goes against state-sponsored knowledge about the outside showcasing how rich other countries are, free, and plentiful.

Remittances have contributed to this cognitive dissonance through North Korean migrants providing pictures of their daily lives while potentially sending money and items that are not readily available in North Korea (make-up, medicine, and so on). The imagery is akin to North Korean migrant-made propaganda which creates a 'Fantasyland' by effectively idealising life abroad (Interviewee 17, 2022). This phenomenon mirrors how prospective migrants and voluntarily mobile individuals worldwide develop aspirations to emigrate. Scholars like Orgad (2012) and Veronese et al. (2020) have examined how people form utopian ideas of destination countries through surfing the Internet, social media, or talking with acquaintances. North Korean migration decision-making is similar as migration projects emerge from different pulls that can be witnessed through impersonal outside media (for example, Chinese soap operas) or direct communication with trustworthy migrants. The key distinction between the two lies in the migrants' ability to provide more reliable information and stronger social capital.

An important element of the North Korean context is that legal migration is not an option for the general population but is reserved for those with the appropriate *songbun*. Moreover, since mobility and border-crossing often take place illicitly through smuggling and broker networks, migration itself is considered an illegal act subject to punishment. While penalties can sometimes be evaded through bribery, return migration is rare for individuals who have been away from the country for an extended period of time. Border-crossing has, however, become a common occurrence to make money in China, trade, or smuggle items to participate in the growing North Korean underground economy. Through this normalisation of temporary mobility to China and illicit practices such as smuggling, outside information has seeped into the country with media and word-of-mouth.

Outside information and social remittances have a similar effect albeit with a crucial difference: remittances in the shape of information, pictures, or messages from family members who have migrated are more reliable than perceptions from outside media (such as K-drama). In this regard, this section has examined how social remittances, often provided along with financial remittances, prompt different mobility projects and, thus, migration aspirations. Life-making projects are developed from the idea that becoming mobile pays back. This message emerges from family members abroad who may romanticise their new lives or update their loved ones about their activities (job promotions, international travel, university graduations, and so forth). Family reunification projects come from wanting to reunite with a family member in another country, this can be triggered through communication as it strengthens emotional connection. Lastly, another

type of emigration project that has been identified in this section is the one that comes with hitting a breaking point such as being persecuted by North Korean authorities. This is not triggered by social or financial remittances, but by events that ultimately drive the individual abroad. Jang Young-jin's memoir presented an example of this as he was not allowed to divorce his wife, which triggered his escape. Interviewee 6 (2022) posed another example of this type of describing a man who was being pursued by North Korean authorities and emigrated to avoid capture. In this case, the individual already had family and connections outside of North Korea.

4.3 Migration Enablers

4.3.1 Remittances, Chain Migration, and Family Strategies

Providing financial remittances, even if it is a struggle and it is not rare for North Koreans to go into debt to provide them (NKDB, 2018 and 2020), is done due to a variety of reasons: duty to the family including filial duty (Interviewee 11, 2022), concern (Interviewee 1, 2022), guilt (Interviewee 4, 2022), and family reunification (Park, 2023: 108), amongst others. Chain migration, which is often supported by transnational networks of migrants, is not necessarily uncommon for North Koreans, though it is simultaneously not common. Some families originated from North Korea and its members slowly started leaving until none of them were left (Interviewee 6, 2022). In border areas like North Hamgyeong, mobility is used as a family strategy akin to a community effort. Chain migration has been solidified as the way in which North Koreans abroad assist those in North Korea to leave the country. As such, North Koreans see how remittance-receiving is not only relevant to cover the financial aspect of things but also getting in contact with the necessary networks that will get the people out safely and knowing whom to bribe (Boadella-Prunell, 2024). This demonstrates Boyd's (1989) examination of mobility as a social product in which migrants influence financial and information flows going to a country, and human flows leaving it.

For the most part, interviewees surmised that the expected uses of remittances vary, yet most North Koreans send them because they feel guilty about leaving their families behind (Interviewees 4, 11, 15, and 19, 2022). The feeling of having abandoned one's family is somehow lessened by providing for the household's living expenses, not only because it is a way to care for them remotely, but also because they have lost one salary due to the person's mobility (Interviewee 19, 2022). Remittances are, thus, set to fix any damage caused to the connection with the family but also to make up for the income loss that would be used to cover anything categorised as *saenghwal bi* (living expenses in Korean) (Interviewee 19, 2022). Interviewee 18 (2022) describes what remittances are mostly used for. Firstly, they are meant to cover food and other expenses related to living; secondly, financial remittances also cover what would be categorised as housing expenses such as fuel, including anything that covers fire or energy production; and thirdly, they are used for education-related expenses, medicine, and to buy clothing. While earmarking what money is for is difficult, migrants are motivated to send money for living expenses because it contributes to the family's survival (Interviewee 19, 2022).

Interviewee 14 (2022) describes the remittance-sending motivations for many North Koreans abroad shifting as they settle in South Korea or other countries. While he agrees that the main purpose behind financial remittances is supporting living expenses and concern for the family left behind, especially since many North Korean migrants are women who leave children behind, this goal changes. The moment the migrant is in South Korea or China, for example, the focus switches toward getting the families outside as individuals desire to reunite with or see their family and going back temporarily as a visitor is not necessarily a possibility (Interviewee 14, 2022). This being said, published survey results asking about how migrants send remittances to fund someone's escape show this is not too common (NKDB, 2018 and 2020). It is also uncommon for individuals to ask their families to leave North Korea permanently. The survey revealed that 19.31 per cent of respondents had sent remittances with the hope of reunification, while 61.78 per cent had no such intention (Boadella-Prunell, 2024: 19).

Relatedly, Bilecen et al. (2017) conclude that an important aspect of emigration is emotional support in the form of reassurance to the person who wants to become mobile. The authors note that financial assistance is crucial for chain migration, but reassurance is equally important. For an immobile North Korean, knowing that a family member managed to emigrate successfully and is capable of sending remittances, can provide this reassurance. Interviewee 13 (2022) reflects on the practice of North Koreans promoting escaping to their family members and emotional connection.

> "This depends on the relationship between both (the mobile and the immobile) and also on why the North Korean is outside. So, if someone leaves because they fear punishment for something, is not necessarily because of wanting to live outside. I wouldn't say, speaking generally, that defectors try to prevent the families come over. But the families may not want to. And, well, in many cases they don't even like their families or keep in touch. Realistically, it depends on the family dynamics and research tends to romanticise the idea of reuniting separated families, but it's not always like this. You may hate your life in North Korea so you live, but you may as well hate your family, leave, and never turn back. (…) But, generally, defection is not so much about the individual, it's more about wanting a better life for yourself, too, but also certain family members. If you have left, your family may as well want to leave but they may be scared, which is only natural and realistic. So, they may need reassurance from a loved one abroad to say 'hey, I am fine. I have found a secure way for you to get out, so don't worry'. And the family has good reason to be scared, so it is necessary for many of them to get this call to be fully convinced about leaving and to know what to do." (Interviewee, 13, 2022).

While different elements may hint that chain migration is not frequent, data collection through surveys has obvious caveats that explain the difference between the phenomenon observed and the actual results. For one, the poll of North Korean respondents may have this particular inclination or priorities. Secondly, the polls offered allow a single response and the main priority for senders may be ultimately to take care of the family at the most basic level (with food, clothing, housing,

and not escaping North Korea). Another point is that earmarking remittances is not an easy process due to physical distance and complications in communicating with the remittance recipients – the wish that the family members will save the money up to become mobile may be there. Still, it may not be voiced nor requested. Prior to the pandemic, NKDB's (2018: 178) research showed that remittances were also rarely used to escape, but spent on living expenses, business, and education or medicine.

This study has reiterated previously that it is difficult to assess what is common or uncommon in North Korea's case, especially regarding mobility since it does not involve a large percentage of people (considering North Korea's total demographics). Migrants are also a self-selecting group and, in North Korea's case, where outside information is limited and knowledge of escape brokers is likewise not commonplace, it can be said that chain migration is not frequent, but it is definitely an established practice. There are plenty of families that started bleeding out from North Korea member per member until all of them found their place abroad (Interviewee 6, 2022). Prior to the pandemic, households near the border began utilising migration as a family strategy for remittances or to establish transnational networks (Interviewee 2, 2022). When North Koreans realise their neighbours have family outside, they become jealous (Interviewee 2, 2022), and they may either report or want to join in the practice. This is where North Korean transnational networks become relevant. Having a household member outside of knowing someone who is acquainted with someone abroad can open the doors to being introduced to a good mobility broker – as well as any broker like a communication one that assists keeping in touch with the family, item smuggler for physical remittances, or remittance brokers that will facilitate providing cash for the family.

Interviewee 5 (2022) talks about these transnational networks pre-, during, and the expected post-COVID-19 lockdowns. Smuggling, escaping, remittance sending networks are mostly dormant due to spikes in security in lockdowns after North Korea closed its borders. Whereas it has all continued minimally (Interviewees 15 and 20, 2022), many people who worked on this have moved on to other businesses. Yet the interviewee emphasises how there are always people who want to make money and many compassion-driven networks (such as human rights activists or Christian groups) that will return once it all re-opens, even if the established networks have diminished. This links to how chain migration has worked. The idea that this is a business for many *Joseonjeok*, Chinese, and North Korean people (as well as a way to proselytise for other associations) ensures that they want to have a good connection with North Koreans that have gotten out thanks to them. Migrants who are abroad now will recommend or put other North Koreans in contact with these networks, which not only help solidify how these networks work but also continue enabling and promoting mobility and transnational activities. This is the business-like approach taken by many brokers to ensure a degree of reliability in a context where trust is always put into question (Interviewees 5 and 8, 2022). This is why communication brokers assist North Korean households in contacting migrants so they can ask for remittances (Interviewee 19, 2022), it keeps the economic venture growing.

Transnational profit-driven networks are one of the bigger enablers of mobility out of North Korea. They maintain the routes going and intertwine with how transnational activities are dealt with in North Korea with communication brokers working on the remittance brokers as has been mentioned before, but there are many other connections. Remittance brokers in North Korea usually provide cash to the receiving families and, this money, is already with them at the time in which the North Korean migrant transfers money to the broker in China. Because of this, the broker in China needs to settle the accounts with their North Korean partner at some point. Since illicit trade networks between China and North Korea are better established than just sending someone across the border with a bundle of cash, Chinese brokers settle the accounts by delivering items to the North Korean side to be then sold (Interviewee 17, 2022). For example, if the North Korean broker is provided with twelve washing machines, they can then sell them to the markets for a substantial return of capital (Interviewee 8, 2022) from their initial 'investment' where they provided money for the remittance-receiving household. This not only gets them the money back but, in addition, pays them way more than enough to cover the commission costs (Interviewee 17, 2022).

The process of settling accounts between brokers leverages existing trade and smuggling networks, as well as local markets. This creates a cyclical dynamic: by the end of this repayment process, North Korea's informal markets benefit from increased supply (the washing machines) and demand (remittance-receiving families who now have more money for purchases). The receiving household may go ahead and buy one washing machine and this act may be noticed by the neighbours and, as previously stated, this may trigger migration aspirations. If the money is too high for the neighbouring family, remittance-receiving households may offer micro-loans to provide this (Interviewee 17, 2022) or the brokers may allow the individuals to use their services and pay them back later (often, with the resettling money given by South Korea) (Interviewee 5, 2022). Alternatively, compassion-driven networks including NGOs and religious groups with contributors who provide donations also assist, though they may not help with every leg of the trip. Interviewee 5 (2022) gives the example of Korean Methodist Churches in China that collect donations by making public the number of North Koreans they have helped get from China to either Southeast Asia or to South Korea. They further explain how it is less common for organisations to assist North Koreans go from actual North Korea to South Korea, it is more often that funding and assistance are given from China onwards.

To conclude this section, the survey question 'Other than money and networks, what else can help you escape?' should be addressed. North Korean respondents, for the most part, did not reply to this query or answered that they either could not think of anything else or that there was nothing else that enabled mobility other than networks and money. However, some respondents did say that what they received from the family and the money that they sent to cover living expenses did contribute to their well-being, savings, and future escape. One of the respondents who had been a financial remittance receiver furthered their answer to include that another element that contributed to their migration was having the ability to open one's horizons beyond one's knowledge. The answers thus reflect on how financial remittances as money and social remittances as aspects that

can contribute to knowledge (of the outside but also helpful networks) can function as mobility enablers.

4.3.1.1 First-Time Movers vs. Migrant Families

This section will address an individual characteristic that involves whether an individual is a first-time mover, referring to the first person to emigrate from a particular household, or if the person belongs to a migrant family. First-time movers have it especially difficult to become mobile. The world outside seems unreal, and it is difficult to imagine properly (Interviewee 1, 2022). Interviewee 17 (2022) describes the context for first-time movers with no connections outside of North Korea.

> "I have spoken with North Koreans who have this kind of background and, one way of describing it for us who live in South Korea, France, the UK, or wherever is to imagine that there is this 'Fantasyland' – another world where things are so much better in so many different ways. Things like everyone being wealthier, everything being generally more abundant, there being better opportunities, and all kinds of stuff. This North Korean proposed this thought experiment: to think about this world but, if you go, then you have to go by yourself and you have to leave everybody that you know in your world. You don't even get to contact them again. How many people would actually make that decision? It would be extremely rare. Even if you knew that this 'Fantasyland' was objectively better in every possible way, you have to leave everybody that you've known; everyone you've ever loved or hated; your family; your friends; everything and everybody that has ever meant anything to you would have to be left behind to go into this 'Fantasyland.' And that's even taking out the risk factor. If you add that [the risk factor], let's say, in order to go there you have to go in a spaceship by yourself and there's like a 50 per cent chance that it will blow up in the sky, then how many people are going to take the choice? This is the situation for a lot of North Koreans." (Interviewee 17, 2022).

North Koreans thus, when they decide to leave and be the first ones to do so in their household, they have a vague idea of where they are going, though many do not know the way (Interviewee 15, 2022). However, first-time movers do not have strong ties outside of the country and rely on others (*Joseonjeok*, Christian organisations, brokers, and so forth) to assist them once they arrive in China and during their journeys to South Korea or other countries. And, even with these networks, being caught in China and repatriated is a real fear for many, especially for men who have work opportunities outside (such as in farms or construction) (Gyupchanova, 2018; Scarlatoiu, 2023; Song, 2015).

The potentiality and propensity of leaving North Korea increases for remittance-receivers who are in contact with someone outside the country (Interviewee 17, 2022), yet it all narrows down to trust. A family member or a friend outside can try and assist their loved one in escaping North

Korea but, for this individual, this is still a leap of faith. They are putting their safety in their hands and there are still risks that can get them repatriated or punished (Interviewee 19, 2022). Interviewee 19 (2022) explains how chain migration and networks became better established prior to the pandemic yet, in the early days, many would leave out of desperation. Because of this, many women would end up being sold, knowingly or unknowingly.

First-time movers face difficulty migrating due to unfamiliarity with mobility paths which strengthens challenges such as emotional ties with the one location they know and psychological barriers. Because of this, they rely on external networks such as human traffickers and brokers for assistance reaching China and beyond. Due to the lack of familiarity and knowledge of the process, first-time movers are more at risk of being tricked into human trafficking and forced repatriation. Remittance receivers have the upper hand in mobility as they are more likely to consider migration after hearing from loved ones with first-hand experience. The web of transnational actors in the North Korean mobility scene, including broker networks and migrant families, has been instrumental in building and sustaining chain migration pathways that are, to a degree, less risky for prospective migrants.

4.3.2 Remittances and Entrepreneurship

previous sub-section addressed how migrants can financially cover escaping North Korea, put the prospective mobile people in contact with transnational networks (such as NGOs and brokers), and how remittance-sending has enabled the growth of these networks. Here, the emphasis is put in another aspect of remittance-sending, which is that it can be monetized and, this financial gain can later be used for migration purposes of the migrant family or neighbouring households.

Outside information consumption and tampering with radio devices have become part of the ‘new normal’ in the border areas during the 2010s and onwards. Likewise, Interviewee 2 (2022) pointed out that in the northern provinces, it has become something akin to a family strategy to send at least one family member abroad to, at the very least, China. This is not done purely to have more cash or to help with family migration. Those who reside in China, and at times South Korea, can contribute to the household’s economy by sharing contact information with profit-driven networks (smugglers and traders) and helping with providing certain supplies from outside that can be sold inside (Boadella-Prunell, 2024; Interviewees 1 and 7, 2022).

