

The Forgotten Histories of the Korean Diaspora

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ABSTRACT :

The Korean diaspora has often be studied in relation to its country's economic resurgence after a politically turbulent and traumatic century, but what mechanisms allowed for the initial movement of Korean peoples away from the Korean peninsula? And how did the way in which the Korean migrants moved to a county, as well as the historical processes affecting the mainland, affect the way in which Korean identity is forged? The East Foundation attempts to delineate the history of the Korean diaspora by focusing on four distinct, initial "waves" of migration, each characterized by an overarching economic and political condition that prompted both the incidental movement away from the Korea peninsula and formed the basis for a continually shifting understanding of Korean identity. Although the differing nations in which they traveled to diversely affected their lifestyles, the voluntary or forced migration patterns established a unique Korean psyche for adaptation, relocation, and persistence.

Introduction: De-centering Korean Migration and Remembering the Forgotten Histories of the Korean Diaspora

In a small museum in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, a Soviet-style portrait of a man hangs in the center of the room above a neatly furnished desk. Below the painting is an inscription with Cyrillic text, flanked on each side by a vertical column of words written in Korean. It reads “I have found a new home in this land”¹, and the site serves as a memento to the Korean collective and its leader, Kim Pen Xva, who developed a sustaining Korean community in this part of Central Asia. This is a description of a photograph by Korean-Argentine artist and photographer Michael Vince Kim, who has through his art aimed to address the complex search for Korean identity in the oftentimes forgotten or far-away communities of the Korean diaspora. Like his photography, a museum in Merida, Mexico also reminds onlookers of another community, one that many generations ago lived through the hardships of the henequen plantations and that has found a new home far away from the Korean peninsula. One painting at the site shows a group of Korean men with their traditional hairstyle with tanned skins, toiling away in the hot Yucatan sun². The artifacts of these two locations, as well as the work by Kim, point to a certain determination and adaptation of its migrant communities; more importantly, they allude to a dynamic and multilingual experience, where displacement is processed through a series of foreign interactions and assimilations. These images together undermine a straightforward notion of Korean homogeneity, and instead illustrate the possible diversity and complexity of the Korean diaspora. But how did these people arrive in these places, and what could have possibly motivated them to

¹ Kim, Michael Vince, “Artist’s Statement”

² *Yo Soy Coreana*

leave their homeland? What distinguishes the Korean diaspora from other diasporas scattered throughout the world?

Diasporic studies have been an ever-burgeoning field of study in the past century, one that has been marked by its continual metamorphoses as the personal accounts of immigrants have become more well-known and researched. As such, it is at times difficult to arrive at a single definition for the term, especially when it has come to explain a myriad of distinct social processes and movements across the world and throughout history. But there are a few factors that seem to describe and apply to the term regardless of place or people, and it often has to do with the way in which migrants travel to another nation and the way in which they seek to interact with their homeland. As scholar Kenneth Omeje explains in his analysis of African overseas communities, *diaspora* frequently refers to a group of individuals who have been “forced or compelled to move from their traditional homeland to a new Settlement, without completely losing all the elements of their original identity”; as time passes, notions of their identity also transform³. They not only form bonds with each other, but also maintain their ethnic or national heritage through shared religion, language, and customs. Subsequent generations, depending on their interaction with the dominant culture in which they live in, may reject or accept certain traditions through a complex process of assimilation and later experience a personal and collective change in identity.

In his study of diaspora and transnationalism, sociologist Thomas Faist offers a similar introductory definition of *diaspora*, but also suggests that an important facet of the term is how it “links cross-border experiences of homeland with destination” and speaks of the return to an

³ Omeje 94-95

“imagined homeland”⁴. The diasporic process is not merely defined by the movement from an origin to destination; instead, it can include a series of “onward migration”, where communities are continually formed across a series of places, throughout time. Individuals frequently move from one place to another, whether voluntarily or by coercion, and accumulate these disparate experiences. The diasporic narrative, in this case, is one that develops across several, even different historical moments, and is just as dynamic as the identities of its immigrants.

But what is this imagined homeland? In his work *Global Diasporas*, social scientist Robin Cohen defines it as a key aspect to any diasporic community; it is “an idealization of the real or imagined ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation”⁵. It is not centered on a specific place per se, but in a general understanding or remembering of a way of life; an example could be Zion for the Jewish diaspora or West Africa for black descendants in the New World. This notion ties in with Cohen’s subsequent criteria for *diaspora*, which includes the idea of a “return movement to the homeland”, and “a strong ethnic group consciousness based on a sense of distinctiveness”, one that is intimately coupled with a shared, ultimate “belief in a common fate”⁶.

