

Dances of Divided Korea on the Central Asian Soil

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Abstract

After the division of Korea into two states, there appeared a significant difference in the folk dance performing styles between the North and the South. At the beginning the traditional culture and art of the Soviet Koreans was under the influence of North Korea. It was explained by the diplomatic relations, economic cooperation and cultural exchange between the Soviet Union and the DPRK only, excluding the Republic of Korea. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the South seized the initiative in the issue of promoting ties between the post-Soviet Koreans and their ethnic homeland, even though their ancestors, in the overwhelming majority, came from the northern provinces of the Korean Peninsula. This article is one of the first steps in studying the Korean folk dances in the USSR and CIS influenced by northern and southern styles from historical point of view. The article deals with the old folk dances (*minsok muyong*), excluding court dances (*kungjung muyong*), “new” dances (*shin muyong*) developed in the 1920s, and modern dances (*kūndae muyong*). Based on varied original sources and long personal observations, the article analyzes the folk dances of the divided Korea represented in the repertoires of professional, semiprofessional, and amateur Korean dance groups in Central Asia.

Keywords: amateur, ethnic motherland, folk dances, Korean theatre, *koryŏ saram*, semiprofessional

Introduction

The history of the CIS Koreans is more than 150 years long. During all those years, Koreans living outside of their ethnic motherland performed their folk dances at family or traditional holidays celebrations. After the division of Korea into two states, the dance art of the Soviet Koreans was under the influence of the North Korean choreography. After the diplomatic relations between the South Korea and sovereign post-Soviet states were established, South Korean cultural traditions in dance art started to gain popularity. The Korean diasporas in Russia and Central Asia were trying to maintain relations with both North and South Korea, which, in their turn, were trying to win the loyalty of their “compatriots.” Comparative studies of the policies of the two Korean states in regard to the CIS Koreans are yet nonexistent, and the analysis of the cultural cooperation between the dance groups of the Korean diasporas in Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan and their historical motherland has not become a topic for any article or book yet.

The article makes an attempt to introduce a new academic topic. The research is carried out from the historical standpoint with the aim to reveal the stages of the influence of South-North styles in choreography on folk dance performing art of the USSR and CIS Koreans. The article characterizes three types of dance groups: professional, semiprofessional and amateur, and analyzes the changes in the repertoire of the dances that have their clearly defined boundaries and spectators.

The Korean theatre ballet group has been and remains the only professional dance ensemble. Artists get salary for their work, and their mission is to perform dances including Korean folk dances. Most of the Korean theatre dancers are well-educated. They studied the folk-dance art in South Korea and are fully qualified to perform Korean folk dances. Numerous worldly-wise spectators including VIP guests and foreign delegations enjoy the concert performances of the ballet group.

Semiprofessional dance groups perform in big cities

and they do not have staff dancers who are paid regular salaries. Such groups are composed of young girls who can be students or have some other permanent job. Semiprofessional groups perform at corporate parties, family celebrations, and other cultural events. They are paid for performing their dance program. Spectators at such events are mostly city-dwellers who want to see a colorful show with attractive girls in beautiful dresses with bright accessories rather than a sophisticated professional dance performance.

In contrast to the semiprofessional groups, amateur dance groups are characterized by different ages of their participants: from schoolgirls to retired women. Such groups can be independent or function within the structure of Korean associations getting support in the form of *hanbok* dresses, traditional fans, or drums such as *janggu* and *sogo*. As a rule, such groups perform dances at folk holidays, not only traditional Korean ones but also at national holidays of their countries of residence.

While writing the article, the author used available sources consisting of three main groups. The first group includes talks and interviews with the choreographers of the Korean theatre as well as artistic leaders of semiprofessional and amateur dance groups from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The second group is composed of the news article essays and articles devoted to the concerts and performances of the dance groups and published in the Korean diasporic news articles of Kazakhstan (*Koryo Ilbo*), Uzbekistan (*Koryo Sinmun*) and Kyrgyzstan (*Ilchi*). Video recordings of the dance lessons and performances of the dance groups represent the third group of the sources. Many of those recordings are available on the Internet. Some come from the video materials the author got from artistic leaders of the dance groups. The author's personal experience of watching performances of the Korean dance ensembles in Central Asia, Russia, and the Ukraine for many years also contributed to better understanding of the topic.

