

After 80 Years: In the Search for Own Identity

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Abstract

The process of resettlement in 1937 and adaptation to new places in Central Asia had a dramatic character for Koreans. However, the *Koryŏ saram's* history cannot be reduced to a plethora of sad pages. Koreans could and have achieved amazing results in many spheres and have obtained high status in the USSR and later, in Post-Soviet Central Asia. Among them there were/there are the Heroes of Socialist Labor (the highest non-military title in the USSR), Vice-Prime Minister, ministers and vice-ministers, senators, members of National parliament, winners of Olympic Games and World championships, rectors of universities, outstanding scholars and businessmen, etc. *Koryŏ saram* have lived in different political and economic systems, and in various ethnic environments. Their identity is composed of a multicultural character which includes elements of traditional Korean, Central Asian, Russian, Soviet and Western cultures. This has led to the flexible behavioral models. After collapse of the USSR, Koreans have faced with new challenges that imply new attitudes to the strategies of Koreans and Korean organizations. This article is based on the ideas that have been published and presented at various conferences and in the various works in the 1990s and the early 2000s. However, in the present article these ideas are generalized taking into consideration the changes over the past years.

Key words: *Koryŏ saram*, Soviet and Post-Soviet Koreans, Diaspora, Minority, Identity, USSR, Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Korean Movement.

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1. Introduction

Already 80 years have passed since more than 170 thousand Koreans have been forcibly resettled from the Russian Far East to Central Asia—Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. According to archival documents, 16,307 families (74,500 people) were moved to Uzbekistan in 1937 and 20,789 families (98,454 people) to Kazakhstan.

The process of resettlement and the first years of adaptation to new places in Central Asia tested the character of the Koreans. These were political arrests, difficulties of the resettlement, deficiency of housing, diseases and hunger, deprivation of civic rights, etc., (Bugai 2004; Khan 2009; Kim 1993; Rahmankulova 2001). Despite all these difficulties, Koreans have not only survived under new conditions but also have landed on their feet, have shown miracles of labor heroism and have occupied a worthy niche in the social structure of the USSR and later, after its collapse.

Very often, in foreign publications and documentary films, namely this dramatic page in the *Koryŏ saram*'s history is the center attention. However, 80 years of Koreans' living in Central Asia cannot be reduced to it. Koreans—displaced people—could show the amazing achievements on the new homeland. None of the Korean diasporas in the world could achieve such high status in the social hierarchy of countries-recipients as *Koryŏ saram* did in Central Asia (Khan 2014, 2011, 2009; Khan and Sim 2014). If we take into account the violent character of the resettlement of 1937, when Koreans had limited rights, the given achievements despite these obstacles become especially surprising. And this success remained outside attention of foreign researchers and documentary film makers.

Among *Koryŏ saram* there were/are:

- members of governments (vice-premier minister, ministers and deputy ministers), deputies and senators of parliaments and local Soviets;
- recipients of the most prestigious titles and prizes (Heroes of the Soviet Union, Heroes of Socialist Labor, winners of the National Prizes, etc.);

- scientists with different degrees and titles (members of the Academies of Sciences of the USSR and republics, professors);
- rectors and vice-rectors, deans and deputy deans of universities, heads of schools and colleges;
- directors and deputy directors, heads of departments of research institutions;
- top managers of large industrial, financial, and agricultural enterprises;
- outstanding sportsmen (Olympic champions, World and European championship medalists, world champions in professional sports, head coaches of national teams of the USSR and CIS countries, heads of national Olympic committees, heads of associations of various sports);
- well-known writers, composers, painters, opera, and ballet performers, etc., (Khan 2009, 2011, 2014; Kim 1999; Li 1998; Pak 2005).

In what other countries have Koreans (outside Korea) achieved such results? Only in the USSR and later in the CIS, and first of all, in Central Asia. While living in the Russian Empire, Soviet Union and CIS countries, Koreans found themselves in different political, socio-economic systems and ethnic environment that determined a forming the new types of adaptations. However, before the collapse of the USSR, they were within one state—the Russian Empire or the USSR; but today the *Koryŏ saram* are citizens of the different states. And, of course, in this regard, the question arises: will *Koryŏ saram* be able to keep their identity and maintain their integrity?

I have repeatedly raised the question of the definition of *Koryŏ saram* identity and its future from the very beginning the Korean movement (Kan 1993; Khan 1998). The initial objectives of this movement in the charters of Korean organizations formulated exclusively in the plane of culture: the revival of language, customs, and traditions. However, a long stay outside their historical homeland and far-gone assimilation (Russification and Sovietization) forces us to think about the meaning of the concept “revival.”