Extra-locality for individuals does not mean the migrant will consistently (or occasionally) support those who remain in North Korea. Scholarship has addressed how North Korean migrants who do not frequently send money to their households, are met with frequent requests (Park, 2023). The insistent requests are reminiscent of the concepts of dependency and moral hazard (Alba and Sugui, 2011: 2). However, the requests do not seem to come from necessity or actual dependency for North Korean households (Boadella-Prunell, 2024). The way North Korean households engage with remittances aligns with the cases of Mexico and Nicaragua where families can choose to keep

the money for comfort, but also for entrepreneurial activities (Funkhouser, 1992; Massey and Parrado, 1998).

These activities are often the household's usage of financial remittances for their own ventures. However, interviewee 6 (2022) infers there are ways North Korean migrants can stay connected to their previous businesses. The interviewee exemplifies this with the case of a foreigner living outside of North Korea who ran a bus company in Rason employing North Koreans. In this case, everything was managed transnationally, including paying employees and acquiring the vehicles. This example shows how individuals abroad can remain vital in the local economy by providing money, supply, and information. And, similarly, how non-North Koreans can equally utilise the established profit-driven networks to fuel the North Korean economy, as foreigners sending money legally through international transfers or other legal means can potentially be a breach of UN sanctions. "Not even Chinese banks want to deal with North Korea usually. If you're going to send remittances or money for anything, these transactions take a people-to-people approach rather than through bank wire transfers" (Interviewee 6, 2022).

4.3.3 Playing the Game: The Role of Remittances and Corruption in North Korea's Evolving Economy

Remittance and communication brokers and smugglers who may be involved with physical remittances (such as cell phones and make-up) (Interviewees 7 and 14, 2022) exist at the border of legality and illegality, individuals involved in them know how to play around North Korea's restrictions. 'Playing the game' has reshaped North Korea's society in many different ways. Whereas the regime initially took a *laissez-faire* attitude toward the *jangmadang*, the underground economy has intrinsically changed how North Korea works, at least in the northern border regions. Black markets have emerged across the country, yet the epicentre of socio-economic change has been in the provinces near China for evident reasons (Yeo, 2020): border-crossing is easier; *Joseonjeok* with North Korean family members, Chinese tourists[14] (Joung, 2019: 4), and businessmen, can visit northern provinces with permits (Interviewees 9 and 13, 2022); travelling between provinces requires a permit that is not always easy to obtain (for example, going from South Hwanghae to North Hamgyeong province can be complicated unless the person has enough money to pay bribes) (Interviewee 13, 2022); similarly to this last point, if domestic mobility is burdensome for the individual, it adds another layer of complexity for someone who may be carrying supply (or money) to be delivered (financial remittances, flash drives, Bibles, and so on), yet it is possible (Interviewee 2, 2022); lastly, provinces in the north have traditionally been more abandoned by the state and are more obviously impoverished[15], at the same time, they are less

[14] Non-Chinese and non-*Joseonjeok* tourists, as well as other types of foreigners (for example, exchange students), also have the opportunity to visit areas outside of Pyongyang and in the northern provinces (Interviewee 10, 2022). These tours or chances to visit are less common (Connell, 2019) and visitors have less freedom to roam around than in other regions and Pyongyang (Willoughby, 2014: ix).

[15] This is not particular to provinces near the border with China. Interviewee 10 (2022) explains that "the stereotype is clearly that there's Pyongyang and then there is the rest of the country. And that is true. It's a qualitative difference,

controlled by Pyongyang and have enjoyed, to a degree, more autonomy (Szalontai and Choi, 2014).

As the markets have grown and the *nouveau riche* class of businesspeople has emerged, along with other smaller entrepreneurs and North Koreans involved in informal networks, the lines between money and power have diluted. It is no longer uncommon for grey market entrepreneurs to be richer than the authorities, which has led to higher rates of corruption. On the one hand, officials face frustration about market entrepreneurs living a more comfortable life than themselves. On the other hand, the salaries they are provided with are not enough. As Interviewee 15 (2022) notes "the border guards also need to be fed, and they need the bribes." These new entrepreneurs with access to credit become moneylenders which benefits the community at large and the officials themselves. They lend "at a rate of 30–40 percent monthly interest to state officials who could use their positions to engage in private enterprise" (Hastings, 2016: 57). Hence, in a way, the regime may be accounting for corruption to maintain the system working. Ramón Pacheco Pardo (2021) noted that the 'red line' the regime should not cross to avoid igniting the North Korean people is cracking down on the markets. As evidence of this, the 2009 currency reform in North Korea sprouted vendor protests in Hamhung and Chongjin (Szalontai and Choi, 2014: 65) and public demonstrations in the markets quickly followed in 2020 as a response to the strict pandemic lockdowns in Hyesan (Chao Choy, 2021: 12:05).

Because the regime cannot interfere totally with marketization nor erase it, allowing a certain degree of corruption helps them maintain a grip on power. In other words, if the WPK attempted to punish officials who accepted bribes while the *donju* continued becoming richer, the tension would increase. A total crackdown on both, bribes and markets, would also work against the regime. "Kim Jong-un will not crack down on the city to stop any of it from happening [smuggling, bribes, and illegal commercial activities], you can't go by the book or will have people die starving" (Interviewee 20, 2022). At the same time, the frustration over regular citizens becoming richer than the authorities and how having more money has flirted with the connection of having more political power (because these individuals can buy the authorities). As such, there is an unspoken glass ceiling as to how wealthy citizens can become. Whenever entrepreneurs or North Korean individuals become too rich, officials become involved in repressing the person by taking their possessions and money (Boadella-Prunell, 2024; Interviewees 6, 7, and 20, 2022).

Kim Jong-un's North Korea is, thus, very different from what the country was under Kim Il-sung. What has become the new reality after the 2010s includes many elements that divert from the socialist utopia North Korea attempted to be in the past. Whereas lack of access and data collection limitations make it complicated to assess what is common or rare in the country, evidence collected by NKDB's *Social and Economic Integration of North Korean Defectors in South Korea* (for example the ones from 2018 and 2020) notes that it is an established practice but not necessarily a

really. I've been to larger provincial cities like Wonson, Hamhung, and Chongjin. And they are not Pyongyang, but they are still cities, they are okay. (…) If you travel through the countryside and see the conditions which people live in, they are very extremely basic. If they get electricity, they are really happy, but they have hardly anything in terms of amenities."

recurrent one. Most North Koreans forward remittances to North Korea at least once, usually the year they arrive in South Korea or the year after, but not everyone continues to do so. In 2018, prior to the pandemic, North Korean migrants stated they had not sent financial remittances due to not having money (39.7 per cent); not having any relatives left (21.8 per cent); and the family being financially stable (4.5 per cent). Fearing for the family's safety back in North Korea if they were to be caught receiving remittances seems less pressing, with only 1.9 per cent of the respondents answering this in 2018 (NKDB, 2018: 173). This raised to 4.2 per cent in 2020 during the pandemic (NKDB, 2020: 67).

Interviewee 6 (2022) defines what the concept of 'playing the game' means for North Koreans:

> "You can run a business in North Korea because Kim Jong-un has changed the economic dynamics; private business is the 'new normal' in North Korea. In South Korea, if a North Korean saves up USD 1,000 and sends it to North Korea, they can make a lot with it. They know that North Korea is considerably cheaper, they know the people, they are familiar with the economic context, and they know how to 'play the game' – as long as you don't badmouth Kim Il-sung or any other Kim, you won't be bothered. In this sense, South Korea is a market economy. North Korea is something else, they have a hybrid economic system. North Korean defectors have skills to navigate it, and they know that the North Korean economy has different rules for the game. Pyongyang is not communist anymore, even party officials are involved in activities to make money. The times of the North Korean planned economy are over." (Interviewee 6, 2022).

Bribes and understanding the system also lessen worries for remittance senders as the families have learnt how to navigate the margins of what is allowed and what is not allowed to do. When inquired about concerns about her parents in North Korea, Interviewee 1 (2022) explains how persecution is not in her mind, "I worry about food and their health. There is nothing else to worry about, it's not like they are in danger. My parents have lived in North Korea their whole life, they know how to live [in North Korean society]." And, because remittance-receivers are, similarly to the *donju*, relatively more affluent than North Korean officials, bribes are the way they can engage in their activities without fearing persecution or repercussion to a degree (Interviewee 20, 2022). For example, 'purchasing' a house other than the one that is officially assigned to the household (Interviewee 7, 2022); skipping mandatory meetings such as the Self-Criticism and Mutual-Criticism Sessions (Interviewee 19, 2022); for political merit (Interviewee 14, 2022); or getting travel permits for domestic mobility (Interviewee 13, 2022).

This section has examined how remittance-receiving in connection with rising corruption in North Korea enables North Koreans to pay bribes to obtain travel permits, conduct business activities, receive more remittances, purchase real estate, and skip mandatory party sessions. Remittance-receiving and entrepreneurship can lead to complications such as getting attention from the authorities due to being reported by the *inminban* or hitting an economical glass ceiling. Whereas the recipients are the ones to actively conceal new flows of money by paying bribes, if necessary

(and when receiving or picking up what is sent), senders can contribute to this by not sending a lot of money in general. As a family with a member who is recently registered as deceased or a disappeared person becoming rich quickly could for one trigger jealousy from neighbours that can report the household. Similarly, the recipients could somehow hit the 'glass ceiling' and become targets of the authorities. Hence, it is not common for North Korean migrants to send large quantities of money. Only 25.39 per cent of the survey respondents reported providing financial remittances that exceeded the receiving household's basic living expenses (Boadella-Prunell, 2024: 17).

The surplus that results from what the household gains and the remittances received can go toward entrepreneurial activities such as starting their own noodle shops (Park, 2016) or paying staff (Interviewee 8, 2022), micro-lending in exchange for commissions (Jung et al., 2018; Interviewee 17, 2022); items received as remittances can be work equipment such as acupuncture needles if not supply (Interviewee 7, 2022; Park, 2016); or savings to be spent on future mobility or other expenses. Thus, the North Korean context presents a positive correlation between remittance-receiving and entrepreneurship, a link that is seen in different case studies when there is a surplus after remittances cover living costs (Parra Torrado, 2012; Rozelle et al., 1999). At the same time, the most common use of any surplus is to spend it quickly, either on shopping (Interviewee 16, 2022) or paying bribes (Interviewee 19, 2022). As a side note, Interviewee 6 (2022) mentions that it is not necessarily a surplus that is provided for businesses and entrepreneurial activities:

> "… [by sending money] they're trying to help out a family member. It may also be the case that they send money to the markets, to invest, or support their businesses back there in some way. Entrepreneurs here may be trying to continue their business from South Korea, that might be one potential motive.[16]" (Interviewee 6, 2022).

Authors like Lim (2014: 1) and Rozelle et al. (1999) have inferred that remittances are an investment that can fuel entrepreneurship and, ultimately, contribute to financial well-being. The North Korean case shows that this benefit can support the receiving household economically and, very minimally, to the community that may be supported through micro-loans. But, ultimately, remittance-sending is not intended for entrepreneurship but for covering living expenses, as it has been shown earlier when discussing remittance behaviour and remittance brokers in the section Breaking Points, Networks, and the North Korean Economy. All in all, how remittances are spent is up to the recipients as communication is often cut short to avoid detection (Baek, 2016; Interviewees 17 and 19, 2022) and thus North Korean migrants have little opportunity to earmark how money should be used.

Remittance-sending behaviour from North Korean migrants denotes they still know how to play the game of living under the North Korean regime. Hypernormalisation is characterised by individuals portraying the role of loyal citizens while, simultaneously, acting as they would in their

[16] Having said this, Interviewee 4 (2022) who has researched North Korean migrant entrepreneurs abroad (in South Korea, the US, and the UK) when asked about transnational businesses or businesses between North Korean partners, spoke about ventures between migrants and international, nothing in North Korea.

private lives. Whereas the lines between what is and is not private in North Korea are blurred, North Koreans have found bribes are a good cover-up for activities that are not state-favoured nor entirely legal. The regime utilises bribes in their favour to an extent as they are not willing or able to provide enough salaries for their officials to counter the rising wealth of the *jangmadang* new capitalists. As such, remittance-receiving is hidden in different ways such as reducing the amounts of money that are sent in one go; spending the money quickly by buying things, investing in one's business, or lending the money; or paying bribes to people who may notice remittance-receiving (such as the *inminban* and neighbours).

This sub-section has shown that remittance brokers operate on the border of legality along with other agents in the North Korean underground economy that have reshaped society around the border areas. Corruption has risen through widespread bribes involving North Korean authorities and wealthy entrepreneurs involved in the markets which are somewhat tolerated by Kim Jong-un's regime. Through this informal system, remittances and smuggled items get through the border and support family business discreetly, with bribes allowing families to avoid unwanted scrutiny.

4.3.4 The Genderisation of Migration out of North Korea

Individual characteristics are a key component of mobility, gender being a crucial one that enables different migration paths. Existing research has examined that it is not uncommon in certain countries such as the Philippines (Kessler and Rother, 2016: 74-75), Vietnam (Thao, 2014: 137), or the Dominican Republic (Donato, 2010: 78) to send women abroad. This is due to working opportunities abroad that have a larger female work base (for example, nurses) because it is preferable if the male children stay instead, or due to family strategies. Similarly, other sending countries such as Mexico (Donato, 2010: 78) or Nepal (Lokshin and Glinskaya, 2009). Gendered migration has been a staple for countries such as the ones above throughout the years. Globalisation has influenced new family strategies and new migration patterns with the emergence of remittance-sending organisations such as Western Union (Orozco, 2002); remote jobs and the latest wave of nomad workers (Hermann and Paris, 2020); or the so-called mail-order brides (MOB) that have feminised very specific migration flows from Asia and other developing countries (the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Eastern European countries like Ukraine or Moldova, and so forth) (Meng, 1994: 202).

The North Korean migrant community is characterised by how feminised it is. By March 2024, the South Korean Ministry of Unification reported that 34,078 North Koreans had arrived. 72 per cent or 24,536 out of them were women (MoU, 2024). There is a diversity of reasons to explain this that relate to the status and rights of women in North Korea, work opportunities abroad (both linked to legal and illicit migration), personal inclinations, and demand for women in China (for marriage, the sex industry, and so on).

The first matter to address is women in North Korea are equal to men on paper. Similarly, if North Korean women are asked about their rights, an answer along the lines of being entirely equal will come up (Kim, 2018). The reality, however, shows a different scene. Kim Seok Hyang (2018: 59)

exemplifies this by stating that when North Korean women talk about gender equality, the answer is automatic. "Just as if you put a coin in the vending machine and press a button, you always get a can of soda, they [North Korean women] always answer "yes, of course."" As mentioned earlier in this study, North Korean women are allowed to be housewives while men are expected to go to the workplace that is assigned to them, even if they do not receive a salary. This has, of course, changed throughout the years with elements such as the appearance of the 8·3 workers or, simply, the rise of corruption. Women would reign the *jangmadang* and make their small businesses profitable because the authorities see them as powerless and ignore them (Fahy, 2019: 110). Then, men in their households could potentially invest the money the women had made to pay bribes and skip work, then work somewhere else that actually paid a salary. Some men work at *jangmadang*, but the majority do not. "Men want to save face (*chemyeonui kanghae*) whereas women are "good at talking" (*maljalhae*) which is good for selling" (Fahy, 2015: 100).

Additionally, until 2015 women were not expected to complete military service. This became mandatory afterward, making women between the ages of 17 and 20 serve for five years while men used to serve for 10 years and now do between 7 and 8 years. The change was made because North Koreans were showing discontent over women not serving and then being married off when men were finally discharged. But simultaneously, this has expanded how the regime keeps control of its people. Before 2015, women were seen as manpower yet now, they are put under a similar control and organisation mechanism than the men (NKDB, 2022a). Organisation-wise, since women tend to register as housewives, it could seem as if not all of them would join a labour association that will then take over control of their free time. Yet all unemployed North Korean women are members of the North Korea Democratic Women's League which also hosts mandatory Self-Criticism and Mutual-Criticism Sessions and organises 'voluntary' mass labour for its members (Park, 2011: 167).

Whereas 'cheating' the system and joining the *jangmadang* may seem like women have found empowerment, it is important to note that their role as breadwinners does not excuse them from being the caretakers and still act as housewives in the home. Patriarchal obligations such as conducting house chores, cooking, and caring for the children remain (Haggard and Nolan, 2012: 3). Similarly, the powerlessness of women is exploited by North Korean authorities who make them victims of 'economic and sexual predation' (Hastings et al., 2021: 2). Women are also victims to sexual assault in military bases[17] (NKDB, 2022a). Thus, while they may be ignored by the authorities at the markets, they are not free to do what they desire, they are still tied to the house responsibilities, and at risk of being abused by those in power.