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the changes in the policy towards the Korean Peninsula and consequently the Korean Studies shifted the focus from North to South Korea. While the cultural exchange between South Korea and the

CIS countries was widening, Russian scholars started to study Korean dances, pointing to the fact that there was “lack of fundamental research of the traditional choreography of Korea and no complex studies of the topic” (Tolstykh 2010). One can find some fragmentary data on the folk dances in the books and reference books on the culture and art of Korea (Glukhareva 1982; Markov 1999; Tolstokulakov 2002), and also in the monograph about musical and theatrical art of Koreans in the Russian and Soviet Far East in 1860–1937 (Koroleva 2008).

The Western (File 2013; Renouf 2003; Van Zile 2001) and South Korean literature on the Korean traditional and modern choreography (Kang 2002; B. Lee 2008; Lee and Van Zile 2010; M. Kim 2005) is mainly composed of the studies based on the materials and sources from the southern part of the Korean Peninsula. In late 1990s and 2000s, several young South Korean researchers defended their Candidate of Art studies dissertations in Russia, which were devoted to the dances of their country (S. Kim 1999; Y. Lee 2004; Lim 2000; Mun 2001). However, dances of the Central Asian Koreans were not included in such studies.

The North Korean studies of the Korean folk dances remain little known or rather unknown for the researchers abroad because the country was isolated and politically biased.

In summarizing the review of the literature, it should be emphasized the lack of arts studies on the dances of the Central Asian Koreans; moreover, there is no analysis of the influence of North and South Korean dancing styles on the folk dances performed by the dance groups of the Korean diasporas in Central Asia.

Accordingly, the novelty of the article is determined primarily by the lack of studies in the CIS, the North and South Korea, and other countries. However, this article isn't a study of art criticism or art history; it does not consider the technics, rhythm, and movements of the body, costumes, attributes, music and many other components of the Central Asian Korean dances that are still waiting to be analyzed. The article is written from a historical standpoint and uses corresponding methodological principles, including

descriptive, crosscultural, causal, statistical ones, and so on.

The main hypothesis offered by the article is that migrants from the Chosŏn kingdom to the Russian Far East used to perform folk dances in the traditional North Korean manner which was familiar to them. During a long period of time, the folk dances of the Soviet Koreans were under the influence of the North Korean style of choreography but in the course of the dynamic economic cooperation the South Korean popular and folk culture started to dominate.

The author sets several tasks in the article: to analyze the historical scope of the two antagonistic kinstates of Koreans in USSR; to characterize the main stages of the North and South Korean impacts on the dances of Soviet and post-Soviet Koreans, and to classify the repertoires of the professional, semiprofessional, and amateur dancing groups of Korean diasporas in Central Asia. The article contributes to the understanding of changes and shifts in the influence of the North and South Korean styles on the folk dances of the Central Asian Koreans.

Historical and Political Context of the North's and South's Impact on Soviet Koreans

Many people believe that Koreans in the Soviet Union were on friendly terms with the Northern Koreans. However, actually it was not exactly like that. Certainly, on the official level the Soviet government rendered political, military, and economic support to Pyongyang. The Soviet Koreans (*koryŏ saram*)¹ had little to do with it. However, after the Second World War, around 500 Soviet Koreans including family members were dispatched to Pyongyang to assist in building the North Korean socialism. The number of politically active Soviet Koreans was twice as small: about 200–250 persons (Konoreva and Selivanov 2018; Lankov 1995; Lee and Oh 1968; Suh 1987), among them there were high rank officials in culture, for example the vice-ministers of Culture and

¹ In the past, the term "Soviet Koreans" was used to refer to all Koreans living in the USSR, but they named themselves *koryŏ saram*. Recently in South Korean academic and mass media publications and everyday speech, the ethnonym *koryŏin* is preferred.

Propaganda of the DPRK—Soviet Koreans Chŏng Sangchin and Ki Seok Bok (Chang 2006; G. Kim 2020; K. Kim 2015). After return from North Korea, many of the Soviet faction members became prominent figures in the culture, education, and governmental services in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Russia.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, North Korea tried to establish and maintain close relations with the CIS Koreans. The Korean ABC books and textbooks were sent from Pyongyang, professors from Pyongyang came to teach the Korean language, and instructors trained young people in taekwondo.² Soon the Embassy of the DPRK in Kazakhstan was closed; diplomats went home, and thin strands of ties were broken (G. B. Khan 1997, 16).

As regards South Korea, from the initial period of establishing diplomatic relations with the sovereign countries of the post-Soviet Central Asia, their relations were developing very fast and were widening every year. Thousands of *koryŏ saram* were able to visit South Korea, and thousands of South Koreans came to Kazakhstan. The Korean companies like Daewoo, Hyundai, LG, Samsung, Hanwha, etc. invested millions of dollars in the economy of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. During the past three decades of the diplomatic relations of South Korea with CIS countries numerous concerts, exhibitions, theatre performances, fashion shows, and other cultural events organized by the South Korean side were held in Central Asia.