The question was the following: “What do we revive and for what purpose?” “Revival” can be understood as a revival of the disappearing culture (language,

customs, etc.) of our ancestors who emigrated from Korea to the Russian Far East. Besides, this term “revival” can be interpreted as the copying or an imitation of North Korean and South Korean cultures. But following this way we doom ourselves to be secondary and cultural dependents rather than being unique and having own identity. And, we can understand by the “revival” the development of own culture of *Koryŏ saram*. Another question related to the first issue: is there a problem of ethnic survival of *Koryŏ saram*? Later, other issues have arisen: “who will revive it and how to revive it?” Despite the fact that the Korean movement has a long history, all these issues are still part of the principal agenda and are still relevant.

For last years the Korean movement of the CIS has gotten stronger. There are strong leaders in the Korean organizations with the material and technical resources allow to solve many tasks. There are the means to mass media. There is a strong youth wing. However, the questions formulated above remained. It seems to me that these questions will continue to be key in the future, throughout the existence of the *Koryŏ saram* as a subethnic community.

Before turning to the future, I would like to briefly elaborate on what was the basis of the *Koryŏ saram* identity in all past years and that has allowed them to take their worthy place in the social hierarchy. As I have noted, in the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, *Koryŏ saram* have been actively involved in migration processes: this is the discovering of the Russian Far East, Siberia, the steppes of Central Asia, Moscow, and St. Petersburg, the Northern Caucasus, Volga region, Ukraine and other regions. Such mobility and achievements on new places of settlement are an indicator of high adaptability of Koreans.

The need to fit into various ethno-cultural landscapes formed the flexible models of plastic behavior, which, in turn, further strengthened adaptability of Koreans. Mastering the cultures of other people in new places, Koreans have created multicultural identity which includes traditional Korean culture, the Russian and Central Asian cultures, the Soviet culture and even elements of foreign culture as well as the local culture of those regions where they found themselves (Khan 2001, 2003, 2010; Kwon et al. 2001).

In the USSR that was inhabited by a great number of the peoples speaking

different languages, the only language which guaranteed a possibility of full communication in any region of the huge country, gave the chance of the best education and upward mobility, was Russian. Koreans have made it a mother tongue. New language identity has opened for Koreans the way to a new, wide world, and it became one of the prerequisites of their achievements.

Almost throughout its existence, the USSR had a deficiency of professional personnel in almost all areas. It is enough to remember that by 1917 a large part of the population of Russia (from 55% to 70%, by various estimates) was illiterate, i.e., not proficiently in reading and writing. Thanks to the policy of elimination of illiteracy in the 1940s, the literacy rate has grown to 98-99%. However, primary education was insufficient to reach a high position in the social hierarchy. In the conditions of staff shortage and due to their hard work and diligence, they began to climb a social ladder in those areas in which got higher education (professional qualification).

Here it is important to note that the Koreans have used primarily *individual* strategies for professional growth. No *social elevators* for mobility were activated (because of some reasons) (Khan et al. 2014). Due to their multi-cultural and linguistic identity, competencies and individual growth strategies the rating of Koreans was equally high both among Asian (indigenous) peoples as well as European ones.

The representatives of 100 nationalities live in Uzbekistan. Based on the length of their residency in Uzbekistan, these nationalities may be divided into two large groups: *native peoples* and *migrant peoples*. The first group includes the members of the titular nation (Uzbeks) and other related peoples who have lived on this territory for centuries (Kazakhs, Kyrgyzs, Karakalpaks, et al.). In the second group, Russians are the largest ethnos and have had a special impact due to historical reasons; also included in this group are Ukrainians, Koreans, Jews, Poles, Armenians, Tatars, and others.

The inter-ethnic relations in Uzbekistan and their reflection in ethnic stereotypes were formed under the influence of a number of circumstances. Let us look at these inter-ethnic relations separately, one at a time.

2. The Inter-Ethnic Relations in Central Asia and Their Reflection in Ethnic Stereotypes

a) The Titular Nation and Other Native Peoples in Central Asia

The native peoples in Central Asia as a whole have a great deal in common: origin, common historic past, religion, customs, etc. However, ethnic relations between these peoples, in reality, are by no means so ideal. Especially, the common historical past of the native peoples of Central Asia serves as an apple of discord. In Uzbekistan, an Uzbek-centered model of the history of Central Asia has been implemented. The same situation has been manifested by Tajik-centered, Kyrgyz-centered, and other similar models.

b) The Titular Nation and Slavic Peoples

Though Slavs are represented in Central Asia by a number of different nationalities (Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Poles et al.), they are mostly associated with the largest migrant group - Russians. The interrelations of the Russians and the native peoples of the region are conditioned by the conquest of Central Asia by Tsarist Russia and the Soviet nationality policy.