[17] In this regard, it must be noted that North Korean female soldiers are not the sole victims of sexual assault, men are as well. NKDB's (2022) research found that 6 per cent of the ex-North Korean soldiers they interviewed had experienced sexual assault; 10 per cent had witnessed it; and 19 per cent had heard about it happening. Victims are both men and women, with same sex acts of abuse and relations being commonplace in the North Korean army. Men are not allowed to have relationships with women and thus have relations between them – this is not considered homosexuality but seen as 'an army thing' due to the restrictions imposed to them.

The concept of female role models that have worked to empower women across the globe does not necessarily exist in North Korea. On the one hand, media and literature carry strong family motifs and patriarchal messages through them (Fahy, 2019: 112; Kim, I., 2018). On the other hand, the so-called powerful women North Koreans observe are part of the Kim family. North Korean women may look up to Kim Jong-un's sister, Kim Yo-jong, or wife, Ri Sol-ju – or, if looking back in time, they may have looked up to Kim Il-sung's mother, Kang Pan-sok – but they can never become like them (Gyupchanova, 2021). They were either born in the Kim family or *made* it. Even in Ri's case, her power is due to marriage and not her own skills, and there is very little female empowerment in the matter. Mobility and the promises of living abroad can empower women. Bell (2021: 107) poses "within some families, migration offers opportunities to renegotiate patriarchal practices and to reshape the gender roles of the sending country." Empowerment and emancipation and the pursuit of them may be elements weighted in the decision-making process of leaving a country and, at the very least, why someone may want to become mobile (Groutsis et al., 2020). Even if becoming the family's breadwinner comes with the 'double burden' of caring for it when in North Korea (Haggard and Noland, 2011: 1; Park, 2011: 162).

This second burden as a carer somehow disappears once the woman becomes mobile and, as the interviewees have suggested, the burden changes to providing remittances instead – financial to support the family's survival (Interviewee 19, 2022) and communication to maintain emotional connections (Interviewee 14, 2022). Whereas not everyone who leaves North Korea feels this burden or sends remittances to the family back in the country, many do so in a sense of duty because of the guilt of leaving the family behind (Interviewees 1, 4, and 11, 2022). Gender and remittance behaviour are quite tied together because women who leave often leave a husband and children behind, and thus remittances become an intrinsic part of their distance motherhood (Interviewee 12, 2022; Kim, 2020a). This is notable in contrast to migration patterns in other countries in which mobility is dictated by the household head (Mahmud, 2020; Lubkemann, 2016). The changing North Korean economy has blurred household hierarchies and destabilised the deep-rooted patriarchy in the country (Dalton and Jung, 2023). As such, this thesis finds that migrant households and, more especially, female migration in North Korea do not show strict structures such as Mahmud's (2020) theory on household dictators. Van Dalen et al. (2005) proposed the idea that households and first-time migrants become mobile due to perceptions that there is profit in leaving the country. In the North Korean case, women carry a double burden as carers and providers, and migration and the economic benefits that come with it have this duty as motivation. Whereas Chung (2018) refers to remittance-sending in distance parenthood to compensate for the parental absence, the North Korean case shows this may be part of the motive that inspires migration. Women may decide to leave North Korea to emancipate themselves from this burden.

Leaving North Korea behind can be done in a diversity of ways. Legal ways include becoming an overseas worker which requires a good *songbun* (Gyupchanova, 2018) or being wealthy enough that one can get a permit to visit China (Interviewee 13, 2022). This permit can be obtained through paying bribes and requires a purpose that the state would approve, such as visiting family in China. Individuals who leave with this permit are subject to scrutiny upon coming back. Moreover, they do not have total freedom when abroad either as Ethan Shin's testimony at the hearing in front of

the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (2023: 1:40). If someone who has been state-approved to go abroad (diplomats, tourists, dispatched workers, exchange students, and so forth) escapes, there are consequences for the family in North Korea (Scarlatoiu, 2023). However, this does not mean they do not escape. For example, North Korean labourers who do end up escaping often get in touch with local groups or individuals who assist them get to embassies (Interviewee 12, 2022). Whereas approval rates and demographics for who gets to visit China are unknown, Interviewee 13 (2022) points out that it would involve, mostly, North Koreans near the border with China since they have more contact and physical closeness with the country.

Overseas workers can easily be divided into two gendered groups. Men are sent to do physical jobs including construction, mining, and forestry in countries like Russia, Mongolia, and Poland (Gyupchanova, 2018). Women are sent to do less physically demanding jobs including farming and restaurant work in Poland and China (Gyupchanova, 2018). Interviewee 1 (2022) explains that, when she was a restaurant worker in China, she had short breaks where she would be allowed to see her family and personally bring items and money. However, this seems to be a rare case since North Korean workers, even if working near the border, are hardly ever allowed to visit their families. And, since Kim Jong-un took power, overseas workers have been monitored more strictly (Lankov, 2016b). These positions are highly coveted because North Koreans get substantially higher salaries abroad than domestically, even with the harsh work conditions they must endure when they are dispatched.

This being said, being an overseas labourer is a long-term plan if North Koreans want to use the economic benefits to take care of their families. The Central Committee Bureau 39 of the WPK, sometimes just called Office 39, is an organ of the party that is reported to ensure hard currency flows into the country for the regime. Overseas labourers are part of what they manage by having North Korean authorities get the payment for the whole team and then redistributing a portion of it to the workers. Managers can keep up to 90 per cent of the wages each dispatcher labourer should receive. Sometimes, their wages may be entirely withheld for months, and they may go in debt with their managers (Gyupchanova, 2018: 190). Thus, it is difficult for labourers to forward any sort of remittance to their families during this time since they are not only monitored and their freedom of movement is restricted, but their meagre salaries (if they are not withheld) go to paying for food or necessities. Still, they send whatever they can afford (Chestnut Greitens, 2014: 57).

Shifting focus to illegal emigration, North Korean women may find it comparatively easier to secure jobs in China. These jobs are illicit on both sides: they necessitate illegal border crossings by North Koreans (whether temporarily or permanently), and they lack the required Chinese visa. As a result, Chinese authorities classify them as illegal economic migrants if caught (Interviewees 5 and 12, 2022). This means that while their salaries are significantly higher than those in North Korea and the possibility of sending money back to their families exists, some individuals opt to return to North Korea to deliver the money directly, as reported by KINU (Lee, 2006: 45). Yet, in this context, there is a risk of being repatriated back to North Korea by Chinese authorities. The repercussions of having left can include a period of up to 15 years in mobile labour brigades (*rodong dangryeondae* in Korean) or a long-term prison-labour facility (*kyohwaso* in Korean).

Alternatively, if the person is suspected to have been trying to go to South Korea or been involved with Christians, they may be sentenced to death or political prison camps (*kwanliso* in Korean) (Scarlatoiu, 2023).

North Korean women are in high demand, so to speak, similarly immigrants are in many contemporary capitalist countries. Sassen (2002: 258) links the phenomenon of 'feminisation of survival' with the human trafficking industry, which has contributed to the hypermobility of women and how they fund remittance-sending. Besides the sex industry, migrant women also find jobs in low-paying jobs conducted without contracts. Migrant women are thus stripped of rights that regular citizens enjoy and offered low-paid, low-skill jobs that regular citizens do not take because the salary is lower than it should be (Chomsky, 2007: xiii). Vulnerable groups such as immigrants and refugees face this contemporarily across the globe and, in China, North Korean women in Korean-speaking regions are both victims and beneficiaries of this. The jobs they are offered are assembling or factory work or labouring as cleaners or carers (Interviewee 12, 2022; Kim, 2014 and 2016). What they are promised, however, is jobs with good conditions and better salaries.

> "These women's status is very fragile in China. Before they escaped, they didn't know they would suffer outside; they imagined a better economic life in China because of the job possibilities, but it all ends up being a fraud. When they get to China, they end up being employed by Chinese in jobs that aren't good at all or sold as wives to elderly Chinese men, with whom they end up living and having children." (Interviewee 5, 2022).

Moreover, whereas they may be approached while in North Korea and offered service or factory jobs, these people who are seemingly recruiters may end up being sex traffickers. Thus, North Korean women are extremely vulnerable to them and the low-paid jobs that may allegedly 'employ them' tend to become being sold as brides or doing live pornography (Interviewee 12, 2022). North Korean women are sought after because China has a shortage of women (Martínez García, 2019: 60). North Korean women may have left North Korea and gone to Chinese cities to work in restaurants or factories. Work opportunities for women relate to their subordinate social position which entails a more concealed work location (inside a factory, inside a karaoke house, within a private home, and so on). This keeps them safer from Chinese authorities than their counterparts. These North Korean men have a limited repertoire of work opportunities that are manual and outdoors (such as farming and construction). Because of the high visibility, they are in graver danger, especially with their potential limited Chinese language skills. So, they tend to work temporarily, save money, and border-cross back to North Korea (Kook, 2018).

But in China, because of the one-child policy, there is an overabundance of men. Because of this, some 'bad' brokers are actually 'traffickers' (*inshinmaemaebum* in Korean) (Kook, 2018: 129) set up to sell women and may approach them at the *jangmadang* directly in North Korea or even in China (Interviewee 12). There are times when even the Chinese police are involved in the coercion and selling process (Yoon, 2019b: 19-20). Whereas this is not the case universally, women who

are recruited or fall victim to human trafficking (voluntarily or involuntarily) tend to be first-time migrants, meaning that they are the first individuals to become migrants within their households. This is because they may have no means and nothing to pay the brokers if they had aspired or intended to leave North Korea, the only thing they can offer is their body (Interviewee 20, 2022). Some of the women who fall victim to this are minors, for example, with little possibility to have money saved up. Women sought after for trafficking are mostly between the ages of 12 and 29. However, some who are above those ages are also sold off (Yoon, 2019b: 17). Interviewee 13 (2022) describes how brokers, often women brokers, are involved in this type of trafficking:

> "There will always be first-timers leaving North Korea. But, in general, people who are already out are the ones trying to get the ones they left behind outside as well. And this is when human trafficking becomes important too because these women are usually without means and they are the first of their families to leave. Chinese men look out for first-timers to buy as wives. So, there are female brokers – this is where you have many women working – scouting around trying to find the right candidates. Some North Korean women know this is what's happening, and they go with it, some are deceived. Usually, these women brokers go and see, and because they are women themselves, the North Korean women who are trying to run feel more comfortable around them." (Interviewee 13, 2022).

Becoming mobile this way is not always through deception but a voluntary decision. North Korean women may not be exactly aware of what exactly it is to come to them, be it the type of job or working hours, the fact that there will be no contract to protect them, or the man they will be married off to. However, for many of them, it is the only ticket out of North Korea, and it offers better opportunities than what they may get in the country they are born (Interviewee 20, 2022). Some of these women have families in North Korea as well, yet they follow through to provide money to the household or save enough of it to get them out (Kim, 2014; Sung, 2023: 296). This entails that North Korean women who escape, regardless of how much it is planned or not, may be aware of the transnational networks that assist in remittance-sending, mobility, and even communication. Thus, to a degree, the possibility of distance motherhood or keeping in touch with the family (and supporting them) may quench worries of abandonment.

It is noteworthy to address the prevalence of human trafficking at the Sino-North Korean border as it has been an important reason for cross-border mobility. Both China and North Korea have been working on their ends as well as together to halt the practice from happening and North Korea punishes individuals involved in human trafficking (for example, cases E12-I-0897 and E13-I-2389 collected in NKDB's Visual Atlas, 2023, about illegal detentions due to this matter). However, the practice continues. International NGOs have been wary of taking an active approach on the matter beyond requesting for China to halt repatriations and for North Korea to stop detaining or terminating pregnancies for North Korean trafficking victims. Both North Korea and China want to stop the practice because, regardless of the human rights abuses happening, it gets North Koreans out of North Korea and into China. International human rights organisations have emphasised the role of China in protecting these victims and treating them as refugees rather than

putting a halt on human trafficking because, for many North Korean women, this is the only way to escape North Korea (US Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2023: 1:45).

Another work-related aspect of relevance in the gender and mobility nexus out of North Korea is the work one has when in the country. Women, when involved in the markets, are more in touch with smuggling and trading networks, which makes them more in contact with the overall web of illicit networks in the borderland (such as mobility brokers). This is mostly because brokers and smugglers work in their own field. Still, they work together for certain operations (Interviewee 6, 2022) that may require smuggling items and money from remittances, for example. Men, while not involved in the markets generally and, usually, being more under the supervision of others, have some exceptions. North Korean men who go to the army may have the chance to learn how to drive. Driving is a key element for many men in North Korea because not many have a driving license or know how to use a vehicle. Being a driver is very competitive because there are very few cars and many men who want to have the chance to get the job. Many pay bribes to get it because the North Korean regime has an academy for it and one can only go if they are recommended. Even if the man is a farmer and part of the Farmer's Union, where they could opt to drive a truck, they still need to get a driver's license from the national academy (Interviewee 2, 2022).

> "If men can drive, they have an easier life. If you are a driver, you have more contacts, more money for bribes, better sources, and a big network - this can all be used to leave North Korea. They know the networks involved in leaving and they know who comes and goes. But [still], it's an easy life and North Korea makes you popular for it [so they may choose to stay in North Korea]." (Interviewee 2, 2022).

The age component of moving out of North Korea is intrinsically linked to the individual's gender as well. At the same time, there are cases where North Korean migrants pay brokers to get their children outside of the country (Baek, 2016: 28, 229; Lee and McClelland, 2016). Children often escape with their family or one of their parents, or through becoming victims of human trafficking if they are 12 years old or older (Yoon, 2019b: 17). While the Ministry of Unification does not have statistics on the ages North Koreans were when they first left North Korea, and they only share data about how old they are once they reach South Korean territory, the average women are between 10 and 39 years of age (MoU, 2024). This correlates with the ages at which women are sold in China (Yoon, 2019b: 17) as well as the ages preferred for restaurant and factory work for North Korean overseas labourers (Gyupchanova, 2018), considering that after starting to work or being sold they must work at least a few years before being able to reach South Korea. For men, it is similar (MoU, 2024), which coincides with the first decade after their military service (and during said service).

4.3.5 Emigration Paths

4.3.5.1 Leaving North Korea Behind: The Legal Way

On paper, legal migration out of North Korea is possible. Whereas in other countries such as South Korea individuals can decide on migrating permanently on their own accord to another destination, North Koreans do not have this luxury. Legal migration occurs in a limited number of paths that include diplomacy (for example, foreign ambassadors), exchange students, or overseas labourers (restaurant workers, miners, hackers, and so on). In reality, those who have access to coveted international positions are either elites (when it comes to diplomat positions and student exchange programmes) or have a good *songbun* and a good track supporting the regime (for workers) (Gyupchanova, 2018).

How do remittances play a part in this type of migration? Whereas bribes can be paid to increase the chances of being selected as an overseas labourer the aforementioned conditions still need to be met. These are coveted positions due to the salaries North Koreans can amass during their periods abroad, even if the North Korean regime keeps a high percentage of their actual salaries (Scarlatoiu et al., 2022; Yoon and Lee, 2015). Since one of the criteria to be considered for the roles is to have a good track with the regime, remittance-sending would act against the condition. Thus, if anything, being a recipient of remittances may act against legal mobility and be a migration blocker. This is exacerbated because, upon the return of the overseas workers to North Korea, the households are put "under strict surveillance for at least three years" by the Ministry of State Security (Scarlatoiu et al., 2022: 3). Hence, if these workers had sent remittances back to the household and someone else within the family attempted to become an overseas labourer, it could potentially wage against their prospects. North Koreans yearn to have these to become remittance-senders for future-making projects to support the family for a few years since legal migration out of North Korea is always time-limited. Hence, remittance-sending becomes a pull or reason to aspire to leave, but when it comes to ability, it hinders the chances to go.

4.3.5.2 Domestic Travel to the Border Areas

Illicit emigration from southern provinces of North Korea is not as common as leaving from the regions near the border with China. The northern provinces have, to some extent, become the epicentre of change in North Korea due to the prevalence of smuggling, trade, and border crossings in the borderlands. As a result, physical remittances, such as goods and medicine, are more easily transported to North Hamgyeong than to the southern regions. Communication is likewise easier in the borderland because Chinese networks can still be accessed through Chinese devices (that can be either smuggled in or sent by family members). Chinese cell phones are not as useful in the southern provinces, yet communication can happen through intricate networks of brokers who use the 'kissing' procedure with phones. The downside is that it takes longer, and it may require more agents involved, and thus it can be more expensive. The same goes for receiving physical remittances.