The completion of Pyongyang and Seoul for the status of the monopole motherland for the Soviet Koreans led to a split in diaspora organizations, similar to the situation with the Japanese Koreans. As a result, two ethnic organizations emerged in the Soviet Union: Association for the Promotion of the Unification of Korea (ASOK) and the All-Union Association of Soviet Koreans (VASK). Initially, the ASOC, actively supported by Pyongyang, was able to take the initiative of organizing large-scale events and campaigns. The ASOC opened the Korean language classes, sections and clubs of taekwondo, and schools of Korean dances in many Soviet cities with the large Korean communities. The most important contribution of the ASOK was restoration of broken ties with the kinstate—historical homeland of the Korean migrants to

² Taekwondo—Korean martial art—is divided in two main international organizational bodies: pro-North International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF) and pro-South World Taekwondo Federation (WTF).

the Far East of the Russian Empire. Through the network of the ASOK with North Korean governmental institutions, many thousand Koreans from Central Asia and Russia were able to visit their ancestral homeland for free or on preferential terms. Many ordinary Soviet Koreans took part in the ASOK mass events expressing their sympathy to North Korea.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, North Korea started to lose its influence among the CIS Korean diasporas, and most of Korean associations established contacts with South Korean governmental bodies, NGOs, missionary churches and business companies. Soon the leaders of the Korean diaspora organizations became pro-Seoul in their orientation.

At the 2nd ASOK Congress, held in Moscow on September 17, 1993, and attended by delegates from all former Soviet republics, it was decided to rename the organization into the International Korean Association “Unity.” The Unity joined the World League of Koreans “Bominren” with its headquarters in Tokyo, where the pro-North Korean organization named Chongnyŏn (General Association of Korean Residents in Japan) was active. Despite the change of the organization’s names: the ASOK, IKA (International Korean Association) “Unity,” IUKPA (International Union of Korean Public Associations) “Unity,” “Bominren,” the goals and objectives defined in the ASOK statutory documents remained unchanged.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, at the Second VASK Congress in February 1992 in Alma-Ata, the organization changed its name to the International Confederation of Korean Associations (ICKA). After a short while, it ceased to exist.

In the Soviet period and the first years after the collapse of the USSR, *koryŏ saram* demonstrated positive attitude towards North Korea, and Korean diaspora organizations were ready to maintain relations with Pyongyang. However, North Korea suffering from the economic crisis, aggravated by natural disasters and the onset of famine in the country, curtailed its support programs for the Soviet Koreans. In the struggle for influence among the post-Soviet Korean diasporas, South Korea decisively defeated the North.

Dances of the Divided Korea

Significant influence of the North Korean dance art on the Soviet Korean choreography during 1950–95 can be explained by several historical and political reasons.

Firstly, the ancestors of the recent *koryŏ saram* migrated to the Russian Maritime Region of the Far East from the Northern Provinces of the Korean Peninsula: Hamgyŏng-do and Pyŏngan-do. Therefore, they were familiar with regional peculiarities of the Korean folk dances.

Secondly, after liberation of Korea from the Japanese colonial regime, the most educated, experienced and Korean-speaking Soviet Koreans were dispatched in 1945–48 by Moscow to North Korea to establish “à la Soviet” socialist state. After many years of living and working in North Korea and failure of the Kremlin plans, they returned to the Soviet Union with a good knowledge of the state-political system, ideology, education, culture and art, including dances.

Thirdly, during the Cold War period, any contacts and cultural exchanges between the Soviet Union and South Korea were completely ruled out, therefore only North Korean choreography was known in the Soviet Union and the countries of the Eastern Bloc. Although it should be noted that the vivid cultural exchange between the Soviet Union and North Korea had a very short period from the end of the 1940s to the second half of the 1950s. After the XX Congress of the CPSU (February 14–25, 1956) at which Nikita Khrushchev criticized sharply the cult of Stalinism, the relations between Moscow and began to cool.

In July 1951, Ch’oe Sŭnghŭi, one of the greatest dancers in Korea, visited Moscow with her North Korean dance group to perform there. The concert tour included East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria, and for the first time the Korean dances riveted close attention of the European fans of traditional and modern choreography (Löwensteinová, Pucek, and Valošek 2019). Four years after the East European tour Ch’oe Sŭnghŭi together with a Soviet journalist published a book about art in North Korea (Latov and Tsoi 1955). This tour of Ch’oe Sŭnghŭi impacted greatly the Korean dance

style in the countries of the communist Block, first of all in the Soviet Union.