For Koreans, this “common fate” has frequently emerged through turbulent political and historical conflicts with nearby and external nations, especially in the twentieth century, as a result of Japanese imperialism and the destructive Korean War, and later with an ever-increasing United States political and military influence. In his work on diasporic Korean art, Hijoo Son suggests that there is an underlying “master narrative” of Korean history that, for better or for

⁴ Faist 12

⁵ Cohen 17

⁶ Ibid

worse, imposes itself upon the lives of all Koreans, one that emphasizes a “history of suffering” and a “strong belief in the homogeneity of the Korean people”⁷. The difficult lifestyles and personal accounts of overseas Koreans is often understood solely within “the broader context of national suffering of modern Korea”; as a result, its diasporic communities are naturally deemed to be supportive of efforts to “rebuild and develop” a stronger Korean state⁸. While this may be true, especially of initial immigrants to countries like the United States, where the shared suffering served as a call to solidify a sense of community, it is far too limited to study the different overseas communities from only this vantage point. Such an understanding limits the scope of what it means to be Korean, insofar that it does not address the transformative and dynamic influences that consistently shape and alter notions of identity. These narratives also tend to obscure and prohibit those migrant stories that seem to exist away from, at least superficially, the possibility of return migration, and that have little to do with current Korean politics and economic development. How are we to understand, for example, the generations of Cuban Koreans who have lived separated from their homeland for almost a century, or of the Koreans who have grown up in Germany and Europe after their parents had decided to settle and establish new homes? Are those stories destined to be lost to time if they do not fall under the notion of a collective suffering?

That is not to say that we must overlook the role of the historical processes that have brought some Koreans to their eventual communities in the first place; such factors are always important and necessary in trying to understand the causes of their migration and how they relate to their native heritage. But they do not affect all the communities the same way and its impressions are

⁷ Son 156

⁸ Son 158

susceptible to change; the effects of such events differ from country to country, as well as from generation to generation. As scholar Gali Weiss suggests, diasporic identity is more complex than merely where one is from and where they now live: “diasporic consciousness involves a sense of difference and multiplicity of belonging, a sense of ‘otherness’, and hence of displacement”⁹. Korean migrants experience the suffering of their homeland, but also do not, and instead face struggles that challenge different aspects of who they are. As such, in studying the Korean diaspora, it is important to not only learn why and how certain peoples migrated, but to also discover how they interacted and reintegrated themselves in wholly new environments. The story of Korean migration is consequently one made up of innumerable yet invaluable individual stories that, taken together, amount to a powerful collective understanding of a given moment in history, but that also have value for the distinct ways in which they process these overarching “master” narratives. To quote Hijoo Son again, in interview with professor Y. David Chung, “the circumstances of their movement shape their ideas about Korean identity” and “decenter the concept of Korean diaspora”¹⁰. In order to address the creation of these Korean communities in regions like Central Asia and the Americas, it is important to accept the various Korean identities possible that exist and cross ethnic and national boundaries.

In this paper, I argue that the way in which the disparate Korean groups migrated and subsequently settled in their new countries not only affected their assimilation into these cultures, but also influenced how they remembered and reimagined their Korean heritage and language. In turn, such narratives would affect how these Koreans would later return or maintain their connection to the Korean homeland. These divergent individual and collective experiences

⁹ Weiss 60

¹⁰ Sun & Chung, “In Conversation”

complicate the notion of a “fixed” Korean identity, while concurrently examining the parallels between the Korean diasporas living across the world. In this way, rather than emphasizing the “where” and “when” of these groups, a greater emphasis is placed upon the lasting influences of initial movement abroad, and how it creates unique worldviews that exist between languages, cultures, and time.

As such, I delineate the history of the Korean diaspora by four distinct and initial “waves” of migration, each characterized by an overarching economic and political condition that prompted both the incidental movement away from the Korea peninsula and formed the basis for a continually metamorphosing understanding of Korean identity. Although the differing nations in which they traveled to diversely affected their lifestyles, the voluntary or forced migration patterns established a unique Korean psyche for adaptation, relocation, and persistence.

In the first section, I offer an account of the first communities of the Korean diaspora of the modern era, from the 1850s to 1910s, within the context of a quickly changing and weakening Korean state. I explain that the sudden movement to nearby countries like Far East Russia and China, as well as to further nations abroad like Hawaii and Mexico, stems from a disjointed and precarious state at home, where Japan and other foreign nations began to exert their political influence over the peninsula. Economic and cultural hardships thus encouraged Koreans to look outwards for opportunities; as a result, many Koreans traveled abroad as a potential labor workforce. In the second chapter, I discuss the forced migration of Koreans to Japan and Sakhalin Island, as well as the relocation of the “Koryo-saram” in Russia to far-off regions in Central Asia. This generation of Korean migrants had to adapt to the loss of their native country

and reconcile their national and collective identity against the subjugation at the hands of Japanese and Soviet policies throughout the early twentieth century and the Second World War.