Remittance-receiving North Koreans in regions far away from the border have additional migration barriers starting with a different knowledge base of what to expect from the outside. Whereas watching K-dramas and overseas media is part of the new normal in all of North Korea, it is still more common in the northern regions. Word-of-mouth information and overseas media exists, but it is more difficult to transport flash drives all the way down to South Hwanghae than it is to smuggle them directly into Chongjin. Remittance-receiving, especially regarding to social remittances like pictures and other types of communication, helps build a base knowledge that can support the emergence of emigration projects. In this context, social remittances become key to enabling potential future migration.

Household members abroad can make all the difference in these areas because they can provide information about the steps to migrate in a region where emigrating is less frequent than in the borderland. They are not only a testament that migration can also happen, but they can provide their experiences and details (such as networks or steps to follow) on how to escape North Korea. This information is crucial for North Koreans seeking to migrate, as access to reliable knowledge about escaping is a significant enabler. Two other critical factors are possessing capital and having a job that allows for mobility. Money is particularly vital, given the restrictions on freedom of movement that North Koreans face even within the country. Whereas it is possible for a North Korean to get a permit to visit a relative in another province, if the goal of the individual is to escape, they may not want to put the relative under surveillance if the person suddenly goes missing. Still, these permits are not automatically approved if one can prove they have family in other regions. In these cases, bribes go a long way (Han et al., 2017). Financial remittances can support paying these bribes to reach the borderland.

The other element is being mobile because of work. Previously, this study has presented how interviewees noted how coveted and complicated it is for a North Korean to learn how to drive. As Interviewee 2 (2022) denoted, those who work as drivers have a comfortable life with higher pay that affords them bribes but also expands their networks. Similarly, Interviewee 4 (2022) referred to how North Koreans in the train business enjoy a similar predicament. This is not necessarily because of the money, but because their job already involves travelling through North Korea and, because of their careers, they are effectively free to move domestically. The job makes it easier for them to expand their networks and sources of information which later on makes it easier to escape.

In the two cases, remittance-receiving can be an asset not only for information about how to do this and to put them in contact with the right people, but also for the financial flows involved. Cash remittances can cover bribes needed to become a party member and to receive letters of recommendation required to obtain a driver's license, a position in the army where the individual may be taught to drive or to become a train conductor or staff. Thus, remittance-receiving is relevant in these regions because it may set apart the idea of migrating from being a dream to a potential reality if the individual belongs to a household with someone abroad. This starts with sharing reliable information and how-to explanations to reach the borderland and the next steps.

Financial remittances and networks are the key elements to cover for bribes domestically to make the first domestic move that precedes emigration.

4.3.5.3 Border-Crossing to China

Border-crossing to China is a crucial point in the emigration journey of North Koreans. The following sub-sections will introduce the different paths prospective migrants use to escape North Korea successfully and reach their chosen destinations. The way in which remittances enable these pathways will be underscored. Carling's (2002: 21-22) research on Cape Verde included but did not focus on the meso-level, which includes transnational networks and practices. In contrast, the present thesis underscores the influence remittances have on emigration journeys out of North Korea, and the transnational level (connections, networks, practices) is crucial in successfully crossing the border to China.

Beyond crossing the border, the nature and dynamics of migrant communities abroad shape the transnational activities that link migrants to each other and to North Korea. Bidet (2013) examines the challenges North Korean migrants face in building formal and informal communities in their host societies, noting that feelings of exclusion can limit connections and even drive new migrants away from established groups due to stigma by association. Nonetheless, some migrants acquire knowledge of transnational practices through Hanawon centres, where they interact with fellow North Koreans, while others integrate into ethnic communities (Interviewee 7). As Baek (2016) highlights, these communities engage in a range of activities, from student initiatives to activism and advocacy. Furthermore, transnational activities by migrants include sending items and information to North Korea, which lowers costs and reduces migration risks (Denney and Green, 2018). For example, Shin (2019) identifies distinct transnational practices followed by migrants in New Malden in the UK. Within this enclave, members of the conservative group collaborate with transnational human rights networks, while those aligned with the local settlement group focus on promoting North Korean pride. These diverse transnational activities underscore the interplay between remittances, migrant networks, and the broader migration journey, from the initial border crossing to life in the diaspora.

Now, these practices involve connecting migrant communities with other migrant communities, while other transnational activities, such as sending information and money, support chain migration. This is because contact information and migration know-how are shared. As authors such as Faist (2000) and Elrick and Ciobanu (2009) indicate, migrant networks are key to sustaining chain migration through reciprocity, solidarity, and engaging with transnational networks that are migration enablers (such as brokers). The table below shows the transnational networks at the meso-level that participate in and facilitate border crossings from North Korea to China.

Table 5. North Korea's meso-level networks

Network	**Impact**
Migrants (family, friends)	Provide information, contacts, social capital, and resources to those in North Korea. This impacts aspirations as it has potential

	to improve perceptions of life outside and provides resources to cover the cost of abilities.
Illicit trading networks (smugglers and brokers)	Smuggle information, foreign media and other foreign items to trade (for example, cell phones, radio devices), and social and financial remittances.
Illicit networks (human smugglers and brokers)	Offer escape services from North Korea to China or from China/North Korea to South Korea (through the underground railroad or through plane).
NGOs and Christian missionaries	Assist North Korean migrants reaching South Korea through the underground railroad with assistance from illicit networks. The networks cover migration costs.
Human traffickers and recruiters	Traffickers select North Korean women for the sex industry or to marry Chinese men (voluntarily, forcibly, or deceitfully); recruiters find North Koreans for jobs with bad conditions and cheap wages that Chinese citizens do not want to take on.

Sources: Compiled by the author as an overview of the networks at the meso-level and their impact migration as examined in the literature and theoretical review

4.3.5.3.1 The Human Trafficking and Work Recruitment Paths

North Koreans may cross the river to reach China as a potential final destination in various ways. North Korean women may opt voluntarily to be human trafficked to China which can lead to being engaged in the sex industry (prostitution, adult chatroom, or cam work) or married off to Chinese men. NKDB's (2023) database holds 4,247 cases of human trafficking. These numbers come from self-identified individuals who have reached South Korea. This side of the China dimension is complicated to crack because, on the one hand, North Koreans are illegal immigrants in hiding. On the other hand, human trafficking victims, whether they are voluntary 'victims' or not, are not registered anywhere. The numbers of the actual North Korean women who reach China this way is suspected to be very high (Kook, 2018), especially considering the percentage of women who reach South Korea. The women who become involved with human trafficking unwillingly are either kidnapped by networks set up by Han Chinese (Kook, 2018; Yoon, 2019b) or tricked by people pretending to be job recruiters promising work opportunities in China (Kook, 2018: 129).

Interviewee 13 (2022) points out that this emigration path is more commonly taken by first-time migrants or, in other words, individuals who do not have any other migrant within their households. This is due to various reasons, one being that China has a population issue in which they lack men and, thus, North Korean women are in 'high demand' and therefore are actively sought after (Kim et al., 2009: 161-162). Another one is that, as Interviewees 11 and 20 (2022) denoted, little is a prerequisite for this mobility option other than being a woman. They do not need to have money saved up or other means, they can offer their bodies.

The previous section Legal Mobility in North Korea has examined different opportunities that North Koreans can exploit to leave North Korea behind beyond human trafficking, such as work in the care or construction industries in China. North Koreans are recruited for these types of jobs by brokers in North Korea. Thus, while some brokers who offer jobs may be human traffickers, it is not all of them. Those migrants who become successfully employed in China have, however, illegal employment and thus must remain in hiding. Female workers, usually involved in the care or service industry, are often hidden within homes or restaurants and thus are not in immediate danger from Chinese authorities. However, male workers work in construction and farming and, therefore, are visibly outside and more at risk.

Victims of human trafficking and illegal workers face similar risks of being caught by Chinese authorities and potentially repatriated to North Korea, which has been reported to lead to detention, forced abortions (for pregnant women), and death (NKDB, 2023). There is also the additional risk, of course, of being caught upon border crossing by North Korean guards, dying while crossing the river, and, ultimately, being tricked into going to China for a job that does not exist and forced into prostitution. Regardless of this, for many individuals who lack the means, to sell their bodies (be it as wives, cheap labour, or for the sex industry) it is the only way to become mobile.

How do remittances play a part in this path? Social remittances contribute to the knowledge of whom to contact. This can translate into knowing which broker may be a so-called 'bad' broker (Kook, 2018: 129) or which brokers are trustworthy and may even give better jobs. Similarly, North Korean migrants may either still live in China and can offer some sort of safe haven or introduce the prospective migrant to a support network (distant relatives, *Joseonjeok*, other North Korean migrants, and so on). Social remittances can contribute to building up expectations of what is to come and prepare the individual for the steps to take, such as how the process of crossing the river will be. If the person is crossing without a broker, the best time and spots to cross the river from either because there is less security, or it is easier to transverse.

These portions of the migration process can be influenced by the information migrants give. In the North Korean case, chain migration functions as a social process based on kinship and ethnicity. Migrants lower the costs of escaping by providing trustworthy information demonstrating solidarity (Faist, 2000: 195-196) and reciprocity (Elrick and Ciobanu, 2009: 101). Most importantly, migrants have kept chain migration active throughout the years (Green and Denney, 2018) and it lowers risks for North Korean migrants. Liu's (2013) theory about strong and weak ties is relevant here. Strong ties, such as the primary household, will prioritise safer options, as opposed to weak ties (such as acquaintances) that will offer solutions that are more innovative, in other words, less tested. An example of how strong ties work is that migrants cover escape fees or arrange escape for their family members using brokers they know or trust (Interviewee 3, 2022).

In addition to social remittances, financial remittances can contribute to this in two ways: bribes and broker fees. For those who cross on their own, either taking blind leaps of faith or following advice or information received from others, bribing guards contributes to crossing without being detained or harmed. The rest of North Koreans, be it those who follow brokers or even those who

are kidnapped, have the bribes covered by the person guiding them (or taking them). This being said, broker fees are paid to support border-crossing to China, at the very least. And, even for those North Koreans who pay fees to be transported to South Korea, broker fees cover the initial bribes to border-cross and they may pay for other expenses. But brokers do not follow one single model in which they run their trips, some of these agents may require the North Korean to incur payments for their food, car trips, medical needs, or even bribes if caught abroad (Interviewee 12, 2022).

Remittances play a crucial role in facilitating safer emigration from North Korea. While non-receivers can still attempt to emigrate, they face higher risks of being caught during the crossing or while in China, or of falling victim to brokers who deceive them with undesired or unexpected outcomes. In contrast, remittance-receivers are more likely to have access to reliable transnational networks that can help secure their journey and potential stay in China. China is, for many, a destination country when they first cross. But brokers sell the idea of reaching South Korea either before the first crossing or upon reaching China, this is how they keep the escape routes and their businesses functioning (Interviewee 4, 2022). Thus, China can potentially be a stopover for North Koreans who will move on to South Korea afterward. Remittance-recipients may be aware of this and be put in contact with compassion-driven organisations like NGOs or churches that will offer a safe haven, further financial support, or help to reach that final destination. Regardless of whether North Koreans reach China as a final stop or a stopover, financial remittances contribute to paying fees involved with border-crossing and potential future expenses that will contribute to the time in China (bribes, broker fees, transportation, medical bills, and so forth).

4.3.5.3.2 The Compassion-Driven and Profit-Driven Networks Path

Compassion-driven networks are what migration literature has deemed as the rescue industry (Hernández-León, 2013: 25-26). They are often involved in assisting North Koreans who are already in China to reach another third country (Interviewees 12 and 13, 2022), usually South Korea. There are occasions when particular groups such as Christian organisations may consider assisting known North Koreans who are Christian to escape from North Korea, however. These instances are facilitated when relatives of these North Korean believers in North Korea tell Christian groups about them (Kim, 2008). Faith and beliefs exist separate from remittance practices. Yet, in North Korea, where religion is persecuted, Bibles and other religious texts are not available publicly (CSW, 2016: 10). While initiatives like FDFF and other compassion-driven groups send flash drives to North Korea that may include Bibles or other religious media (CSW, 2016), migrants may send Bibles in Korean to their North Korean relatives (Baek, 2016). Thus, if North Korean remittance-receivers become acquainted with religion through items sent from abroad, these beliefs can potentially become an ability to connect them to Christian groups that will fund and assist in their escape to and from China.

In practice, when Christian groups contribute toward the escape of an individual to China, they work with brokers. North Korea's profit-driven networks include brokers that deal with transnational remittance-sending, communication, and escaping the country, and because of this

North Koreans call them ‘helpers of North Koreans’ (*talbuk doumi*, in Korean) and ‘their only hope’ (*yuilhan huimang*, in Korean) (Park, 2023: 103). The previous section has explained there are regular escape brokers and job recruiters. Still, some of them may be ‘bad’ brokers who are not providing the service they offer (for example, human traffickers tricking victims). Migrants who communicate with their relatives can share their contacts and experiences with them, including trustworthy brokers, but also which brokers are to be avoided (Denney and Green, 2018: 3).

Snel et al. (2020) define agents in the migration industry as those transnational actors crucial in people’s mobility. Brokers are the main agents in the North Korean migration industry, they run lucrative, profit-driven businesses that help North Koreans with various transnational services. These services require steep commission fees that cover bribing North Korean and Chinese authorities but also provide benefits for the individuals conducting an enterprise that is quite dangerous (Park, 2023). In North Korea, illegal border-crossing, smuggling, or being identified as a human trafficker can lead to detention in labour camps or even execution (NKDB, 2023). The fees vary according to the service provided by the broker, with the more expensive packages involving a third destination other than China. Brokers, however, offer border-crossing services in which they assist North Koreans in getting to China and leave them there (Interviewee 15, 2022). Even for individuals who escape with urgency or because they reach their breaking point, knowledge contributes to planning and the decision-making process and, ultimately, the peace of mind that migration is possible, and one can survive it without being detained or harmed. As Interviewee 13 (2022) denoted, North Korean migrants who wish to have their families reunite with them in another country have the big task of reassuring them that if they made it out safely, so can they. Non-recipients and individuals without transnational contacts are, in contrast, left to their own devices with potentially limited means, information based on hearsay, and networks that can be less reliable (in other words, less professional, less efficient, or human traffickers).

4.3.5.4 The Paths to Reach a Third Country

The pandemic lockdowns put a halt on border-crossing and other transnational activities taking place on the Sino-North Korean borderland. The impact of the closure is reflected in the drop in numbers of North Korean migrants arriving in South Korea which went from 1,137 and 1,047 in 2018 and 2019 to 229, 63, and 87 in 2020, 2021, and 2022 respectively. In the early post-pandemic years, there has been a slight increase, with 196 North Koreans entering South Korea in 2023 and 181 as of September 2024 (MoU, 2024). These numbers do not reflect only the rise in difficulty to leave North Korea, but also the complications in traversing China, flying out of the country illegally (especially considering booster requirements and lockdowns that other countries may have had during the time), and crossing borders in South-East Asia. Interviewee 20 (2022) reflects that while activities diminished, they survived to a very minimal degree and broker services became devastatingly expensive.

Brokers and other services across South-East Asia that had assisted North Koreans became mostly dormant though, as Interviewee 5 (2022) notes, a re-opening of the border may resuscitate them or bring new brokers in since there is money to be made in the business. Remittance-sending has been impacted by the closure, raising the question of how the brokers in China and the brokers in North Korea settle the accounts once North Korean households have received the money. Whilst not an answer to the query, Interviewee 2 (2022) explains commission during the time rose so high, that some North Korean migrants refused to send money back home as to something akin to a protest. Interviewee 18 (2022) exposed that, during the pandemic, commissions not only rose, but the 'real commissions' (understood as the money that is subtracted once the family receives it, regardless of what the brokers promised to the migrants) could raise to be 60 per cent.

This section examines how remittance-receiving, social and financial, contributes to reaching South Korea as a potential final destination country as well as other third states (Japan, the US, and so on). The analysis looks at pre-pandemic migration as remittance-sending has dropped to a minimum and border-crossing has become virtually impossible after January 2020. Interviewee 20 (2022) pointed out that escapes were, to a degree, still possible, fees had multiplied. NKDB (2022b) noted how the migrant-North Korean household remittance behaviour had changed with North Korean migrants noting for the first time that they were receiving financial remittances rather than sending them during the pandemic.