An Sŏnghŭi, the daughter of Ch'oe Sŭnghŭi followed the example of her famous mother and taught Korean traditional dances in the Soviet Union. She studied the Russian ballet art at the Bolshoi Theater, taught Korean dances and produced a book published first in coauthorship with two Russians (An, Tkachenko, and L'vov 1956). The second Russian edition of the book was printed under her own name (An 1959). For many decades, those two books printed in Russian were a kind of textbooks for teaching and learning Korean dances in the Soviet Union.

At the Korean department established in 1955 at the Actors' Faculty of the Tashkent Theatrical Institute, the students (young *koryŏ saram*) were majoring in drama arts, singing, playing music, and North Korean dances. After graduation, they all became actors of the Korean Music and Drama Theater in the city of Kyzyl-Orda in neighboring Kazakhstan. Many more students of the Korean department studied according to the same curricula, with North Korean dances included.

In 1969, in Uzbekistan was organized the first semiprofessional Korean song and dance ensemble Kayagum. It played a decisive role in staging Korean dances for amateur dance groups. North Korean dancer Hwang Jeong Ok was greatly popular in Tashkent and made an invaluable contribution to popularizing the North Korean style of folk dance. Born in 1940 in Korea, she graduated from the Pyongyang Choreographic School of Ch'oe Sŭnghŭi. Before arriving in the USSR, she danced in the State Dance Ensemble of the DPRK. According to Journalist Brutt Kim, Hwang Jeong Ok came to Moscow to study. After uncovering of Stalin's personality cult at the 20th Congress of the CPSU, Pyongyang urgently forced all North Korean students to return home. Hwang Jeong Ok refused to follow the order and ended up in Tashkent. There she graduated from the Tashkent Choreographic School, then the Moscow Theatrical Institute. For many years, she danced in the well-known Uzbek national dance ensemble Bakhor. She laid the foundation for the Korean dances repertoire of the famous Soviet Korean

ensemble Chen-Chun (B. Kim 1999, 110).

According to the memoirs of the artistic director of Chen-Chun (1971–73) Timofey Hwan:

In the dance art, there was a lady of amazing beauty named Hwang Jeong Ok. Her choreographic compositions remained for a long time in the repertoires of Kayagum, Arirang and other amateur ensembles, causing indescribable delight among the audience. Her posture immediately betrayed her as a professional dancer. With its appearance among Soviet Koreans, the attitude towards Korean dances changed. The dances have become more varied. Endless walking around the stage with fans in hand gave way to more meaningful movements. Unfortunately, her stay in the USSR was shortlived. Not finding her prince among the Soviet Koreans, she left. She is rumored to have married an Austrian. With the departure of Hwang Jeong Ok, the dance culture of Soviet Koreans was deprived of the opportunity to renew its repertoire for a long time. Individual attempts by local choreographers to fill the gap ended in failure. There was no sense of completeness in dance compositions like Hwang Jeong Ok did.” (Hwan 2008, 235–236)

From the second half of the 1980s to the mid-1990s, North Korean choreographic art played a critical role in reviving Korean folk dances among Koreans in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Margarita L. Khan, artistic director and choreographer of the Korean dance ensemble Kore in Tashkent, writes about it:

Several amateur groups have been formed in Uzbekistan, in which dances were staged by choreographers from the DPRK. In 1989, the Korean theater-studio Sin-Sen (artistic director: Kim Yelizaveta) was established under the Union of Theater Workers of Uzbekistan. This studio actively represented the dance art of North Korea. The repertoire of this group included ceremonial dances like “Wedding” and “Masks,” staged by Pyongyang choreographers. Repeatedly the Sin-Sen collective, along with the Chen-

Chun professional collective, took part in the April Spring international festival in Pyongyang. (M. L. Khan 2001, 87)

According to Margarita L. Khan, North Korean choreographers Kim Hya Chun and later Kim Sung Nyon³ made a great contribution to the production of the Korean folk dances on the stages of Soviet Uzbekistan. Margarita L. Khan recalls that choreographers were assisted by instructors who trained students in dances.

³ The Romanization of the names of North Korean choreographers may be inaccurate, as their transcription was made not from the Korean, but from the Russian spelling.