In the third chapter, I examine the voluntary and government-endorsed movement to Europe and South America, in nations like Germany, Argentina, and Brazil. This wave of immigration occurred after the creation of a North and South Korean state following the Korean War; consequently, many of these immigrants carried with them legacies and personal histories of their divided home. Finally, in the last chapter, I look at the role of diasporic communities in the development of the Korean state and economy in recent decades. These communities are emblematic of a greater trend of twenty-first century globalization, insofar that they are not solely narratives of assimilation; instead, these communities encourage constant movement and travel between their country of origin and subsequent destinations. These circumstances allowed for the Korean diaspora to be fiscally and culturally important and recognized overtime. I also discuss how several government policies, coupled with the economic developments, paved the way for mass return migration to Korea, as members of diasporic communities returned to their homeland and faced experiences that further challenged notions of identity and belonging within Korean society.

This paper then can be read as a supplemental history of the Korean diaspora, insofar that I focus on the smaller communities that exist alongside the more established and numbered Korean communities in countries like China and the United States. The different ways of traveling induced different ways of remembering Korea, and such circumstances laid the foundations for

how such a remembering effectively coincides with the idea of a transnational “Koreaness”, and for a comprehensive appreciation of the diversity of the Korean diaspora today.

Pushed Abroad, the 1850s-1910s: Weak national economic conditions and labor opportunities in Far East Russia, Hawaii, and Mexico.

In the early modern era, the movement of Koreans was initially limited, as it was “strictly controlled and discouraged” until the mid-nineteenth century¹¹. 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 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 1869¹²—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 corruption¹³. But the poverty did not emerge in a vacuum; as author Tai-Hwan Kwon suggests, in addition to some of the aforementioned causes,

¹¹ Brubacker and Kim 27

¹² Um 124

¹³ Patterson 104, 118 (As cited by Park)

“the growth of population destroyed the balance of land and population”, resulting in “chronic shortages of food and [in] the spread of sociopolitical unrest”¹⁴. 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 also 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”¹⁵, 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

¹⁴ Kwon 3-4

¹⁵ Cohen 6

Korean migrants would differ in 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”¹⁶, 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 citizens¹⁷ 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 faith¹⁸. 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 life¹⁹. 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 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.

¹⁶ Saveliev 485

¹⁷ Kim, Harris 359

¹⁸ Saveliev 485-686

¹⁹ Kim, German 65

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 Pyongyang²⁰. Although the fear of long-distance travel 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 solutions²¹. This is another way in which the conditions of the Korean state at the turn of the 19th 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 workers²²; most were also between the ages of twenty and thirty.

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 hegemony²³. Once

²⁰ Sutton 99 -101

²¹ Gardner 2-4

²² Kim, Bernice 410

²³ Sutton 99-101

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 opportunities²⁴, 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”²⁵. 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 change 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”²⁶. 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 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.

²⁴ Kim, Bernice 410-411

²⁵ Sutton 100

²⁶ Kim, Bernice 410-411

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 work²⁷. 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”²⁸. 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 favorable labor contracts²⁹. The plantation owners in Mexico were interested in a potential Asian labor force because the Maya workers already 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 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

²⁷ Park, Hea-jin 138

²⁸ Kim, Hahkyung 247-248

²⁹ Ibid 248

were “economically motivated to welcome Korean labor but not politically motivated to protect or aid Korean settlement in Yucatán”³⁰. 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 farms³¹. 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 nonexistent³². 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 dishes³³. 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 forth³⁴.

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

³⁰ Ibid 244

³¹ Park 144

³² Ibid 144

³³ Ibid 146

³⁴ Ibid 146

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”.³⁵ As such, though a significant number of the migrants in Mexico would later travel to Cuba to work in the potentially more profitable sugar economy³⁶, 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 option³⁷. 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”³⁸. In the subsequent years, Korean male immigrants on the islands would thus encourage the migration of “picture brides”, to promote the creation of Korean families and communities, under the influence of the Christian missionary faith³⁹. Such a phenomenon also occurred in Far East Russia, when the number of migrants in continued to grow between the turn of the century

³⁵ Kim, Hahkyung 258

³⁶ Kim, Michael Vince, 2018.

