Pushed Abroad: Remembering the Forgotten Histories of the Korean Diaspora

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In the early modern era, the movement of Koreans was initially limited, as it was “strictly controlled and discouraged” until the mid-nineteenth century. Like Japan before the Meiji Restoration, Korea exercised a stable, isolationist policy that not so much prohibited travel abroad but rather questioned the need for it altogether. As the century progressed, however, this stance was increasingly undermined, as interested European countries and imperial Japan began to pressure the Korean government to open its borders and revoke its “hermetic” attitude, ultimately culminating in the infamous Japan-Korea Treaty of Amity in 1876. Such pressure, however, further heightened the already existing domestic problems like famine and the rise of peasant uprisings. In the northeastern provinces, for instance, poor harvests during the late 1850s and 1860s brought ruin to farmers in the region—particularly the harvest of 1869—thereby leaving Koreans there with little option than to move north towards Manchuria, China, and even the Russian Far East. At the same time, a weak Korean government offered little hope of social mobility or opportunity, and many Koreans suffered from these impoverishing conditions. Many traveled from rural areas to urban centers in the hopes of improving their lives, but they were still plagued by limited economic policies and social corruption. But the poverty did not emerge in a vacuum; as author Tai-Hwan Kwon suggests, in addition to some of the aforementioned causes, “the growth of population destroyed the balance of land and population”, resulting in “chronic

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1 Brubacker and Kim 27
2 Um 124
3 Patterson 104, 118 (As cited by Park)
shortages of food and [in] the spread of sociopolitical unrest“⁴. In this context, Koreans began to venture outwards—both out of economic necessity and opportune timing.

It is important to consider, though, that the migration occurred because of the rise of external, extra-national influences. In this sense, these initial Korean migrants can be analyzed together under what social scientist Robin Cohen calls a “labour diaspora”⁵, insofar that these Korean workers traveled and created settlements in foreign countries and were, whether unwittingly or not, targeted for their work potential. These migrants often traveled with economic hopes but were frequently vulnerable to false promises and false dawns. The Korean state they left behind was fragile and, perhaps most importantly, on the precipice of foreign annexation. As such, there was not much of an obvious incentive to return, and there were physical and political obstacles that often-prevented return migration altogether. Korean migrants in this time period were thus notable for being some of the first to travel to these foreign nations and for developing a hitherto unique understanding of Korean identity—one that, for the first time in centuries, was determined through interaction with surrounding nations and peoples. More importantly, from this outside vantage point, they were able to see Korea from a new, global perspective. These immigrants who traveled abroad and even overseas often kept reminders of their heritage vis-à-vis language and music, but because of their labor conditions and overt “foreignness” to locals, had to slowly adopt and assimilate in order to have any chance of survival. That being said, many of the Koreans in these new communities would maintain a stubbornly proud and even nationalistic attitude and worldview, especially in the face of Korea’s struggles at the end of the nineteenth century and the looming Japanese occupation. These Korean migrants would differ in

⁴ Kwon 3-4
⁵ Cohen 6
behavior and traditions from the hundreds of thousands that would follow their footsteps in the following decades, yet they nonetheless established a precedent in these countries of how to live and how to maintain an interconnected community.

The Koreans who traveled to Russia in the mid and late nineteenth century would become the ancestors of the Koryo-saram, or ethnic Koreans living in Russia and Central Asia. Often considered as “Continental Koreans”\(^6\), primarily to differentiate them from the Korean migrants who would later travel to Sakhalin Island during World War II, these Koreans were the first to embrace migration to Russia in search of an alternative means of living. The farmers who migrated as a result of the agricultural and economic hardships in northern Korea were initially welcomed into the Russian Far East, as they were seen as a useful and steady source of cheap labor. The Russian administration in fact emphasized and exploited this through a Russo-Korean treaty in the late 1890s, wherein Koreans were offered legal status as citizens\(^7\) after migrating and provided with acres of land. To facilitate integration, they were also encouraged by the Russian military governors to convert to the Orthodox faith\(^8\). Despite these efforts, however, in the first years of migration in Russia, the Koreans lived in separate communities that were not too different from those in their homeland, as they managed to retain and continue to practice their own language, customs and other facets of daily life\(^9\). The opportunities for Russian citizenship aside, the proximity to the Korean peninsula and the relative newness of the migration ensured that the Korean migrants in Russia were still connected in one way or another.