During that period, similar North Korean influence was also strong in Kazakhstan but to a lesser degree. It seemed that the reason for it was the Korean theatre in Kazakhstan and Pyongyang's choice of the Uzbek Koreans for exercising their influence. It is not by chance that in mid-1990s, Pyongyang closed its Embassy in Almaty but preserved it in Tashkent and it functioned until July 2016. From the late 1980s, the Central Asian Koreans started to revive their amateur performances and in the early 1990s the first private schools and courses in Korean dances were opened. The best dancers from the Korean theatre were in great demand. The famous People's Artist of Kazakhstan Rimma Kim had a group of followers who, like her, organized their own dance show groups. It was only natural that at the beginning the repertoires of such semiprofessional and amateur dance groups were mostly composed of already well-established and rehearsed dances with the North Korean flavor.

The first Korean settlers in the Russian Far East performed simple village dances during their popular holidays and family gatherings. The decisive role in the development of the dancing culture of Soviet Koreans belongs to the Korean theatre. It was established 1932 in Vladivostok as a result of the merge of several Korean amateur drama circles and dance groups, then it was relocated to Kazakhstan and later moved from one place to another: Kyzyl-Orda (1937–41, 1959–68), Ushtobe (1942–59), and Almaty (1968). The Korean theater soon became a touring theater, which performed in the kolkhozes (collective farms) and cities with a significant Korean population (G. Kim 2014, 232–241).

In the Soviet time, semiprofessional and amateur dance groups were established in “rich Korean kolkhozes” mainly

in Uzbekistan. Vivid examples of the amateur dance and vocal art were amateur ensembles, theatres of the kolkhozes named after Dimitrov, Polyarnaya Zvezda, and Severnyi Mayak located not far from Tashkent. The most well-known of them was a girls' dance ensemble "Chen-Chun of the famous kolkhoz Politotdel in Tashkent area. "Uzbekistan State Philharmonic" in 1969 created the first professional Korean dance and vocal group named "Kayagum" (Tin 2001, 81).

In Kazakhstan, similar amateur groups performed in the 1950–70s in the former Korean kolkhozes in Kzyl-Orda area and in Karatal region of the Taldy-Kurgan area. Because of the massive and boosted urbanization of the Korean population and migration of Korean farmers from the villages to the cities in the 1980s, many former Korean kolkhozes lost their specific ethnic nature. In Uzbekistan, big Korean kolkhozes functioned until the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the Korean amateur art was declining and in the mid-1980s, it was at risk of extinction.

Perestroika and democratization made all Soviet peoples want to return to their ethnic roots and restore their traditional customs, dances, songs, and above all, their native languages. When diplomatic relations between Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, other former republics, and South Korea were established, there was a great interest in South Korean culture, art, and anything with the label "Made in Korea."

Due to a number of reasons, Kazakhstan was chosen as a case for analysis of the folk dances of Korean diasporas in Central Asia. Exactly in this country are performing all three types of the dancing groups: the only one in the former Soviet Union professional Korean Theater, several semiprofessional and amateur dance ensembles in all provincial capitals, Almaty, Nur-Sultan, and other big cities.

Korean Theater in Almaty

The Korean theater in Kazakhstan (officially known as the State Republican Academic⁴ Korean Theater of Musical

⁴ Academic theater is an honorary title awarded to the biggest and oldest state theaters established in Soviet Russia and adopted by the Soviet Union. Upon the collapse of USSR, some of the former republics of the Union adopted this title.

Comedy) evolved from a centuries-long tradition within the Korean folk culture and dances. It is one of the oldest national theaters in Kazakhstan as well as the first national Korean theater outside the Korean Peninsula. For several decades, the Korean theater had been the center of the culture for the Soviet Koreans. Every year the theatre troupe went on artistic tours to the places of residence of Koreans. Another peculiarity was that all drama actors could dance and sing very well. That is why folk dances were an integral part of all performances of the theater in which spectators could watch and learn simple dance movements.

In 1967, the vocal-choreographic ensemble Arirang was formed and a dance group was organized in the Korean theatre; it helped to promote Korean folk dances. However, up to the mid-1980s, there was no cooperation between the Korean theatres and dance ensembles from either North or South. The folk dances performed by the Soviet Koreans in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were similar to the village group dances—moving in circle and waving their hands. In the 1960–80s, students of the Korean Department of Tashkent Theatrical Institute were taught the North Korean style of dancing.

By the end of the 1980s, their relations with the historical motherland were established. In 1989, the Korean Theater went on its first foreign tour to the DPRK. Thirty drama actors of the theatre troupe and ensemble Arirang participated in the festival “April Spring” in Pyongyang. In October 1989, for the first time in its history the Korean theatre was invited on an artistic tour to South Korea (Kim and Hwang 2019).