4.3.5.4.1 The Underground Railroad from China to South Korea

It is estimated that 100,000 to 400,000 North Koreans are hiding in China (Kirkpatrick, 2006; Seymour, 2005: 16; Song, 2015: 401). According to South Korea's Ministry of Unification (2024), 34,078 North Korean migrants have successfully reached South Korea. These figures highlight two key points. First, relatively few North Koreans emigrate compared to the country's estimated population of 26,069,416 in 2022 (World Bank, 2024). Second, for many North Koreans, China serves as the final destination rather than a stopover to a third country. China as a stopover is, to a degree, common for migrants because of various reasons. These include the high fees required to reach South Korea, how migrants are not generally aware of which destinations are available to them, and how brokers promote further migration only after migrants have successfully reached China. However, the journey through China is filled with challenges, as North Korean migrants navigate both social and legal vulnerabilities in an unfamiliar environment

Amid these challenges, the role of networks becomes crucial in enabling North Koreans to navigate their journeys, including those that are compassion-driven or profit-driven. Compassion-driven groups include Christian and human rights groups such as churches (Interviewee 5, 2022) or LiNK that assist in rescues to bring North Koreans into South Korea. Profit-driven networks include escape brokers, for example. North Koreans can pay brokers directly to go through the journey and reach South Korea this way. For this, North Koreans may have the money already when leaving North Korea (either from remittances, savings, or capital gathered through jobs or the *jangmadang*); save the money while in China through work; get loans or escape on credit with the

agreement to pay the brokers once North Koreans receive South Korea's resettlement money; or have it prepaid for them by relatives abroad.

Remittance-receiving contributes to how ready North Koreans can be to take on the additional journey from China to South Korea after crossing the border. Financial remittances can not only cover broker fees but also additional expenses that may not be covered within them such as bribes or medical expenses. The Laos-Thailand route used to be the most commonly taken by North Koreans and North Koreans would be required to pay certain fines to Laotian authorities if they were caught and wanted to be released to continue their journeys (Song, 2015: 405). Interviewee 15 (2022) noted: "if the escapees are caught, that's it." Brokers are businessmen providing services for benefit. North Koreans who are caught yet have money on themselves can cover these fines that may be incurred during transit. Financial remittances can be this needed capital, and social remittances can contribute to the individuals knowing this extra money may be required if the journey goes pear-shaped.

Financial remittances can also be capital for individuals who live in China until they leave, contributing to living expenses or rent, for example. Most importantly, transnational communication with loved ones provides knowledge of which cities may be safer to live in and put people in contact with networks of other North Koreans or sympathisers that can assist in finding jobs. For North Korean women who are involved with human trafficking, having information about which broker can get them to South Korea and knowledge of the fees can contribute to how and when they start planning how to begin this leg of the migration journey. First-time migrants may have learnt about the emigration process through hearsay or not at all. As multiple interviewees noted, most North Koreans do not know their destination possibilities nor how to get there. In this case, they need to rely on word-of-mouth information, individuals who approach them, or their own research, and it is safe to point out that in-detail data about the routes and steps to escape is not something brokers make public on the Internet or to people. Hence, individuals who have household members already abroad have the upper hand when it comes to emigration chances from North Korea to South Korea.

Contacts, knowing the right networks (compassion-driven networks, networks that can offer safety or jobs, and so on), and having enough capital make all the difference between successfully getting through to South Korea or not. As Interviewee 17 (2022) explained, whereas NGOs like LiNK have a balanced number of first-time migrants or others who already have household members abroad, North Korean migrants help put the organisations in contact with those who need help. Remittance-sending thus contributes to having enough means to cover expenses *en route* and while saving money in China (if applicable) before setting toward the underground railroad. Additionally, they put the North Koreans in contact with people who will potentially keep them safe, give them a job, or with the brokers or compassion-driven networks that will ultimately take them to South Korea.

4.3.5.4.2 The Odd Ones Out: The United Kingdom, the United States, and Other Third Countries

For many North Koreans who leave the country, China becomes their final destination. This is not only due to the circumstances of their escape and efforts to make a living (or in some cases, being victims of human trafficking) but also because they often lack knowledge about other potential destinations and how to reach them. As discussed in earlier sections, reaching South Korea is promoted in various ways: brokers offering their services, K-drama and K-pop portraying an aspirational image of life in South Korea, and propaganda from North Korean migrants showcasing their success there, among others. Thus, if North Koreans settle in a destination other than China, it is usually South Korea. This section will address how North Koreans reach other countries and how remittances support these different paths.

North Koreans have a unique status as migrants, as they can automatically settle in South Korea and receive resettlement assistance (Interviewee 5, 2022). However, many are unaware of this support when they first escape and only learn about it later, often after reaching China (Interviewee 12, 2022), which is where they become acquainted to the possibility of going to other destinations. For example, compassion-driven networks, such as Christian groups, may not only assist North Koreans reach South Korea but also other countries. And, likewise, North Koreans can go through the underground railroad with a broker to request asylum in different foreign countries' diplomatic bodies. This can also be done in, for example, non-South Korean embassies and consulates in China. However, the Chinese government has raised security surrounding them and it is increasingly difficult for North Koreans to reach them, as Kim (2008) retells in his memoir. The increased security adds a layer of risk because Chinese authorities, if they caught the North Korean attempting to request asylum, could potentially be repatriated back to North Korea.

Compared to the number of North Koreans in South Korea and China, those residing in other countries are few. This raises the question of how and why they end up elsewhere. North Koreans with relatives or ties in Japan used to receive remittances including money, and pictures, but also items like TVs, cameras, or bicycles (Interviewee 10, 2022). As Kang Chol-hwan's memoir presents, many families that received such remittances were more affluent than those who did not, yet it affected their *songbun* status (Kang and Rigoulot, 2000). The emotional ties and family history as well as the idea that in Japan you can make a living by working hard, as opposed to the few opportunities for social and financial mobility in North Korea, contribute to the raising appeal of migrating there (Bell, 2021). Thus, North Koreans with said ties can potentially start with enough capital to emigrate or more capital than the average North Korean and know of people in Japan (such as third-generation North Koreans). While this does not directly contribute to accessing profit-driven networks that facilitate migration (particularly since remittances from Japan were legally transferred into North Korea) it does provide financial support that enhances mobility. Additionally, knowing that one has relatives abroad or that there is a community of (North) Koreans in cities like Osaka helps North Koreans form an idea of life in Japan, influencing their decision-making processes.

Two of the other communities of North Koreans are located in the US and the UK. Some other, smaller ones are scattered in Australia and other European countries. Before leaving North Korea, individuals were not only not aware of how to get to such countries, but they also did not know about them. Migrants who engage in transnational communication and outside media, including movies, can contribute to how North Koreans see these countries and if they consider going there. All in all, the lack of information they have about them makes most North Koreans believe that there is little difference from going to the UK, Japan, or Australia. Since outside information has seeped inside of the country, North Koreans are now more aware of North Korea's economic situation in comparison to different countries. Thus, when they think of other states, the general consensus is that they are richer and living there offer more freedoms, regardless of how little they know about them. Receiving remittances from family members who actually live in these countries provides factual information about what residing there is like. While financial remittances are always the same regardless of where the individual sends them from, social remittances are what makes the difference as they provide knowledge that helps not only build the idea of living in, for example, New Malden, London. It also provides information about how the relative migrated there. This is relevant because the journey differs from 'simply' going to China or taking the most usual path to South Korea.

The journey can involve requesting asylum in China or another third country after traversing the underground railroad; or first resettling in South Korea and then choosing to re-migrate to another country to reunite with a relative who lives there. While this information can be provided by compassion-driven and profit-driven networks, the possibility of reaching these third countries is not as common a route as it is to go to South Korea. Social remittances such as information and networks to contact; financial remittances to fund the trip, fees, and expenses; and the emotional connection (at times powered up by international communication that acts as social glue between the mobile and the immobile), enable North Koreans reaching third countries. First-time migrants, on the opposite side, can potentially find the option more daunting as, other than Japan, the North Korean presence is negligible in comparison to China or South Korea. The networks of support and resettlement aid can be potentially smaller and, even if the idea of capitalism and meritocracy is attractive to North Koreans as Interviewee 19 (2022) mentioned, they would still need to learn the language first and potentially transfer their education there. Having relatives there who can support the North Koreans is a reason to go through the struggles of moving to, for example, Australia, as opposed to the easier path of going to South Korea or remaining in China.

4.3.5.5 Luxury Escapes and Children Retrievals to South Korea

North Korea's underground railroad is not the only way for North Koreans to resettle elsewhere. Wealthier North Koreans can afford the more expensive schemes that involve brokers producing counterfeit passports to then fly to South Korea. Lee Sungju retells the steps of his escape from North Korea and arrival to South Korea by flying out of a Chinese airport alone, dropping his fake passport, and identifying himself as a North Korean upon arrival at Incheon Airport to begin then the interrogations that precede obtaining citizenship and starting resettlement (Lee and

McClelland, 2016). As his case shows, brokers function as enablers and guides for the process but do not follow the North Korean until the end. Just as brokers would abandon the North Koreans if they were trapped by authorities in China or the underground railroad, once the North Koreans are past the airport gates, the service is then over. This type of path involving flying out of the country is the alternative to the riskier endeavour of reaching a state that is, to a degree, less hostile toward North Koreans seeking a new (legal) home. The documentary *Crossing Heaven's Border* (2009) by Lee Hark Joon shows the contrast between the two journeys. A group of North Koreans are going through the underground railroad, for example, and some are hurt and detained before they reach Thailand. The film also follows a woman who had escaped through human trafficking and flies directly to South Korea, rather than the risks and dangers experienced by the group, she surprisingly boosts about how the airport staff wishes her a good trip to Seoul (Lee, 2009: 42:30).

While not without risks, flying to South Korea is the quicker and more convenient way to obtain citizenship there and reach safety. However, the service is considerably more expensive. Reaching South Korea through the underground railroad used to cost, prior to the pandemic, between USD 2,000-3,000 dollars per migrant. In contrast, the 'luxury packages' cost between USD 10,000-15,000 dollars per person (Ford, 2018: 123-124; Kirkpatrick, 2012: 12; Lankov, 2013: 116). An interesting note about Lee's aforementioned memoir is that he escaped as a minor (Lee and McLelland, 2016). He was one of the many children left behind in North Korea but in his case, he was eventually reunited with one or both of their parents. As Lee describes, children are retrieved by brokers (pretending to be relatives) who locate them and take them out of North Korea to then bring them to their families.

Chain migration involves North Korean migrants helping their families leave. Not only through promoting the idea and trying to ensure the family members that it is possible to escape successfully (Interviewee 13, 2022), but it can also involve paying for the fees and arranging it all with profit-driven networks (Denney and Green, 2018; Lankov, 2004: 865). This is especially useful for family reunification when it requires retrieving children who may not be able to receive remittances or arrange anything on their own. The interplay between demand-driven and profit-driven transnational groups enables migration, maintains escape routes, and lowers costs for North Koreans to escape (Coggins and Torghabeh, 2018: 57). The interaction is what enables North Korean families to slowly reunite in South Korea, as noted by the examples posed by Interviewees 3 and 6 (2022).

Interviewee 10 (2022) explained that North Koreans do not require links abroad to become rich or make money. Thus, first-time migrants who have made the right connections and gathered enough capital can potentially afford the luxury escape packages to fly to South Korea. A luminosity-based study estimated that the annual GDP per capita in North Korea in 2018 was USD 790 dollars (Crespo Cuaresma et al., 2020: 2). This notes that, while becoming wealthy is a possibility, for regular North Korean citizens receiving money from abroad or having their escape pre-planned and prepaid by relatives is a more feasible possibility. Similarly, it is challenging for North Koreans in China to accumulate the capital needed for a 'luxury' trip to South Korea, as their status as undocumented, illegal immigrants limits them to low-paying jobs. This is where remittances

become significant. Social remittances can connect individuals with the appropriate networks, which may even help them secure better job opportunities with higher salaries in China. Financial remittances can contribute to the broker fees for more expensive trips, which are far less affordable than travelling through the underground railroad.

4.3.6 Chapter Conclusions

Carling (2001, 2002, and 2018) examines migration as a two-step process in which people's mobility is broken down into the step of wanting to emigrate and then the one in which they have the ability to do so, as provided in Chapter 3. Certain personal attributes or possessions, be it knowing how to drive or having a passport, have the potential to be abilities or capabilities. Capabilities are what individuals could use to emigrate if they wanted to, while abilities are a means to something (Carling and Schewel, 2018: 956-957). In other words, when there are aspirations to become mobile, individual skills and what they own become abilities. As the author examines, "the immigration interface of potential destinations and his or her individual level characteristics" determines whether a prospective migrant is able to become mobile or not (Carling, 2002: 92). In this sense, the two-step migration process has two different results for aspiring individuals: voluntary mobility and involuntary immobility.

Individual characteristics, what Carling (2002) identifies as the micro-level, are crucial in emigrating. This chapter has addressed different traits that influence migration, including how party membership involves mandatory meetings and activities that limit free, unmonitored time for individuals, reducing their chances to escape unnoticed. This connects to the idea of organisational life and the relevance of gender. It is not a coincidence that 72 per cent of North Korean migrants who reach South Korea are women (MoU, 2024). This is due to a variety of reasons. Unlike North Korean men, women are often excused if they skip work or after-work 'mandatory' activities as it is usually understood they may be involved in markets (Park, 2011: 165) or take sick leaves due to their periods (Gyupchanova and Zwetsloot, 2018: 34:30). Perhaps more importantly, before Kim Jong-un it was illegal for men to be jobless whereas being a housewife was allowed for women (Lankov, 2016a). Therefore, women can use these small freedoms to escape, border-cross, and remain unreported (Fahy, 2019; Park, 2011: 165).

Furthermore, the migrant's place of residence is crucial. Human trafficking, recruiting, smuggling, and all-in-all, anything that could be included under the umbrella of North Korean migration, occurs often in the provinces near the border: North Hamgyeong, South Hamgyeong, and Ryanggang. These areas are simultaneously where the *jangmadang* are best developed as being at the periphery of the regime's control has given rise to more autonomy (Szalontai and Choi, 2014: 65). Subsequently, citizens involved in the *jangmadang* and smuggling have thrived there. Individuals who have become affluent or, to some extent, gained profit from the market economy have more chances to afford brokered escape plans and outside information from smugglers. The table below summarises how individual characteristics influence emigration.

Table 6. Abilities and micro-level characteristics in the North Korean context

Individual's characteristics	Abilities
Age	Higher effect on abilities among individuals aged 20-29.
Gender	Higher effect on abilities among women.
Place of residence	Higher effect on abilities if individual is located in the (North/South) Hamgyeong or Ryanggang provinces.
Socio-economic status	Lowering effect on abilities if individual is less affluent.
Employment	Lowering effect on abilities if individual is a man and employed in the official economy.
Family ties abroad	Probably higher effect on abilities in connection to chain-migration.
Receiving remittances	
Party membership	Lowering effect on abilities if the individual is a party member.

Sources: Compiled by the author adapted from the selected individual characteristics from Carling (2002: 120) for Cape Verde and changed to include elements that may influence North Koreans

This section has discussed how remittances, social and financial, are mobility enablers and, thus, lead to successful mobility. The table above includes family ties abroad as a potential element that contributes to higher chances of escaping successfully. This is because of social and financial capital that is contributed to the potential migrants that have family and connections abroad. In combination with financial remittances, having household members abroad can be important for the process of the intangible value of social remittances which can help decide the time, the method, and the direction of migration (Sharma and Cardenas, 2020). For example, North Koreans with links to Japan have an emotional connection to the country (Bell, 2021) that contributes to selecting a destination country and planning the escape and emigration accordingly. Similarly, having family members in other locations facilitates selecting a destination. Kin- and socially-based communities abroad supply prospective migrants with resources and contacts that enable migration.

North Korea does not have a migration culture and emigration happens mostly illegally in manners that are not common knowledge for the average North Korean. Hearsay can provide basic knowledge that can be truthful or not. Individuals with family members abroad have an advantage, even if they do not receive remittances, as they are aware that mobility is possible. Those who do receive remittances and contact their family members abroad about matters other than financial remittances being received or do not have access to information about living in different countries; knowledge about how to escape; contact details or knowledge about who can arrange their escape or assist (such as brokers); tips about how much money to carry or complications that may arise (needing to bribe people in North Korea or paying fees when travelling through the underground railroad, for example). The information lowers the costs of emigration for the family members, maintains escape routes functioning, also fuels chain migration out of North Korea (Coggins and Torghabeh, 2018: 57). Steep costs, bad brokers, lack of awareness about the migration process and destinations available, and so forth, constitute migration barriers that can put the aspiring migrant in risk of being unsuccessful in migrating (or being repatriated back) (Carling, 2002: 92). Emigration paths out of North Korea to other countries exist within their immigration interfaces, each within its barriers (for example, challenges specific to reaching Japan or South Korea as

opposed to remaining in China). Remittances contribute to reducing migration barriers. In addition, families abroad can arrange and pay for a brokered escape from their end.