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\(^6\) Saveliev 485  
\(^7\) Kim, Harris 359  
\(^8\) Saveliev 485-686  
\(^9\) Kim, German 65
to any economic and political developments back home. As the years passed, however, a distinctive identity would emerge in the face of the Japanese and Soviet influences.

While Koreans continued to move to Far East Russia at the turn of the century, other groups of Koreans began to move further abroad, towards Hawaii and even North America. These Koreans, mainly encouraged by the teachings and appeal of Christian missionaries, traveled and established settlements in Hawaii between 1903 and 1905. Many of these migrants, upon seeing advertisements detailing the opportunities abroad, departed from port cities in the south, but also from northern regions in Hwanghae and Pyongyang\(^\text{10}\). Although the fear of long-distance and the unknown prompted hesitation on the part of many individuals, the worsening conditions at home, and the exotic allure of the islands—coupled with the warm climate and a seemingly reliable sugar cane economy—convinced the migrants to take the risk. From the perspective of the American employers, the Koreans offered a valuable source of labor, especially when considering that other groups like the Chinese, who were at the time excluded from entering the country and its territories, were not viable solutions\(^\text{11}\). This is another way in which the conditions of the Korean state at the turn of the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century worked in the favor for international influences and to the detriment of this “labour diaspora” class. Of the 7,000 Koreans who traveled to Hawaii, only one-seventh of the migrant group were farmers, as the majority were instead “coolies”, common and manual laborers, ex-soldiers, and other workers\(^\text{12}\); most were also between the ages of twenty and thirty.

\(^{10}\) Sutton 99 -101

\(^{11}\) Gardner 2-4

\(^{12}\) Kim, Bernice 410
It is worth noting that many of the initial Koreans who traveled did so with the idea of returning home—despite the hardships—in order to raise funds and challenge Japanese hegemony. Once they arrived, however, many found such goals harder to achieve. The Korean migrants were divided into groups and were sent to work on the sugar cane plantations, where they struggled to meet daily needs, let alone make a profit. Although up to 2,000 Koreans returned to their homeland and another thousand traveled to California for other types of opportunities, others managed to continue to live among the plantations and carve a space for themselves on the islands. Within the various plantations, the Koreans established organizations where they could uphold a distinctively Korean social hierarchy, “foster nationalism”, and exercise “education and religious fellowship.” In this way, the migrants maintained an active connection to their homeland, despite the distance and their relative minimal political influence. These groups served a representative function for other Korean migrants at the time, insofar that they displayed a willingness to identify themselves as being deeply connected to the “national” cause. Rather than live abroad but remain detached from events back home, the Koreans in Hawaii believed their actions could enact some sort of difference and possibly raise awareness to their collective plight. At the same time, however, they began to lose some aspects of their cultural life; as Bernard Kim suggests, the Korean migrants on the islands began to lose most of their “outward characteristics of nationality.” They adopted western clothing and changed their traditional hairstyles, and though the immigrants naturally used the Korean language, their immediate offspring and subsequent generations began to adopt English as the de facto means of communication. Although this gradual assimilation into a larger culture is commonplace among

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13 Sutton 99-101
14 Kim, Bernice 410-411
15 Sutton 100
16 Kim, Bernice 410-411
diasporas around the world, the Korean migrants in Hawaii began this process while simultaneously preaching a nationalistic desire to return home and preserve an independent Korean state.

At the same time that Koreans were settling in Hawaii and ushering an age of migration to the United States, other migrants embarked on a long and often forgotten voyage to the Yucatan peninsula. It was here that the notion of the Koreans as a labor force was most heavily emphasized and even exploited. In 1905, 1,033 Koreans embarked on an English cargo ship called the SS Illford from Jaemulpo (today Incheon) to Mexico, to settle farms and work. The migrants imagined the journey as an opportunity for prosperity and success; they were planning on eventually returning to Korea and improving the standard of living there. They did not expect to discover the difficult living conditions that awaited them once they arrived; instead, they were forced into indentured servitude on henequen plantations.