In the 1990s, the Korean theatre was developing cultural ties with South Korean theatres, cultural foundations, and dance schools. In 1992, five artists of the Korean theatre attended a three-month training course at the national theatre of the Republic of Korea. In November of the same year, 11 artists of the Korean theatre participated in the international festival “Year of Dance in Seoul.” South Korean directors, choreographers, and actors came to the Korean theatre to teach young actors performing art, dances, and singing; they also directed new productions. In 2006, Prof. Jin Soo Young from the Research Institute of Ritual Dances taught the

Korean theatre ballet dancers to perform classical dances. The Korean theatre concluded agreements and participated in the programs of the Overseas Koreans Foundation, which made it possible for the young artists to take annual training courses in Seoul and study drama art, choreography, and music there (Tsoi 2007, 148).

Semiprofessional Ensembles of Korean Dances

During the period of Perestroika and an explosion of the ethnic renaissance in the former Soviet Union there appeared amateur dance groups in all places with big Korean population. There were hundreds of them but the majority soon disappeared. The most successful and united groups with good and talented leaders and financial support managed to turn into semiprofessional dance groups. They started to perform for a pay at big family events: birthday parties, weddings, and 60th anniversary events. Bigger companies and private firms invited Korean dance ensembles to perform at their corporate events. They were popular for colorful dances with Korean national flavor performed by young girls. Payment for such performances was an additional or main source of income for members of such semiprofessional dance groups. Among Korean semiprofessional dance ensembles, a special place belongs to Bidulgi, a dance ensemble founded in 1990 by the state agency Kazakhconcert. The founder and leader of the group is the People's Artist of the Republic of Kazakhstan Rimma I. Kim (born 1946). The ensemble toured in the United States, North and South Korea, it is a winner of the Grand Prix of the Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan, performed at numerous art festivals of the Korean diaspora in Kazakhstan.

The total number of the girls who learned and practiced Korean dances under Rimma Kim is more than one thousand. At some events, over half of hundred girls of different ages danced simultaneously on the stages of the biggest concert

halls making a grandiose show. Bidulgi was twice on artistic tours to the United States, once in North Korea and several times in South Korea.

Dances performed by Bidulgi are influenced by the North Korean dance style due to the legacy of Rimma Kim who for a long time had been a prima and chief choreographer of the Korean theater.⁵

⁵ Rimma Kim, interview, September 17, 2019, Almaty.

The traditional Korean dance ensemble “Nam Sung” (“Southern Star”) was established in 2004 with the support from the Korean National center of Almaty. It continues to preserve the Korean culture, carefully saved by the ancestors. The repertoire of the ensemble includes at least twenty dances, representing the dances of the divided Korean Peninsula and Korean diaspora in Kazakhstan. The ensemble consists of three groups: (1) a younger group consisting of 10 dancers aged 4 to 7 years; (2) a middle group consisting of 10 dancers aged 8 to 12; and (3) a senior group of beginners—7 girls—and advanced dancers, the most numerous. The total number of the dancers is 40, with girls aged 4 to 25 years.⁶

⁶ Marina Kim, interview, September 21, 2019, Almaty.

Korean Amateur Dance Ensembles

At present, there are branches of the Association of Koreans in Kazakhstan in all regions (called “oblast”) of Kazakhstan, besides other Korean public organizations functioning there. The main aim of such organizations is to preserve traditional ethnic culture, teach the Korean language and promote consolidation within the Korean communities. As a rule, these Korean NGOs and Korean businessmen support amateur dance groups as they need financial support for buying traditional dresses, music instruments, audio equipment, renting dancing rooms, etc. Nevertheless, many of the amateur dance groups are not stable and often cease to exist due to many reasons. However, several dance groups have been performing for many years. One of them is Acheemnoul.

The amateur dance group Acheemnoul in Taldykorgan is one of the oldest in Kazakhstan. It was established at the end of the 1960s. Tatyana Nam was an enthusiastic person who

decided to organize a Korean dance group in Soviet times when nobody was thinking about Korean amateur art. The official date of birth of the group Acheemnoul is April 13, 1972, when the Korean amateur actors, singers, and musicians gave their first concert. The dancing group was directed by Galina Tsoy (Chwe), she was professionally educated in “Choreography of Russian dance.” The Ensemble became soon well-known in Kazakhstan.

Acheemnoul was a laureate of numerous national contests. It took part in eight Korean art festivals, organized by the Association of Koreans in Kazakhstan, and seven times won the Grand Prix. The dance group soon became widely known and gave concerts not only in Kazakhstan but also abroad, including Daegu, Busan, Seoul, Pyongyang, Suwon, Moscow, Krasnoyarsk, Tashkent, Dushanbe, and Berlin. In 1989, Acheemnoul for the first time went on a tour to Pyongyang at the invitation of the USSR Society of Friendship in North Korea. Twenty-one years later, in 2010, the troupe participated in the Days of Culture of Almaty region in Suwon, South Korea.⁷

⁷ Galina Tsoy, interview, September 18, 2012, Taldykorgan city.