The majority of the Russians think that their mission in Central Asia bore a civilizing character and that with their arrival came industry, modern scientific and educational establishments, European culture, the liberation of women, the monogamous family, etc. However, today many Uzbeks, especially officials, regard the activities of the Russian Empire and the Soviet state with respect to the native peoples of Central Asia as a colonial-repressive one, which led to the oblivion of traditional values and historical memory, a one-sided economy, ecological disasters, and the loss of national pride.

The discrepancy in their perceptions about the role of Russification in Central Asia between the Russians and the natives is also manifested in the negative stereotypes they assigned to each other. As British researchers have written, "Russians evaluated themselves as skilled, responsible, scrupulous workers unlike

representatives of titular ethnic groups who were incapable of normal factory labor and “would like only to carry portfolios or to trade (Pilkington et al. 2001, 16).” Uzbeks, in their turn, think that “Russians lack the ‘patriotism’ needed to work on cotton, that they do not strive for honorable agricultural labor, desirable for a native dweller, but seek easy lives in the city (Brusina 2001, 180).”

c) Koreans and the Titular Nation

As a whole, relations between “the titular ethnos and Koreans” can be characterized as positive. First, Koreans arrived not as conquerors but as a deported and repressed people. This fact provoked a sense of pity among the native population.

Second, some other peoples either deported (Crimean Tatars, Turks-Meskhetsins et al.) or forced into exile (Greeks) constantly made it known that they were temporary guests on this land. In contrast, Koreans from the very beginning perceived Central Asia as their new motherland.

Third, Koreans never pretended to hold a more developed or more ancient culture than Central Asian ones. The first generation of *Koryŏ saram*—mostly peasants—dimly conceived their distant historical past. And the second and subsequent generations already identified themselves not with Korea but with the USSR. The topic of the “superiority” of a particular culture simply did not exist in relations between the Koreans and Uzbeks.

Fourth, the customs and codes of behavior of the *Koryŏ saram* coincided in many respects with the traditions of Uzbeks.

Fifth, the majority of the Koreans of Central Asia were engaged in agriculture like the main native population. Due to the Koreans, large fallow lands unusable for agriculture were cultivated and the productivity of many agricultural crops increased. This evoked a respect on the part of Uzbeks, who know the worth of hard agricultural labor.

Sixth, being a migrant group and having no status as a titular nation like the Uzbeks or as “big brother” like the Russians, Koreans achieved high watermarks in the most varied fields of life in a short time. This was also favorable for their

image: professionalism and industry came to identify Koreans. In recent times, the population of Uzbekistan has also witnessed the economic and cultural achievements of South Korea, and as a result, this opinion has strengthened.

Seventh, *Koryō saram* have played an important role in establishing contacts for attracting and adapting the South Korean business to Uzbekistan.

d) Koreans and Russians

Koreans are also evaluated highly by European peoples in Uzbekistan. First, *Koryō saram* are a Russian-speaking group. Russians and Eurasian Koreans have the same mother tongue, but this tie goes beyond a means of thought and communication. That is, the Koreans are educated at Russian-speaking educational institutions where the quality of instruction remains higher than at Uzbek-speaking ones. These institutions have access to Russian fiction, scientific and technical literature, which in turn grant access to the worldly achievements of mankind. For Russians, the mastery of the Russian language indicates a person's ability to succeed in science, technology, and other intellectual fields.

Second, the role of the collective heritage, typical of traditional Korean families, has weakened since they mastered European culture. That said, European-Korean marriages are on the rise. Thus, the percentage of mixed Korean marriages in the beginning of the 1980s in Alma-Ata reached almost 40%, and among these marriages, a "particularly large proportion was made up of inter-ethnic marriages with Russians (Em 1997, 42)." The reason is that, being Russified, Koreans have come to depend less and less on a public Korean milieu. The primacy of the collective over the individual is typical in a majority of families of the region's native peoples. And in mixed Korean families, relations are built more and more on an individual level than on a collective-social one.

Third, Russians, generally speaking, highly value North/South Asian culture, with many adhering to Eastern martial arts, Buddhist and Confucian philosophies, yoga, meditation, Dao systems of nutrition, Eastern landscaping, acupuncture medicine, etc. The European population associates Korean culture with this historical-cultural region.

e) Koreans and Other Minority Groups

Other ethnic groups also positively rate Koreans. In all poly-ethnic societies, even in countries with developed democracies, small ethnic groups feel less comfortable than larger ones (basks). It is natural that they oppose themselves to titular nations, as well as large privileged ethnic groups. Uzbekistan is not an exception here. In the binary opposition “we – they,” ethnic groups, which feel uncomfortable describe themselves as “we,” including in their ranks Koreans.

Thus, in the existing inter-ethnic oppositions “title nation - other ethnic groups,” “Russians - other ethnic groups”, “large ethnic groups - small ethnic groups,” the Koreans have a stably positive rating. One reason for this is the mixed, non-traditional character of *Koryŏ saram* culture. This mixed character does not oppose Islamic to Christian, Asian to European, Turkic to Slavic, etc., but includes all of these categories in the formation of a distinct *Eurasian* culture. This, in turn, allows for *highly adaptive* models of behavior (Khan V. S., 2010, 2011, 2014).