³⁷ Sutton 100

³⁸ Gardner 3

³⁹ Kim, Bernice 412

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 accepted⁴⁰. A Korean town was also established in the eastern part of Vladivostok, as a Korean nationalist movement “opposed to Japanese colonialism” surged through the region⁴¹. 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 liberation⁴². 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.

To summarize, the nineteenth century marked a turning point for the Korean peninsula, as Koreans began to emigrate to other lands on a large-scale for the first time in centuries. Unstable, deteriorating economic and agricultural conditions at home, as well as the growing sovereignty of nearby nations, prompted many Koreans to venture out of their homeland and settle in nearby regions like Far East Russia and Manchuria, and even in faraway lands like the United States and Central America. Their willingness to improve their standards of living, however, often left them vulnerable to manipulation and deceit, as many Korean migrant groups were targeted by other governments or agencies for their potential as an inexpensive labor force. Koreans traveled to Hawaii and Mexico, consequently, with promises of financial opportunity, but instead had to work as indentured servants on sugar and henequen plantations. The immigrants in Hawaii, however, would serve as an example for other generations of Korean migrants in the United States, as they would preserve important Korean language and cultural traditions. In Mexico, the Koreans slowly adapted to their unexpected conditions, to the extent that their assimilation in the

⁴⁰ Saveliev 485

⁴¹ Um 124

⁴² Kim, German 66

dominant Mexican culture was perhaps more thorough—and subsequently forgotten—than in other communities. These Korean migrants would continue to look for other possible locations and would lead them to settlements in Cuba and other countries. In Far Eastern Russia meanwhile, Koreans managed to escape the farming droughts back home and establish the first diasporic communities in the region—many of which would continue to accept more Korean migrants in the subsequent decades.

But as the Japanese influence loomed larger by the beginning of the twentieth century, the migrant connections to the Korean homeland grew more complex and their identities became blurred. The Korean migrants of this era thus faced a crossroads in their sojourns abroad: They had to reconsolidate their initial and personal aims within the context of a nation in increasing distress. For some Koreans, the only viable way to exercise their Korean identity was to increase nationalistic fervor and continue travel to already established communities, but in the process acknowledge their inability to affect the struggles in Korea. The shifting political and societal dynamics of the Korean peninsula in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century therefore demonstrate the ongoing and constantly evolving effects of migration. When Korea fell to Japanese conquest in 1910, these migrants were no longer of one place or another, and as such the way they assimilated into their new territories was radically different, especially when considering that they could no longer return to their country of origin. The migration processes are dependent upon the metamorphosing objectives and desires of its peoples, and in this time period, the Korean people began to realize that to be Korean was to work towards a potential, if implausible, return and liberation. In the ensuing years following Japanese rule, Koreans would continue to move abroad—in part motivated by these initial travelers—but would have to adapt

in ways that further challenged the notion of a Korean identity. The narrative of the Korean diaspora would change and develop as a result of the traumatic and forced displacements to come, further complicating the roots and collective memories of these migrant communities.

Japanese Imperialism and Soviet Influence: Colonial Migrations and Forced Displacements from 1910 to 1945

The story of the Korean migrants in the first half of the twentieth century, up around to World War II, is one characterized by a constant identity struggle and of repeated, forced adaptation, as Koreans were increasingly at the whim of surrounding political and national entities. If the early Korean migrants set a precedent for leaving their country and establishing communities abroad, the subsequent generation of migrants were instead victims of an increasingly tense, tumultuous, and volatile East Asia, one in which Korea as a nation did not exist. These Korean migrants had to adapt to the loss of their native country and reconcile their national and collective identity against influences that pushed them from one place to another. Following the Japanese annexation in 1910, Korea was now governed by the Japanese imperial government and treated as a colony. And almost immediately, a large number of Koreans voluntarily and forcibly migrated to Japan and the Soviet Union, as better options for life seemed to only exist outside the peninsula. For the Korean migrants in faraway settlements in Far East Russia, Hawaii, Mexico and other locations, Korea as a “homeland” only existed in the imagination, insofar that the country they once left was no more; rather, their fates were inevitably tied to the decisions and success of the overarching Japanese hegemony. Though some attempted to return home, all Koreans abroad now faced the struggle of feeling stateless, of being caught between multiple worlds. The question facing many migrants of this era was not simply: “What does it mean to be Korean”, but also “Where now is Korea”—their homeland. The Korean migrants who traveled to Japan and the Soviet Union were, like their compatriots at home, under constant pressure to align their identities with the expectations of the overarching society, and frequently compensated aspects of their life to better adapt and live in these demanding and unwanted territories. At the

same time, other migrants traveled to these nations despite the difficulties because they believed it nonetheless provided them with a greater chance of a better life. In this way, through a series of ongoing migration patterns, from one place to another, the Koreans of this era tried to persevere through these conflicts and maintain a sense of collective unity.