In 1994, the Korean dance ensemble “Misson” was organized in Astana, the new capital of Kazakhstan. “Lyudmila Gatsenko, the Honored worker of culture of Kazakhstan, has been the leader of the group from the very start to present days. People’s Artist of Kazakhstan, Rimma I. Kim was invited on many occasions to assist in staging new dances, making the repertoire more diverse, and improving the skills of the group overall. She staged many wonderful dances such as “Dance with fans,” “Joy,” and “Bidulgi.” Misson adorned with their dances all events held by the Korean community association. It was a regular participant and winner of the republican festivals of Korean Art, Peoples’ Friendship Festival, and Day of Peoples Unity.⁸

⁸ Yelena Kim, interview, November 23, 2018, Almaty.

Elena Kim founded a dance school “Alex” in Kyzyl-Orda in 1997. Children of different nationalities learn classical, folk, and modern dances there. Korean dances are especially popular among the students who got many awards at various contests of dance and art festivals of the Korean culture.

Let us look at the table compiled based on several interviews with the leaders of the professional,

semiprofessional, and amateur dance groups. I asked several simple questions and all positive answers are indicated as “+” (plus) symbol and negative replies with “-” (minus) symbol. There are differences among the three types of the dance groups and they are mostly in the repertoire of the dances performed by them. Of course, an amateur dance group cannot perform the *ogomu* dance because it does not have expensive drums made in Korea or the *s’alpuri* dance that needs intensive rehearsals. However, the main reason for rejecting such dances is a passive reaction on the side of the spectators to the unfamiliar dances that appeared on the stages quite recently.

Table 1. Korean Folk Dances Performed in Kazakhstan

Name of the dance	Professional performance	Semiprofessional performance	Amateur performance	Historical period	NK or SK influence
<i>buchaech’um</i> (fan dance)	+	+	+	From early time	NK
<i>sogoch’um</i> (small hand-drum dance)	+	+	+	In the last decades	SK
<i>jangguch’um</i> (hour-glass drum dance)	+	+	+	From early time	NK
<i>ogomu</i> (five drum dance)	+	+	-	In the last 5-7 years	SK
<i>gōmmu</i> (sword dance)	+	+	-	In the last 5-7 years	NK
<i>bongsan t’alch’um</i> (bongsan masked dance)	+	-	-	In the last 5-7 years	SK
<i>salp’uri</i> (shaman ceremonial dance)	+	-	-	In the last 3-5 years	SK
<i>heungch’um</i> (folk dance)	+	-	-	In the last 3-5 years	SK
<i>kibangmu</i> (female entertainers’ dance)	+/-	-	-	In the last 3-5 years	SK
<i>hallyanmu</i> (male dance)	+/-	-	-	In the last 3-5 years	SK
<i>samgomu</i> (Buddhist drum dance)	+	-	-	In the last 3-5 years	SK
<i>ipch’um</i> (improvisational folk dance)	+	-	-	From early time	NK

North and South Korean Dance Styles in Kazakhstan

Interviews with Rimma Kim, Larissa Kim, and Marina Kim confirmed the author's assumption that before the establishment of diplomatic relations between Kazakhstan and South Korea, North Korean dance style was dominating in the professional and amateur dance art in Kazakhstan. The 24th Olympic Games in Seoul in 1988 lifted the iron curtain that was hiding South Korea from the eyes of the Soviet people.

However, given the fact that the socialist ideology penetrated all spheres including the art, it is understandable that cheerful, optimistic, rhythmic, and spectacular dances of North Korea caught the fancy of the Soviet Koreans (Ryzhenko 1986, 61–65). Moreover, even in the Soviet times, the Korean theater choreographers and dancers enriched traditional North Korean dances with elements of their own plastic movements, dance music, and attributes. This led to the appearance of a unique mix of the Soviet and North Korean choreography.

North Korean choreographers and dancers did not visit the Soviet Union frequently, but every visit, every lesson, every concert or a dance performance evoked great interest and attention among the Soviet Koreans.

According to Rimma Kim, the chief choreographer of the Bolshoi Theater in Pyongyang had a very profound influence in Central Asia. He gave lessons in Tashkent for 2–3 weeks and laid the fundamental basics of the Korean dance movements, such as slow and fast steps, spins, jumps, movements of shoulders, body, feet and legs, hands and mimics. Rimma Kim passed that knowledge and skills to hundreds of her dance students.