And, we should remember that the main factor for the successful adaptation of Koreans in the former USSR and was the Soviet policy of nationalities. In spite of various difficult pages of Soviet history and even ethnic repressions during Stalinism, the Soviet ethnic policy, ideologically and in real life was based on the principle “friendship of peoples.” Without this kind of policy, the professional achievements of recent immigrants could not be possible.

Perestroika and independence had an essential influence on the life of Koreans, forms of their labor employment and the prospect of further existence in the new states. The liberalization of the economy led to an outflow of Koreans from the sphere of the state economy to the sphere of private business through “shuttle” small trading businesses, the restaurant business, construction and repair work, the computer business, medical clinics, and etc. The commercialization of public consciousness and the reduction of the representation of Koreans in the state structures have led to an infringement of balanced employment of Koreans as it took place during the Soviet period.

Significant reductions of the number of Korean students, creative, scientific and technical intelligentsia is observed. There was an outflow of Koreans from science,

education, culture, public health services, industry and other spheres to small and middle businesses. Though this tendency concerns all peoples of the CIS, losses of an intellectual potential for the Korean diaspora will be much more sensitive than for large nations. The decrease in educational level coupled with our increasing commercialization in a choice of value driven orientations leads to a loss of qualitative characteristics of socio-cultural identity of the Korean diaspora.

Due to growing nationalism in post-soviet states, Koreans in Central Asia loose their positions and many of them move to Russia (main country-recipient) (Ata-Mirzaev et al. 1998; Maksakova 2007; Khan 2014) and other countries (the USA, Canada, Europe, Korea). According to the State Committee on Statistics of Uzbekistan, the Korean population is gradually decreasing. In 1989, 183,140 Koreans lived in Uzbekistan, 172,384 in 2001, 169,700 in 2002, 166,100 in 2003, 161,700 in 2004, 157,300 in 2005, 153,000 in 2006, 150,000 in 2007, 147,700 in 2008 (Khan 2009, 146).

In Kazakhstan, the number of Korean population is decreased from 100,739 people in 1989 to 99,662 in 1999. According to the Census of 2009, the number of Koreans in this country is 100,400 people. According to the Census of 1999, 19,764 Koreans live in Kyrgyzstan. In 1999, 19,784 Koreans lived there, and 17,015 in 2017 (<http://stat.kg/>). In Tajikistan in 2000, 1,696 Koreans lived here, and only 634 in 2010 (Perepis 2012, 7). According to Census of 1995, 3,159 Koreans lived in Turkmenistan. Present Turkmen mass media write on the 2,500 Koreans (<http://asgabat.net/>), although there is information that in fact we should speak about a Korean population which numbers in the hundreds.

New challenges facing the Koreans in Central Asia pose the question of the elaboration of the new strategy for effective adaptation in the new circumstances (Khan 2014).

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to summarize the issues raised and at the same time formulate them as recommendations or suggestions for thought.

Extension of the social base of Korean organizations. Today the Korean organizations have an “exclusive” character when the same people are in the leadership of these organizations for many years.

More active work with the youth. The youth and a new balance of the young, middle and older generations can give our Korean organizations a breath of fresh air and renewed vigor.

Conducting an inventory of potential of the diaspora. We need to know everyone who can help to strengthen the capacity and the image of Korean diaspora.

Professional apparatus of AKCC or its branches and departments. Any public organization will have limits to growth if it is based on “non-professionals,” or on the principle of “voluntary work.” It is necessary to build our work on the basis of professional management.

The transition from the system of mass concert and entertainment events to the projects’ system. Today, the activity of many Korean organizations is built on the well-run scheme of organizing of cultural events (Lunar New Year, Navruz, Chuseok, Independence day, etc.), while the promotion of Korean diaspora development has no systemic character.

A revision of the purposes and tasks of the Korean organizations and go outside the framework of the activity the culture-oriented activities. Culture must become only one of the directions of Korean organizations’ activities.

The creation of a program to improve the image of Koreans in the country and their status in the social hierarchy. This simultaneously means that the elevators of social mobility will be added to the individual strategy of professional growth.

Strengthening of the local Korean centers in the provinces.

Extension of information about AKCC. It is necessary to create the own website as well as pages on Facebook, Twitter and other social networks. This website (in Russian, Korean and English) will regularly update an information about AKCC, post announces, create an archive of information and analytical materials, and have a feedback system.

To extend the possibilities of the newspaper *Koryo Sinmun* it is also useful to create its website.

Strengthening of cooperation with Korean organizations in other countries.

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