The illegal enterprise was manufactured by an international immigrant broker hired by henequen plantation owners, called John. G. Meyers, via the “Continental Migration Company”17. Having failed to convince Chinese and Japanese immigrants to travel to Mexico because of the poor labor conditions, Meyers traveled to Korea and recruited potential migrants through various advertisements in local newspapers, promising wealth and a favorable labor contracts18. The plantation owners in Mexico were interested in a potential Asian labor force because the Maya workers present could not adequately address the intense and slave-like labor demands. Known as the “green gold” for its high demand and revenue, henequen was an important crop used to

17 Kim, Hankyung 247-248
18 Ibid 248
make rope and twine and was essential in the Mexican economy, and so it was no surprise that
the plantation owners were trying to somehow alleviate their labor shortage by manipulating an
eager Korean population. But as scholar Hankyung Kim suggests, the Mexicans were
“economically motivated to welcome Korean labor but not politically motivated to protect or aid
Korean settlement in Yucatán”\(^{19}\). The Koreans who read the advertisements believed the
promises that were given to them, and once they realized their precarious situations, it was far
too late for them to affect any change.

After ultimately arriving in the city of Merida, the Korean workers underwent immediate
physical and dental inspections and were divided into groups to be dispatched to haciendas, or
plantation farms\(^{20}\). They were tied to four-year contracts and nine-hour long work days, and the
incentives that originally motivated their travel abroad, like education and property, were
nonexistent. Within these conditions, the Korean migrants continued to speak their own language
and maintain their own diet—they even created Korean-style kitchens where they made variants
of Kimchi and other Korean dishes\(^{21}\). And like their Russian diasporic counterparts, the Koreans
upheld a closed and intimate community with one another. Despite this, however, the Koreans in
Mexico slowly had to adopt to their isolated circumstances, and this subtle yet important
transformation was exemplified when their Korean surnames were changed to sound more
compatible with Spanish, when “Kim” often became “Kin”, and “Ko” became “Corona”, and so
forth\(^{22}\).

\(^{19}\) Ibid 244  
\(^{20}\) Park 144  
\(^{21}\) Ibid 146  
\(^{22}\) Ibid 146
Once their contracts were completed, many Koreans still yearned to return home, but could not do so because of the meagre salaries they endured while working at the plantations. Most noteworthy, the change of political power back in Korea drastically obstructed any possibility for Koreans to travel back. As a result of the Korean-Japanese Treaty in 1905 and subsequent annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910, Korea was no longer an internationally recognized nation, and thus the notion of a Korean identity no longer existed in the way it had previously. As such, the Korean immigrants “were no longer with a country to represent them and protect their rights on foreign soil due to the lack of an internationally acknowledged national identity and their then diplomatically defunct government”.23 As such, though a significant number of the migrants in Mexico would later travel to Cuba to work in the potentially more profitable sugar economy24, most of the Korean migrants had to settle and discover a new home in Central America. The Korean immigrants transitioned from a “labour diaspora” into one effectively in exile, living between national states than belonging to any.

The Koreans in Hawaii thus also faced limitations in returning home, as they too had to accept the idea of permanent settlement; following Korea’s annexation, it became the preferred option25. In fact, many Korean migrants rallied together behind the belief that they had to do everything they could to liberate Korea from Japan. As scholar Arthur Gardner states, the Koreans in Hawaii forged “a nationalist sentiment out of all proportion to their numbers in their new land”, and the liberation became “the one critical and dominant issue for the whole community”26. In the subsequent years, Korean male immigrants on the islands would thus encourage the

23 Kim, Hankyung 258
24 Kim, Michael Vince, 2018.
25 Sutton 100
26 Gardner 3
migration of “picture brides”, to promote the creation of Korean families and communities, under the influence of the Christian missionary faith\textsuperscript{27}. Such a phenomenon also occurred in Fat East Russia, when the number of migrants in continued to grow between the turn of the century and the 1910s as a result of the Japanese conquests. In the span of ten years, the Korean population in the region doubled, as thousands of anti-Japanese rebels were accepted\textsuperscript{28}. A Korean town was also established in the eastern part of Vladivostok, as a Korean nationalist movement “opposed to Japanese colonialism” surged through the region\textsuperscript{29}. In fact, the October Revolution of 1917 further incentivized and united Koreans to the Soviet cause, as the ideals inspired Koreans to believe that they could ensure Korean liberation\textsuperscript{30}. In this way, the events occurring in the Korean homeland accelerated the process of “sovietization” for these immigrants, in turn allowing them to better integrate and develop within Russian society.

\textbf{Works Cited and Bibliography:}


Gardner, Arthur Leslie. \textit{The Koreans in Hawaii; an annotated bibliography}. Honolulu, Social Science Research Institute, University of Hawaii, 1970.

\textsuperscript{27} Kim, Bernice 412

\textsuperscript{28} Saveliev 485

\textsuperscript{29} Um 124

\textsuperscript{30} Kim, German 66