Today in South Korea there is a variety of courses, schools, and groups teaching and developing the dance techniques. Korean folk dances are considered to be innovative and unique in their style of performance. As a result, the influence of South Korean dance styles in Kazakhstan has increased markedly, as evidenced by the table data.

Table 2. Original Korean Dances Performed by the Dance Ensemble “Bidulgi” Directed by Rimma Kim

Name of the dance	Historical period	North (NK), South (SK) Korean influence or mixed (M)
Pearl	Started in 1970 in Korean theater till recent	NK
Joy	From 1990th	NK
Bidulgi	From 1990th	NK
Dance with wreath	Late 1990th	NK
Elegy	Early 2000th	M
Happy childhood	Early 2000th	M
Sarang	Early 2000th	SK
The peasant festivities	Late 1990th	NK

Table 3. Original Korean Dances Performed by the Dance Ensemble “Nam Sung” Directed by Marina Kim

Name of the dance	Historical Period	North (NK), South (SK) Korean influence or mixed (M)
South star	Initially	M
Star dance	last 5-6 years	M
Fairy’s dance	last 5-6 years	M
The sunrise	last 3-4 years	M
Black and white	last 3-4 years	M
Children dance	last 3-4 years	M

For Soviet Koreans, the Korean theatre in Almaty was the center of traditional dances and they bore strong North Korean influence. Until 10–15 years ago, *koryŏ saram* could not see any traditional mask or *salp’uri* dances, but only hear *samulnori* and *p’ansori* performances. At present they can attend dance classes in South Korea and the South Korean dance style is growing more and more popular not only among Koreans in Kazakhstan but also in Central Asia and Russia. The second wave of the Korean phenomenon known as *hallyu* came to Kazakhstan in the last decade and the Korean mass culture song/dance teams and individual performers have become very popular among the local young people.

Conclusion

Koreans of the Soviet Union and modern CIS countries have

never forgotten their folk dances. Traditional folk dances were performed on the stage of the Korean theatre by professional dancers, in the so-called Houses of culture in kolkhozes by amateur performers and at family gatherings by all those who wanted to dance. The roots of the Korean folk dances go back to the north of Chosŏn state of the 19th century, from where the settlers migrated to Russia in search of a better life. After the deportation of Koreans to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 1937, the ties of the Soviet Koreans with their ethnic motherland (North and South Korea) were broken and remained episodic for nearly half a century. Therefore, the influence of North Korean style in performing folk dances was dominating among the professional dancers of the Korean theatre even despite only occasional visits from Pyongyang. The power of such cultural impact was defined by the political and ideological rationale or “proletariat solidarity” together with controlled and planned development of the culture and art in the Soviet Union and North Korea. It was also due to the fact that during the period of the Cold War there was no competition on the part of South Korean dance style as Moscow and Seoul did not have official relations.

When the CIS countries and South Korea established diplomatic relations, the North Korean dance style started to lose its popularity. The influence of South Korea was growing with every passing year because of the dynamically increasing cooperation in the field of trade, economy, culture, and education. South Korea, being a country with advanced economy, was rendering all-round support within the frameworks of the ODA and sent volunteer-teachers including choreographers under the KOICA programs. Leading Korean theatres, schools of choreography, culture foundations, universities, corporations, and private persons supported the promotion of the national culture. The South Korean folk-dance style and repertoire were gaining popularity among the Korean dance groups in the CIS. Soon, the South Korean national dresses *hanbok*, fans, drums, and other musical instruments and accessories replaced everything that was sent from Pyongyang or brought by Central Asian Koreans from North Korea.

Thus, the growing cooperation with South Korea

in the field of trade and economy, its high status as an advanced country among the Central Asian states, as well as open borders facilitated a quick change of paradigms of the ethnic culture among Korean diasporas of Central Asia. Nevertheless, the North Korean folk-dance style is still present in the performances of the Korean theatre and semiprofessional and amateur dance groups.

The ethnic culture preserved by Korean diasporas of Central Asia is one of the most important components of their identity. In the relations between Korean diasporas and their historical motherland, represented by two Korean states, the ethnic culture and identity is of special importance for the politics. Governments of many countries devote great attention to preservation of native languages and ethnic culture among their compatriots abroad.

In this regard, expenses and financial means allocated by a historical motherland to its ethnic diasporas abroad should not be considered as sponsor's aid or financial support but rather as noneconomic investments aimed at strengthening its diasporic resources in the international relations.

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