Financial and social remittances have an obvious impact on the path of an individual successfully leaving North Korea. On the one hand, money covers fees and expenses; on the other hand, information prepares the individuals for the trip, contributes to decision-making, and helps the migrant choose a destination country. While North Koreans can potentially have access to such information even if they do not have family abroad, North Korea is a low-trust society in which such knowledge may not be shared openly. There are additional layers of risk in trusting those outside the household due to being hyperbolic information, untrustworthy, or lies that can be potentially linked to human traffickers. Individuals with family abroad who receive remittances are more likely to receive trustworthy information from those who have firsthand experience with successful mobility.

4.4 Migration Deterrents

Knowledge is a double-edged sword when it comes to migration aspirations. On one hand, it can create a favourable image of life in other countries and make the process of escaping and relocating seem easier, safer, or more feasible than it actually is. On the other hand, while financial remittances contribute to the comfort of households in North Korea, social remittances may alter the perception of life abroad or the migration journey itself. This section examines how remittances can prevent migration aspirations from forming or shift the decision-making balance in favour of voluntary immobility. The previous section has observed the paths available for North Koreans to escape the country and how remittance-receiving minimises risks, expands resources, and lowers capital. The risks in escaping North Korea are an important layer of why North Koreans may choose to stay but they can be mitigated by the encouragement of having support from household members who have successfully relocated (Interviewee 13, 2022). Remittances provide psychological reassurance by demonstrating the feasibility of migration and reducing its perceived and factual risks through reliable information and practical resources. The section that follows looks at how social and financial remittances contribute to the life of North Koreans who are in North Korea and how this impacts mobility aspirations.

NKDB (2018: 187) notes that the average amount sent to North Korea amongst remittance-senders is 2,778,800 KRW, a large amount for a country where the average official salary is between 5,000 and 10,000 North Korean won (KPW) a month (Lankov, 2022). Perhaps most importantly, this money is not received by families in KPW, but in foreign currencies, primarily US dollars and Chinese yuan, which are more commonly used in North Korea (Interviewee 7, 2022). The value of foreign currency is higher than KPW because they are more fungible and easier to spend in North Korea (Interviewee 15, 2022).

The amount of money may seem large and can contribute to the comfort of the household, but much of it is lost in paying bribes (Interviewee 19, 2022). It is noteworthy to mention that remittances support the economic well-being of the family and mitigate the effects of economic

shocks (Shastri, 2021). Hence, remittance-receiving lessens economic stress and improves life satisfaction and psychological well-being because of the financial aspect of it as well as the ability to maintain ties with household members abroad (Ivlevs et al., 2019). In the North Korean case, remittances are kept within an average range, so the household does not seem conspicuously wealthier in the eyes of the authorities or the *inminban* (Interviewee 18, 2022). North Korean migrants are savvy about what life in North Korea is like and, for the most part, the bigger motivation to provide financial remittances is to support the family's survival. Because of this, what is sent is rarely a big quantity (Boadella-Prunell, 2024). Financial remittances are not something that can usually skyrocket a household to become wealthy nor do they provide enough to fund entire businesses. Rather, North Korean migrants offer enough to cover (or partially cover) living expenses, housing-related costs, fuel for the house, food (Interviewee 18, 2022), and market products (Interviewee 16, 2022).

Another element to mention is entrepreneurship and how easy it is for remittance receivers to become *donju* or wealthier because of businesses. Financial remittances can cover part of business expenses like staff salaries or migrants can send supplies or items to be used at workplaces (Interviewees 7 and 8, 2022) such as acupuncture needles (Park, 2016). Remittances contribute again to general comfort in conducting the activities and do not cover it all. Large estimates or comparisons of the average amount of remittances sent to North Korea can give the false impression that escaping a potentially poor or less wealthy life is an easier path. However, this is not the case. As Interviewee 10 (2022) denoted, there are plenty of economic areas in North Korea that can make North Koreans wealthy without remittances. And remittances can only cover as much, since large remittance amounts would make the family a target for the authorities (Interviewee 18, 2022). The interaction where large amounts of money or expensive items are involved is not in the dealings between brokers and receiving families. Still, it is between the brokers in China and those in North Korea when they settle accounts (Interviewee 17, 2022). In other words, the financial benefit for the family that can be invested in the business is not necessarily significant and it may have little impact on the economic well-being of the general community as well, even if the business they partake in involves providing micro-loans.

To examine the financial benefits of remittance-receiving, the survey asked migrants whether any members of their household had stopped working due to receiving money from abroad. The results showed that 94.20 per cent of respondents indicated no one in their household had stopped working, while 5.80 per cent reported that someone had (Boadella-Prunell, 2024: 16). Hence, evidence that North Korea faces a moral hazard or dependency problem with remittance-sending has not been found (Alba and Sugui, 2011) since even though the household may request money (Park, 2023) they continue to work. Thus, while remittances contribute to the comfort and survival of the family, they can also provide additional luxuries, such as free time (by paying bribes to avoid attending Self-Criticism Sessions) or protection from certain punishments if someone is caught engaging in illicit activities. North Koreans are socialised into a society with its restrictions and, as Interviewees 11 and 19 (2022) have pointed out, they are humans who learn how to live their happiest lives and trust the people surrounding them. They build their lives there and that is why for many *donju* or remittance-receivers who may have the connections to leave North Korea,

many do not. Like any other North Korean, they have learnt how to live in North Korea and virtually everyone they know is there. The same happens all around the world with households who decide not to migrate, regardless of remittance-receiving, because the majority of their family and friends reside where they are located (Ermisch and Mulder, 2019; Mulder, 2018). Therefore, when this context is combined with the increased comfort provided by remittances, these financial flows can actually become a mobility deterrent.

Social remittances are received through pictures, messages, and items sent from abroad. As noted earlier, Interviewee 17 (2022) highlighted how North Korean migrant propaganda may either conceal the negative aspects of life abroad or exaggerate the positive elements to counterbalance the impact of any unfavourable aspects (such as isolation or discrimination). In contrast, immobile North Koreans may either lack the experience to understand the downturns of life abroad or hold onto the understanding that living in North Korea can be narrowly or significantly worse.

As explained above, remittances can contribute financially to the family's well-being in North Korea. Another way migration may be deterred through remittances is through communication and emotional connection. Through remittance-sending kin-based links are nurtured and act as social glue, reinforcing an emotional connection that would be lost due to physical distance. Thus, it creates a translocal space for mobile and immobile people to share ideas, one that is created through transnational communication and located between 'here' and 'there' (Vertovec, 1999: 450). The need for emotional connection comes from both directions but, in the migrant's side, communication and remittances come from isolation where they are (Tedeschi et al., 2022) and the sense of duty. As the communication and assistance flows continue, this sends the message to the immobile individuals that the family member is making enough money to help and well enough to have regular contact. This can trigger life-making projects, but it can also deter migration by increasing emotional comfort through human connection.

This thesis so far has examined how social remittances have a larger potential to contribute to the emergence of migration aspirations due to how they shape migrant life perceptions. Financial remittances, however, can be mobility enablers and migration deterrents. Whereas the monetary contribution is not as significant to catapult the receiving household into a rich status or invest in entire new businesses, they support the family's living expenses, quality of life, survival chances, and business expenses (if they have one). Because North Koreans, like any other person, are socialised into believing their country is normal and into following its rules, they live their lives in normality and build them with social and family interactions that are also North Korea-based. Since North Korea does not have a migration culture, the tolerance or content that North Koreans experience with their lives in the country with the addition of remittance flows adds another layer of comfort that may deter migration.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Thesis

This thesis has examined how remittances to North Korea from North Korean migrants impact the aspirations to emigrate from the country and the ability to do so. Scholarship on North Korea has focused on a variety of trends within the country, including *jangmadang*, emerging social classes, the feminisation of migration, and outside information dissemination. As the number of North Koreans who have escaped the country has grown, more information has come through about the informal networks facilitating and enabling trade, migration, and communication between those who are and those who are not mobile. As such, this thesis has stemmed from the notion that while North Koreans have become increasingly mobile after the famine, emigration is still not common nor generalised across the country. The paths followed by North Koreans to leave the country and find a new home are well-known, and some of the elements that pull them to other countries, such as freedom or food (depending on the time period), have been identified. As access to outside information increases in the country, this study bridges the gap between these broader, impersonal phenomena (such as trade and outside media) and the more personal, reliable social capital involved. In doing so, this thesis has examined how North Koreans who receive financial and/or social remittances have a fundamentally different perceptions and experiences of migration than those who do not.

This research has presented migration as a two-step process in which potential migrants first develop the desire to migrate, and then they realise that migration. However, this process may not be successful for everyone, and some individuals may end up being involuntary immobile. Various elements at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels interact to create aspirations for emigration through projects that can only be achieved abroad, alongside deterrents such as comfort. These factors can aid the prospective migrant access a migration path (such as getting a student visa). This study has looked into the projects and paths that lead North Koreans abroad and identified how receiving remittances intrinsically changes both steps. This has been done so though answering the following research questions: Do financial and social remittances prompt aspirations to leave North Korea?; and Is mobility enabled through social remittances? By answering these, this research has aimed to address the role of financial and social remittances as mobility deterrents, drivers, or enablers.

The literature review of this thesis has explored how existing scholarship traces the origins of North Korean international informal migration, which started during the famine years, and how it developed until the pandemic lockdowns. It has further connected mobility with the gradual formation of transnational networks (profit-, compassion-, and demand-driven networks) and looked into how the groups, involved in moving people across the border, became interconnected with other networks. Some of these networks are engaged in smuggling, bringing outside information inside North Korea, and facilitate remittance-sending (Baek, 2016). The literature review has examined the logistics of North Korean migrant-led transnational activities, particularly the sending of financial and social remittances. It has underscored how financial remittances can contribute to escaping North Korea by covering fees (Kim, 2020; Lankov, 2004: 871), and how

transnational networks have maintained chain-migration (Denney and Green, 2018) and human trafficking (Kook, 2018) active. Lastly, this section has presented how, in the absence of MFIs, remittance-receivers have used financial remittances for entrepreneurial activities, such as becoming money lenders, instead of spending the capital on living or migration expenses (Jung, 2018; KINU, 2015: 14; Lankov and Kim, 2008: 67).

Following this review of North Korean migration, Chapter 2 shifts focus to existing scholarship on the nexus between remittances and migration, transnationalism, and migration frameworks. Traditional migration has focused, perhaps obviously, on migration, not staying. These theories suggest that potential migrants perform cost-benefit calculations to decide between immobility or immobility. These assessments include elements such as economic opportunities, which can be the chance to send remittances (Mahmud, 2020; Sassen, 2002; or Van Dalen et al, 2005), emancipation (Groutsis et al.), family proximity (Thomas and Dommermuth, 2020), and so on. Authors like Rozelle et al. (1999) underscore how microfinance-driven economic development, which is intrinsically small and limited to the household, can be a migration deterrent. At the same time, Van Dalen et al. (2005: 378) point out that remittances convey the message that "it pays to emigrate" to family members, encouraging emigration.

The implied rationality behind classical migration theories naturally raises questions in the context of North Korea: why do North Koreans stay? Scholars such as Dash (2020) and Imran et al. (2020) examine the dependency on material and immaterial remittances from migrants, which provide comfort for recipients. Shastri (2021) further highlights how financial remittances mitigate economic shocks for the receiving households. While comfort and relief may deter migration, Mahmud (2020) and Lubkemann (2016) speak of cases where migrant households actively aiming to send at least one family member abroad for its economic benefits, ensuring that migration occurs within the household. As more outside information has seeped into North Korea, citizens have access to more data to use in making cost-benefit calculations concerning migration. Nevertheless, the number of North Koreans entering South Korea[18] remains low[19]. Does this suggest that, in their calculations, North Korea always appears to be better than the potential destination? Or are North Koreans behaving irrationally? These questions lead to an exploration of a growing trend in migration theory: immobility theory, which observes why individuals cannot or choose not to become mobile. The literature review concluded by introducing three migration theories that include immobility and their application to the North Korea case: displacement in place (Lubkemann, 2008), motility (Houtkamp, 2016; Kaufmann et al., 2004; and Creswell, 2008), and the Aspiration and Ability model (Carling 2001 and 2002; and Carling as Schewel, 2018).

[18] As this thesis has previously indicated, South Korea remains the country with the largest North Korean migrant population, yet it is important to re-emphasise that North Koreans in China are illegal immigrants living in hiding and there are no official reports about them. Estimates that have been previously cited identify them to be between the tens or hundreds of thousands in the 2010s.

[19] As of March 2024, 34,078 North Koreans have been reported to enter South Korea (Ministry of Unification, 2024) in contrast to the little over 26 million that comprise North Korea's total population in 2022 (World Bank, 2024).

Building on the previous section where immobility-acknowledging theories were introduced, the thesis proceeded to outline the methodology used in this explanatory case study. The research has applied Carling's (2001 and 2022) Aspiration and Ability model through a qualitative approach, incorporating in-depth semi-structured interviews with North Koreans and individuals working on issues related to North Korea or with North Koreans. It has also reviewed published materials, research presented at live and recorded events, and a short qualitative survey conducted with North Korean migrants in South Korea. The goal of data collection was to understand the impact of remittances on various aspects of life in North Korea, including economic, political, and social spheres, while also assessing their influence on mobility and outside perceptions.

Chapter 4 presented the case study for this research, which traced the migration process followed by North Koreans and applied Carling's framework to evaluate the impact of remittances on this process. The chapter is structured around four main sections: the baseline of average North Korean life, migration drivers (aspirations), migration enablers (abilities), and migration deterrents. Therefore, the case study began by introducing the foundational base, focusing on the lives and experiences of regular North Koreans who do not receive remittances. It then examined migration drivers, exploring how remittances contribute to the development of migration aspirations by enabling the creation of migration projects. This analysis revealed that social remittances introduce notions of freedom and prosperity, prompting individuals to envision better futures for themselves and their families, which helps develops life-making projects. Remittances also influence family reunification projects, driven by emotional connection. Financial remittances play a crucial role, offering the economic security needed to undertake these migration endeavours, and this research showed how they support escape projects for those facing persecution by North Korean authorities.

The chapter next addressed migration enablers, assessing how and when social and financial resources transform into abilities that facilitate mobility paths. The study presented two primary paths, the legal option working abroad temporarily as an overseas labourer, diplomat, or as a student, and the illicit routes involving border crossings, human trafficking, or brokered escapes. The effect of financial remittances is perhaps obvious as it covers fees, bribes, and other payments. Social remittances, in contrast, provide essential knowledge (such as what to expect, who to trust, and who to contact) combined with the reassurance that the information comes from someone who has successfully escaped and is trustworthy. Finally, the chapter analysed migration deterrents, finding that financial remittances provide economic stability and comfort without fostering dependency. Social remittances strengthen emotional support and act as social glue, both of which can discourage migration.

The following sections of the Conclusion will directly address and respond the research questions, specifying how remittances influence the aspirations and abilities of individuals to leave North Korea. This concluding chapter will proceed by discussing the findings, empirics, and finally, the contribution and opportunities for future research.

5.2 Addressing the Research Questions

Existing literature connecting transnational migrant communities and chain migration has examined how reciprocal relationships and support networks linking the home country to the host country positively impact migration. Mobility is valued by both the individual and the home country for reasons such as social mobility, political prestige, an opportunity to earn income, or as a means to support the family during economic shocks. Both social and financial remittances contribute to these factors by influencing family dynamics, enabling households to use migration as a strategy, and improving the family's comfort and survival. Migrants embrace remittance behaviour for various reasons such as maintaining emotional ties, fulfilling family duty (as parents or with filial piety), and effectively creating a space between here-and-there that connects the mobile with the immobile. This space connects individual migrants and migrant communities to the home country, which has a positive effect on chain migration by supporting prospective mobile people. This is done through kin and informal reciprocal ties in which people help each other through marriage for visas, finding jobs for them, providing loans, or lowering migration costs by providing the right information and contact details.

Migration has evolved, creating migration patterns, traditions, and cultures. North Korea's nature as an authoritarian state has limited the emergence of a migration culture where migration paths and methods are generally known by the average citizens. Remittance-receiving is complicated by sanctions affecting North Korea and South Korea's Anti-leaflet Law passed in 2020 which effectively blocks individuals in the country from sending anything to the North (including money and items). Sanctions and challenges affecting remittance sending are not unique to North Korea, yet the erosion of impermeability to outside information, coupled with the guarantee of South Korean citizenship for migrants, makes their mobility unique. This section observes how remittances influence migration out of North Korea within an authoritarian context. This context is characterised by migration patterns but no established migration culture, limited access to outside information, and challenges in communicating with migrants or receiving anything from them. The research questions posed by this study are: Do financial and social remittances prompt aspirations to leave North Korea? And Is mobility enabled through social remittances?

The answer to the first question is that financial and social remittances can potentially be migration deterrents and drivers. Financial remittances contribute to the family's survival and comfort and may even contribute to the economic well-being of the household. At the same time, money is not just money in the sense that it sells the idea that, outside of North Korea, one can receive higher incomes or buy a wider variety of goods. The messages, pictures, and media that migrants may send from abroad provide an image of other countries as freer, richer, and more meritocratic while, in North Korea, socio-economic mobility has its limits. Thus, life abroad can be more appealing not only to individuals but also when North Koreans think of their family's future. This creates the idea that pays back to emigrate, yet mobility is not without risks. In the decision-making process, North Koreans consider the dangers of migrating, losing the lives they have built, and the benefits of moving to another destination where their family member(s). Financial and social remittances bring emotional connection and comfort to the family both of which may play in favour of staying in the country and thus be migration deterrents. At the same time, they may act as migration drivers since financial remittances contribute to the North Koreans' certainty that they can afford the expenses needed for the trip. Most importantly, social remittances create a positive image of life abroad and convey that migration is not an intangible goal. Whereas the outside may not be

portrayed as a utopia, the image of life abroad is more desirable than remaining immobile in North Korea.

Lastly, looking into the second question, this research has shown how social remittances enable migration out of North Korea. Neither type of remittance is necessarily required to escape the country or resettle in another country. Still, social remittances provide information that contributes to successful voluntary immobility for any migration path partaken. For human trafficking, social remittances contribute to knowledge of what the prospective migrant will experience and how to engage with the relevant networks for the women choosing to follow this route. For the other means of escaping that involve brokers, while the use and value of financial remittances may be obvious, social remittances contribute to knowing other uses of money (such as bribes and extraordinary expenses). Social remittances bring in information about which networks to contact or avoid, suggestions on how to avoid being caught by the authorities before reaching the destination, and a general knowledge of the paths available after border-crossing. Non-receivers rely on hearsay and may border-cross without knowledge of the next steps or the risks they may face afterwards, some of them facing deportation to North Korea multiple times before they get to resettle. North Korean remittance receivers are better prepared and equipped for successful voluntary mobility.

5.3 Remittances and Mobility Aspirations in North Korea

Migration outcomes result from the combination of aspirations and abilities, which lead to voluntary or involuntary ends. Individuals are socialised into the societies they grow up in and, eventually, migration aspirations may arise from both exogenous and endogenous sources. In migration literature, these can also be called pull and push elements which are what pushes people out of their home country and what pulls them into another one (Lee, 1966). Looking into the North Korean context, pulls may be the relative ease of gaining citizenship in South Korea or the shared culture and language, as well as capitalism, opportunities, and freedoms. Push elements vary through time (Song, 2015). During the Arduous March, push elements included hunger, After the mid-2000s, push aspects diverged to wanting to escape North Korea's restrictive society, lacking equality because of one's *songbun*, or desiring to practice one's faith without fearing persecution. This thesis has shown how remittances have shaped migration and driven North Koreans outside of the country as drivers and enablers of mobilities, but also deterrents of it. This current section presents the arguments and findings concerning aspirations and, thus, the first research question of this study (Do financial and social remittances prompt aspirations to leave North Korea?).

Social remittances contribute to how North Koreans imagine life as emigrants in other countries. First-hand information from relatives who are already migrants provides facts and tips about how to leave successfully, the right networks to contact, and knowledge to set their expectations of what will come after border-crossing. This information can involve key points such as whom to bribe and which brokers to avoid. This erodes the 'leap of faith' quality of emigrating from a country without a migration culture, transforming it into something akin to a feasible plan. The information provided also assists in the decision-making process of emigration, which comes before planning the actual escape. In this context, the more knowledge individuals have about the

escape process and what follows, the better they can weigh the risks and benefits of leaving for location B (China, Japan, South Korea, amongst others) are preferred to staying in location A (North Korea). In contrast, individuals with no relatives abroad may rely on information that comes through hearsay and word-of-mouth information, including outside media, which may be hyperbolic and emphasise aspects of living abroad that are not necessarily accurate. Thus, remittance receivers face fewer risks when emigrating.

Financial remittances contribute to aspiration emergence because the individuals feel migration is more attainable if they have more capital. Yet, one of the most important effects of this type of remittance is the message that if the migrant sends money, it is because they can make money outside. Financial remittances carry social capital with them as well because they convey the message of abundance and opportunity. In other words, money is not just money. This idea, the capital, and the rest of the messages and information fathered by social remittances can contribute to the development of migration aspirations. Once an individual develops migration aspirations while still in the country, involuntary immobility begins.

Moreover, North Korean households can receive not only money, but updates from migrants travelling the world, getting an education, and getting jobs or promotions. These serve as the foundation for how remittance receivers imagine living abroad. Households can be similarly enticed to become mobile with the idea of reuniting with family members and the knowledge that there are other North Koreans or networks of support in the destination country. The ideas and information support the emergence of projects that individuals want to pursue through migration. These include life-making projects, such as seeking freedom and better opportunities for themselves and their families; escape persecution projects for those who fear retribution from the authorities; and family reunification projects, which have the goal of reuniting with loved ones living abroad.

In contrast to those who become involuntarily immobile because of their immobility and migration aspirations, voluntary immobility is still a possible outcome for remittance receivers. This is the case for those who, in balancing the benefits and dangers of migrating, find that remaining in North Korea is more desirable. There is not one single explanation for this but, as Chapter 4 has examined endogenous elements that deter migration aspirations from arising such as socialisation and hypernormalisation, familiarity, comfort, and potential risks for the family left behind. These individuals may have the right capabilities to take certain emigration paths (for example, young unmarried women near the border areas who can voluntarily emigrate through human trafficking). However, when there is a lack of aspirations because the person prefers staying in North Korea, remittance receivers may choose to overlook the enticement of living abroad and remain immobile.

Son and Lee (2017) examined how social remittances shared by migrants include their experiences escaping North Korea. As Interview 13 of this thesis remarked, communication with successfully mobile individuals is crucial for potential migrants as they provide certainty and security. Becoming mobile stops being an intangible idea that carries risks and transforms into a possible, feasible plan. As such, North Koreans do not need to wait until there is a breaking point (Fahy, 2015). Instead, it can be a process planned through social capital and the comfort of a connection with a successful migrant. At the same time, involuntary mobility can still occur to individuals

regardless of remittance-receiving in the cases in which North Koreans are kidnapped by people involved in human trafficking or migrants arrange the escape of family members from their end.

Remittances in the form of information, contacts, and capital can be the deciding factor in the mobility outcome of North Koreans. Information enables decision-making and knowing the steps of how to escape and what to do next; contact details assist North Koreans in planning and realising border-crossing and then reaching a new destination country or getting a job there; and capital provides for necessary fees and expenses such as bribes needed in North Korea or the underground railroad. Non-receivers are more vulnerable to 'bad' brokers when in North Korea and to deportation when in China, remittance-receivers have higher chances and support in achieving voluntary mobility. More on this will be covered in the following section, which examines the findings concerning abilities. However, possessing financial and social capital significantly influences how individuals perceive emigration as a viable option. Thinking of mobility as feasible is the first step to planning migration projects.

Financial remittances and social remittances can also be migration deterrents. This research has not found signs that the moral hazard problem is prevalent in North Korea because the money sent is not substantial enough to support the entire household economy, this capital still provides comfort. Migrants send remittances due to guilt and duty in part because the family is losing an income when the individual leaves. By providing remittances to compensate for the missing salary, the household gains additional financial resources while having one less mouth to feed. This money can be used for living costs, fuel, extraordinary expenses, education, and so on. But, also, they can be invested in the micro-economy of the family to fund entrepreneurial activities or for the families to provide micro-loans to neighbours for a commission. Thus, they sustain the economic health of the left behind and provide comfort in a context familiar to the receivers.

Remittances create an image of the North Korean migrant life that is more desirable than staying in North Korea as they highlight having more freedom, opulence, and wealth. Unlike non-receivers who get their knowledge from hearsay or word-of-mouth sources, those with relatives abroad can accept the first-hand information and updates they receive as factual. In other words, migration is not a goal that is theoretically possible, but a feasible reality that relatives have carried out. If the individuals consider the risks of leaving and still want to escape, then they become, at least temporarily, involuntarily immobile. The outside world may have an appeal, but staying in North Korea may be more attractive to others. If the comforts and familiarity in North Korea are more desirable, North Korean remittance receivers may choose to remain immobile voluntarily unless there is a breaking point such as the authorities persecuting them.

5.4 Remittances and Mobility Abilities in North Korea

The previous section examined this thesis' findings in relation to aspirations. In this section, the arguments following the second research question (Is mobility enabled through social remittances?) are presented. The North Korean regime has implemented various measures to prevent the emergence of a migration culture, including various challenges such as limitations on freedom of speech, freedom of movement (internal and external), and access to outside information in the country. Legal emigration is possible for North Koreans who can show a good track record

with the regime and have the right *songbun*. However, this mobility is temporary and individuals who emigrate legally are under strict supervision during and after their time abroad. In contrast, permanent migration is pursued through illicit means such as border-crossing to China or going through the DMZ to South Korea. Having said this, the regime's domestic politics effectively block North Koreans having a clear understanding of life abroad or how to navigate the emigration process. Both pieces of information were not common knowledge during the late 1990s. Yet, they have become widespread through word-of-mouth and the circulation of outside media. Mobility paths have been established and evolved through the interaction of profit-, compassion-, and demand-driven networks, yet these paths are not common knowledge among the general North Korean population.

Remittance-receiving in North Korea means that the individual at the receiving end has ties with someone abroad. This may be a migrant from before the Korean War, such as Korean who migrated to Japan and remained there and keeps in contact with those in North Korea, or someone who has emigrated out of North Korea. The average North Korean may think of emigration as an intangible idea. Remittance receivers, however, have access to a capital of information about paths to become mobile, suggestions on how to do it undetected, access to networks (or knowing who to avoid), sources of income, and so forth. In contrast, non-receivers may take a leap of faith based on hearsay in a process that is risky both before border-crossing and after. These dangers include repercussions if caught in North Korea, China, or when going through the underground railroad. Moreover, remittance receivers can make informed decisions when deciding whether mobility is desirable and how to realise it in the safest, most efficient way. Perhaps most importantly, North Korean migrants are a live example that emigration is possible, and through the social and financial remittances they provide, they reaffirm leaving North Korea pays back.

This thesis has taken the Aspiration and Ability Model by Carling (2002, 2003, and 2018) to examine the two steps of North Korea's mobility, wanting to become mobile and then executing this mobility. The framework approaches migration acknowledging that an individual is satisfied with a voluntary process, be it being voluntary immobile or mobile. This desire to stay or leave, as well as the feasibility of migration, is the result of the interplay of elements at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. These include the emigration environment and migration traditions within a country, the networks involved in migration processes (such as refugee communities abroad and brokers), and individual characteristics such as the person's *songbun* and gender. When a North Korean remittance receiver wants to become mobile, remittances can be what makes the difference in becoming voluntarily mobile or involuntarily immobile. This is because remittances in the shape of information, contacts, and financial capital are the most useful when leaving the country. Information enables decision-making, allowing North Koreans to weigh why reaching destination B is more desirable than staying in North Korea to accomplish a project (for example, family reunification and life-making projects). Once this is decided, North Koreans develop mobility aspirations but remain involuntary immobile, becoming prospective migrants. This is when the second step of the mobility process occurs, and migration is realised by seizing or making an opportunity.

Different abilities make different mobility paths available for North Korean prospective migrants. Information received through remittances contributes to planning and strategising the escape and can drive North Koreans to bribe the right people (such as neighbours or work colleagues) and

obtain travel permits. Migration out of North Korea and its paths, including border-crossing, human trafficking, or brokered escapes have been maintained and reconditioned as the transnational networks involved with North Korea have evolved. Brokers have emerged to provide new services that have become in demand as the North Korean migrant community has grown. These include communication brokers, remittance-sending brokers, brokers retrieving children from North Korea to bring to China, and escape brokers. Their work has intertwined with compassion-driven groups who hired brokers for their escapes or to send certain items to North Korea, as well as with demand-driven networks (migrants) who invest their capital in getting their families out and, thus, chain migration. On top of this, remittance-sending brokers located in China and North Korea interact with smugglers and traders within the country and piggyback in the informal economy by impacting the supply chain and money in circulation. This has contributed to the survival of the remittance-sending practices as the brokers in North Korea have more options to amass wealth. Similarly, communication brokers have emerged as they facilitate remittance-sending and behaviour with brokers helping North Korean households contact migrants so they can request money or items from those abroad. Lastly, money can provide the capital to pay broker fees, bribes, and extraordinary expenses that are incurred during the migration journey and requested by the networks. In short, knowing the steps to, identifying the right people, and having the financial resources to cover expenses are key factors that enable North Koreans to achieve successful voluntary mobility. Emigration is not without risks and there is a luck factor to it, but remittance-receivers are better prepared for the journey.

In contrast, non-receivers who rely on hearsay and the money they make on their own in North Korea can face more migration challenges due to lack of information, not knowing who the 'bad' brokers are, and potentially having fewer means. Whereas the human trafficking path is still available for North Korean women of the right age, capital and networks (and beliefs) remain an important factor in accessing other paths such as the underground railroad or being helped by NGOs. The lack of information, networks, and means may diminish the chances to emigrate out of North Korea, making it impossible for the prospective migrant to border-cross successfully and safely. After border-crossing, North Koreans are vulnerable in China due to their status as illegal economic migrants and rely on networks or who they are with (be it brokers, a Chinese husband, or an NGO) to follow their next steps. Non-receivers may not have anybody. This is because the cheapest escape out of North Korea involves a broker assisting with border-crossing and nothing else. Receivers potentially know the next steps or whom to contact then, which makes them less vulnerable to Chinese authorities and, thus, deportation to North Korea, which would leave them with an involuntary immobile outcome.

It is noteworthy to mention the case of elderly and young family members left behind. As this study has shown, relatives can hire brokers to retrieve elderly relatives or young children, and human traffickers are also involved in kidnapping, both these cases may trigger involuntary mobility. Abilities are the means to accomplish mobility as intended, while capabilities are the same abilities without the corresponding intent. In these two particular cases, the capabilities that contribute to involuntary mobility are not linked to remittance behaviour, but rather to factors like the individual's gender, having family abroad, and their age.

Voluntary mobility is the result of wanting to emigrate and then having the right abilities to follow a migration path. For example, family reunification projects can potentially come with a pre-

decided destination country which can be China, which merely involves border-crossing, or it can mean South Korea or the UK, which involves different steps, fees, and waiting times. Having 'the right abilities' for a North Korean who originates from the southern provinces of the country entails being a man with the right job and a driver's license to have the opportunity to be mobile within North Korea. Without this ability, one may face additional migration challenges to reach the border, regardless of their ability to pay for the broker fees. Money can cover these fees, but it also needs to cover bribes for individuals who may notice your escape and, potentially, the authorities that can give travel permits, for example. Money and networks are the two most coveted elements to support one's escape. The right network can assist border-crossing and finding a safe place and employment in China. The right broker may also be able to provide a North Korean with a counterfeit passport so they can reach South Korea. They can also take the prospective migrant through the underground railroad.

Remittance-receiving involves information about how migration takes place, the networks to contact or avoid, and the money to cover fees, bribes, and potential extraordinary expenses. Remittance receivers who do get enough money to pay broker fees may still take this path but in a voluntary, more informed way. Whereas prospective migrants may fear being tricked by 'bad' brokers who promise jobs in China but then turn out to be human traffickers, receivers may know this originally and take this opportunity of their own volition. This is relevant when considering individual characteristics such as being a young woman which makes the human trafficking path available for them regardless of financial capital.

Before the pandemic, migrants did not typically send money to their family members so they could escape North Korea. Money is often as much as to cover living expenses, yet it can be saved up or invested in ways that can then be used to cover fees, bribes, and other costs. Additionally, migrants can put their households in contact with networks that can assist in escaping North Korea and also in being safe in China, getting jobs in China, or reaching another third country. Remittance receivers are also more generally aware of how migration happens and what steps to take in the future while non-receivers need to rely on their research or what they are told. In their case, they are more prepared to be in China permanently or for a time and remain there more securely. Additionally, they have higher chances of having the capital to pay passage through the underground railroad to a third destination. Non-receivers, in contrast, face more risks not only to human traffickers but also to being caught in China or not being prepared enough to leave due to the lack of information and networks.

In conclusion, the impact remittances have on mobility out of North Korea is multifaceted. They contribute to pulling North Koreans outside by creating the idea that leaving is rewarding. And they deter receivers through economic and emotional comfort. At the same time, remittance-receivers have higher chances of becoming voluntarily mobile by using what they receive to plan, prepare, and contact the right networks. Whereas non-receivers, in contrast, may leave with limited information and may not know what steps to take after border-crossing to China. They may also not know if reaching another third country is an option, whereas receivers are given this information and have the certainty that migration is feasible. This thesis underscores the importance of remittances as both drivers and enablers of migration as they interplay with elements at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels to facilitate the development of mobility projects (family reunification, life-making, and escaping persecution). Remittances also serve as abilities to execute

migration projects by making certain paths available. This is done through providing social capital that helps make informed decisions, contact the right networks, and gain familiarity with the migration journey. Additionally, financial capital is crucial for successful voluntary mobility as it takes care of broker fees and other expenses. In conclusion, remittance-receivers have a distinct advantage in achieving voluntary mobility and reaching the desired destination country safely and successfully.

5.5 Implications and Future Research

This thesis contributes to migration studies and North Korean studies literature. Firstly, this study advances the growing body of transnationalism in migration and how remittances play a part in it while simultaneously breaking the mobility bias of migration literature. Studies have observed the relevance of solidarity and reciprocity-based networks between migrant communities and those left behind in triggering chain migration by providing post-migration support. In addition, they also ease the mobility journey and lower its costs through information, ideas, and financial remittances (for example, Piracha and Saraogi, 2017, and Sharma and Cardenas, 2020). This thesis has conducted an explanatory case study in an authoritarian context and offers a new perspective on how remittances can influence the mobility process beyond triggering more migration through chain migration or family strategies. It has shown how financial and social remittances can both deter and enable migration, and how they equip North Korean migrants with critical information for navigating migration networks and overcoming barriers. Carling's (2001 and 2002) Aspiration and Ability model has shown that, while remittances can create emigration projects by developing perceptions of living abroad, social and financial remittances can deter migration. Mobility is, therefore, more than a simple cost-benefit calculation where individuals compare two countries of residence. It is a dynamic journey shaped by human connection, economic well-being, and ambition, but also influenced by risk aversion and the comfort of familiarity with one's home and community.

North Korea's context is not unique, but it is characterised by various migration patterns and the ways in which transnational behaviours are conducted. Firstly, North Korea does not have a migration culture. While there are migration patterns that are commonly used to leave the country (brokered escapes and human trafficking), a migration culture entails that there are known paths or ways to engage in this phenomenon. Mobility out of North Korea and, particularly, permanent migration, is something that is pursued through illegal ways. Secondly, when North Koreans leave, the family may be punished through guilt by association. Having a family member abroad is something that North Korean households want to hide and communicating with them or receiving money or items from the migrants can raise flags about the situation to the authorities. Calling people in South Korea is, for example, illegal. Therefore, engaging with transnational behaviour among migrants is challenging due to the risks it represents. Unlike other regions where households can use migration for social mobility and rely on remittances sent by migrants abroad, this is not the case for North Koreans. Migration, communication, and income flows put the family at risk. Additionally, migrants cannot freely visit their family left behind for holidays or short trips, as this would put the individual and the household. And thirdly, North Korean migrants are unique because they are guaranteed a home in South Korea, unlike migrants from other countries who

may need to face long waiting periods and processes for visas and asylum. Not only can they obtain citizenship, but they also receive resettlement assistance.

The number of North Koreans scattered around the globe, including the estimated total in China and those in South Korea, is small if the demographics of North Korea are considered. However, existing research has observed that chain migration, at times called chain defection, is a phenomenon that is perceived in the patterns of how North Koreans migrate. This study has examined that a country without a migration culture and transnational linkages that are challenged can still maintain migration patterns and, these patterns and paths, are enabled through transnational networks. Profit-, demand-, and compassion-driven networks have developed through systems of bribes and piggybacking with smuggling and trading networks that work in North Korea to survive. The escape paths and the routes used by North Korean migrants are kept alive because there are profits to be made by the brokers involved, but also because migrants construct enticing ideas about 'the outside.' The average North Korean is socialised to understand the world in a certain way following state media and propaganda, as Baek (2016) poses, this is then challenged through outside media. There is an argument to be made that information coming from North Korean migrants themselves sent to their family members is the strongest propaganda a North Korean can receive about life outside. This is because messages about one's well-being, pictures, or updates about trips or job opportunities are shared and they are provided along with financial remittances that serve as proof that migrating pays back.

Moreover, the Aspiration and Ability model is a lens to analyse remittances that challenges the mobility bias of migration literature. It does not look at mobility as something that people who want to emigrate pursue, but it observes what can drive individuals to migrate while also examining what can deter them from doing so. Similarly, it looks at why some people are able to seize migration opportunities, and some are not, while also observing what can go wrong in the process through identifying migration challenges. This thesis has shown how remittances in a context like North Korea and the risks they entail are multifaceted and have diverging effects in the two steps of migration. While remittances create the perception that emigration is rewarding, they also provide comfort to the family left behind, with communication helping to maintain the emotional connection lost when the migrant leaves. As for executing migration, financial remittances cover bribes and fees, but social remittances reduce risks and lower costs of migration for the prospective mobile individual in comparison to the limited information and networks of non-receivers. Due to the lack of a migration culture and freedom of movement and speech, first-time migrants generally do not know what happens after crossing or possible destination countries. Remittance receivers are more prepared both in means and information contributing to a better planned, or at least envisioned, escape.

This study advances the debates about Asian remittance-sending behaviour and the micro-economy of the receivers where scholarship has divided migrant families between remittance-dependents and remittance-senders (Hoang and Yeoh, 2015; Khamkhom and Jampaklay, 2020; Imran et al., 2020). The North Korean case does not show the dependency syndrome (Imran et al., 2020) nor the social mobility observed in receiving households in cases like India (Bharti and Tripathi, 2020). This thesis has not found remittance dependency to be a widespread phenomenon in North Korea as the amounts of money sent to the household back home are closer to what an average North Korean would make. They are sent to cover living expenses and not to enrich the

family or fund entire businesses to, in part, keep the attention of the authorities away from the receivers. On the topic of remittances and micro-financing, interviewees disclosed that money can be used for businesses and for the receivers to be micro-lenders.

As mentioned, this research contributes to North Korean studies literature as it has examined financial remittances as an aspect that facilitates migration (Kim, 2016 and 2020; Park, 2021) and as a duty for the migrants (Park, 2023). This study has observed remittance behaviour by looking at the rationale and motivations of North Koreans who send modest amounts of money to households, not for migration purposes, but to cover living expenses. This thesis aligns with previous research that has covered financial remittances as something that facilitates escaping North Korea and completing the journey to another country. Moreover, it has provided an in-depth analysis as to how it supports this argument. As Lee and Kim (2022: 45) examined, North Koreans emigrated to Japan after having "experienced the power of remittances and the charm of connection." This thesis has broken down this power and charm, as well as the social capital carried through it to look at how exactly it influenced migration aspirations and the ability to become mobile. The analysis has gone beyond financial remittances to include social ones and examined why social and financial remittances may support mobility but may synchronously deter it. In this regard, Son and Kim (2017) specified social remittances could include information about how other migrants had escaped. This present thesis has expanded on this by examining how social remittances affect migration beyond the decision-making process and including how they reduce costs and risks for the potential migrants' journey.

Song (2015) traced how North Korean emigration has been shaped by the Arduous March, natural disasters, civil and human rights abuses, and natural disasters, showing how migrants seek food, freedom, economic opportunities, or a place to live that has not been affected by droughts. This research has examined how remittance-receiving has shaped the way North Koreans see other countries as destinations and how they perceive freedom. As such, freedom can be interpreted as a means to better the family's or one's life (through education, economy, or better rights); freedom to reunite with family members who left and cannot come back; and escaping persecution by North Korean authorities. This research shows how non-remittance receivers can have the same migration projects, yet the lack of trustworthy social capital from successful migrants can lower their chances to escape successfully without being caught. Remittance-receivers, however, have the upper hand in migration by having both the social capital and networks, and financial assistance to support their endeavours. Denney and Green (2018) referred to chain-migration out of North Korea. This thesis has expanded on this by emphasising how transnational activities and financial and social capital transferred from North Korean migrant communities to their families back home fuels this chain-migration.

A limitation noted in the section Research Limitations explained that data collection had rendered some evidence anecdotal. This encompasses intangible and unquantifiable data related to individual characteristics and how these influence the interplay between remittances and mobility. Examples of these characteristics include trust, sexual orientation, religion, and personality. Future studies could address what has been a limitation in this thesis by conducting longitudinal research to examine specific aspects of these characteristics and their connection to migration. This might involve interviews or focus groups with North Korean migrants on topics such as migration and religion, migration and sexual orientation, or the role of trust in the mobility journey. Participatory

research methods, such as migrant-led storytelling projects and ethnographic studies could explore these different topics and help identify patterns that are not easily quantifiable.

This study has covered remittance behaviour, transnationalism, and migration patterns out of North Korea up until the pandemic. Future research can involve longitudinal studies observing how these three phenomena have evolved during the COVID-19 lockdown in North Korea, if at all, and how they will develop after the re-opening of the North Korean borders, when profit-driven networks may potentially re-activate. This research has faced limitations such as access to North Korean migrants, it would be interesting to expand on how North Koreans communicate about living abroad from different locations (such as the UK and South Korea) and whether their families in North Korea actively express desires to leave. These projects could include how changing circumstances in North Korea, such as regimes or Kim Jong-un's attitude towards border-crossing or transnational communication have impacted remittance behaviour and mobility. Another interesting research that could be partaken with more access to either North Korea or with migrants who used to be remittance-receivers could involve the usage of remittances beyond living expenses and the extent to which they contribute to entrepreneurship. A quantitative study that could be completed by expanding this research would be observing the link between exposure to remittances and migration looking at gender. In other words, it would explore whether the gender of the sender and the receiver influences what is sent and how this affects migration. Finally, another interesting future project could be a comparative study analysing how social and financial remittances influence migration in other authoritarian contexts.

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Interviews

Interview 1 (2022). North Korean Migrant in South Korea. Pusan, South Korea. 9 October 2022.

Interview 2 (2022). North Korean Migrant in South Korea. Seoul, South Korea. 30 June 2022.

Interview 3 (2022). North Korean Migrant in South Korea. Pusan, South Korea. 8 October 2022.

Interview 4 (2022). Scholar at University A. Seoul, South Korea. 23 June 2022.

Interview 5 (2022). Scholar at University B. Seoul, South Korea. 21 July 2022.

Interview 6 (2022). Scholar at University C. Seoul, South Korea, online interview. 18 July 2022.

Interview 7 (2022). Scholar at University D. Seoul, South Korea. 4 August 2022.

Interview 8 (2022). Scholar at University E. United States, online interview. 26 July 2022.

Interview 9 (2022). Scholar at University F. Melbourne, Australia, online interview. 8 August 2022.

Interview 10 (2022). Scholar at University G. Vienna, Austria, online interview. 29 August 2022.

Interview 11 (2022). Scholar at University H. United Kingdom, online interview. 6 September 2022.

Interview 12 (2022). Author and Journalist. United States, online interview. 14 July 2022.

Interview 13 (2022). Researcher at International Organisation A. Brussels, Belgium, online interview. 12 August 2022.

Interview 14 (2022). Researcher and Author at International Organisation B. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, online interview. 4 July 2022.

Interview 15 (2022). Researcher at NGO A. Seoul, South Korea. 7 July 2022.

Interview 16 (2022). Researcher at NGO B. Seoul, South Korea. 5 August 2022.

Interview 17 (2022). Activist at NGO C. Seoul, South Korea, online interview. 22 September 2022.

Interview 18 (2022). Researcher at NGO D. Seoul, South Korea. 3 November 2022.

Interview 19 (2022). Researcher at NGO D. Seoul, South Korea. 18 October 2022.

Interview 20 (2022). Researcher and Activist at NGO F. Washington DC, United States, online interview. 7 September 2022.

Annex 1. Romanisation

This thesis is written in English and therefore uses romanisation for Korean terms originally in *hangeul*. The scheme used is the Revised Romanisation (RR) of Korean which is one of the most popular spellings used and hence more accessible. Furthermore, this research follows the traditional order of Korean names. Korean names consist of a family name that is followed by a given name that commonly has two syllables, which are romanised with a hyphen in between them when using the RR scheme.

These are the name orders and romanisation schemes that will be used in the thesis. Exceptions have been made when the individuals or English spellings of certain locations and words are popularly transcribed differently. Thus, this study writes the names of the latest South Korean presidents as Moon Jae-in and Park Geun-hye following the RR scheme and name order. Special cases are made for other names that have other popular transcriptions and orders, such as Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un, whose names would be written as Gim Jeong-il and Gim Jeong-eun using the RR method, or South Korea's first president, Syngman Rhee.

Annex 2. Survey Questionnaire

1. In which region have you lived the most? (Provincial Level)

2. What is your gender?

1) Male

2) Female

3. Your year of birth?

4. When was your final year of defection?

5. What is your type of employment?

1) Regular Employee / Full-time Employee (They're entitled to medical / employment insurance)

2) Contract Based Employee (their contract is less than a year nonetheless treated equally as regular employees)

3) Daily worker (No fixed period, they work when required i.e., construction site)

4) Self-employed (the one that employs more than 1 staff member)

5) Unpaid Family worker (works more than 18 hours in one week in family business without getting paid)

6) Economically inactive person (housewives and students)

6. Have you sent remittances? Did you receive remittances?

1) I sent remittances to N.Korea

2) I have received remittance while in N.korea

3) I received and have sent remittances.

7. (Senders) What have you sent? / (Receivers) What did you receive? (Q7 would be asked based on the answers provided in Q6).

1) Money

2) Letters, text messages, or cells

3) Others *This question is supposed to be filled out by the respondent.

8. If you sent remittances, were they enough to cover living expenses?

1) Yes, more than enough.

2) Yes, just enough.

3) No, not enough.

4) I'm not sure.

9. In N.Korea, before receiving remittances, did you want to leave N.Korea?

1) Yes

2) No

3) I'm not sure.

10. If you told them you were leaving, did you talk about remittances before escaping?

1) Yes, I promised I would send remittances.

2) Yes, they told me to send them remittances.

3) I haven't talked about the escape.

4) I talked about the escape but not the remittance.

11. Did anyone in your household stopped working because of remittance receiving?

1) Yes.

2 No.

3) I'm not sure.

12. Why did you escape North Korea?

13. Other than money and direct networks, what else can help you escape?

Annex 3. Semi-structured Interview Sample Questions

Remittances and transnational activities

1. Besides money, what else do North Korean migrants send to their families?
2. What are some of the main reasons why North Koreans send remittances back home? (motives, intentions, purpose)
3. Are financial remittances enough to cover living expenses? If yes, are the large enough for individuals to splurge or invest in businesses?
4. Are remittances used for domestic business (for example, *jangmadang*, private taxi businesses, and so forth).
5. Are remittances part of household strategies to make money? / Do families plan who is going to leave and how remittances will be sent?
6. How important is remittance-sending to North Korean migrants? How does filial piety and parenthood affect remittances?
7. How important for migrants is communicating with their families? Is it more or less important than sending remittances?
8. Do remittances (including items) and communication have any effect in people's aspirations to leave North Korea?
9. Are remittances used to escape North Korea?
10. How relevant are transnational connections in escaping North Korea?
11. How do North Koreans send financial remittances/items/contact their families? Has this changed throughout the years?

Migration

1. How important is money when escaping North Korea? Other than money, what else contributes to a successful escape?
2. Is there any difference between migrants in relation to which resources they have? (money, information)
3. Do migrants who travel together have similar backgrounds or 'income levels'? (background understood as families who work in grey markets, individuals that are migrants, victims of human trafficking…)
4. What is the most common 'background' or characteristics for migrants? Is there any transnational connection that sets them apart? (transnational connection can be remittances, family abroad, networks with people abroad…)
5. Is it possible to leave North Korea without money?
6. Is it possible to leave North Korea without connections to brokers or human traffickers?
7. How do North Koreans learn the know-how about how to escape North Korea? Is it common knowledge?
8. How do North Korean communities abroad connect with North Korea? Do any of these activities affect migration?
9. What are the main reasons why North Koreans decide to leave North Korea?
10. What are the main challenges to leave North Korea? How do North Koreans circumvent this challenges?
11. Is there anything that deters North Koreans from escaping? (domestically or internationally) (for example, knowledge of life in South Korea, discrimination, issues when hiding in China…)

12. What do North Koreans think of the “escapee life” of North Koreans abroad? Is knowledge of life outside a migration deterrent or driver?