Immediately after the Japanese conquest of the Korean peninsula, Koreans initially traveled to Japan in hopes of improved living conditions, and in this sense were not unlike the generations of migrants who preceded them in the late nineteenth century. Before the annexation of 1910, the Korean community in Japan consisted of an assorted group of students and merchants, in the low thousands⁴³, but poverty and agricultural exploitation prompted many Koreans to leave their country and settle in Japan and even Manchuria (which was no longer part of China but rather another section of the increasing Japanese Empire). According to scholar Tai Hwan Kwon, the emigrations to these regions were both rooted in a steep “deterioration of agriculture” and in the “extreme poverty of average Korean farmers” typically caused by the “exploitation of the colonial regime”⁴⁴. The scarce farming conditions in the southern Korean peninsula, coupled with the increasing demand for laborers, ensured that Korean migration would continue rather than decrease in the subsequent colonial years. In the 1920s, particularly during the global depression, the shortage of “unskilled, menial labor” in Japan further accelerated Korean migration to the region, as Koreans voluntarily traveled to take advantage of such conditions⁴⁵. Simultaneously, during the first decade of Japanese occupation, several Koreans also traveled to Manchuria to also escape poverty or to ambitiously establish an independence movement⁴⁶.

⁴³ Lie 4

⁴⁴ Kwon 6

⁴⁵ Lee 208

⁴⁶ Kwon 4

Though they were technically colonial subjects and part of a larger and complex Japanese hierarchal society, the Koreans in prewar Japan (and its constituent states) could be seen as another example of Cohen's "labour diaspora"⁴⁷, to the extent that the migrants were actively moving abroad as a result of being recruited for their potential as a cheap source of labor.

This migration, though later exploited at the start of World War II, was nonetheless mostly voluntary at first, even if the working conditions would prove to be brutal and easily manipulatable. It is important to note that of these prewar Korean laborers in Japan, over "ninety percent" were from "displaced, impoverished peasant households" from Korea's southern provinces of Cholla, Kyongsang, and Cheju; and many were enlisted through extensive recruitment programs and professionals⁴⁸. From an economic and societal perspective, Korea was still suffering from years of poverty and instability. In this sense, the Japanese conquest was a sign of Korea's weak and fallen stature; as such, it was not surprising that the number of immigrants abroad in general had risen. Although there were very high tensions between the two nations, for impoverished Koreans, "employment in Japan was preferable to starvation in Korea", and many willed themselves to abandon their homes to establish new communities in regions like Osaka and Hyogo⁴⁹. Despite those intentions, life in Japan was not easy, even if some considered it to still be slightly better than the conditions on the Korean peninsula. Working in construction fields, factories, mines, and agriculture, the Koreans in Japan were routinely discriminated against and "subjected to inferior social and economic working conditions"⁵⁰, as they were not held in the same degree as Japanese workers. Furthermore, because they lacked the

⁴⁷ Cohen 6, see earlier chapter for similar definition

⁴⁸ Lee 208

⁴⁹ Weiner 65-66, as quoted in Bumsoo Kim 236

⁵⁰ Lee 209

prerequisite technical skills and language abilities, these migrants could not aim to have desirable jobs, and instead had to “compete with the lowest strata of the Japanese labor force”⁵¹. In fact, the Korean workers were often paid an inferior wage compared to their Japanese counterparts, and many were tied to complex and vague employment contracts, sometimes resulting in conditions akin to “conscripted labor”⁵².

Such scenarios were ubiquitous among the Korean migrants in Japan and resulted in a highly disenfranchised and disconnected minority group, as many Koreans lived in “relative isolation from mainstream society” and formed extensive ghetto communities⁵³. For comparison, although a similar degree of segregation occurred in migrant settlements in Manchuria, the Korean migrants there comprised “the dominant ethnic group” and consequently did not have to compromise their strong communal unity⁵⁴. On the other hand, the discrimination and the social divide between the Japanese and the Koreans in mainland Japan may have stemmed in part from an openly enforced Japanese distinction between “inland” and “outland” imperial subjects: Koreans were not Japanese citizens and therefore treated as inferior, even if the idea of “formal integration”—or forced Korean assimilation into Japanese culture—was officially propagated⁵⁵. This notion served to heighten the already-present historical tension between the two ethnicities. In this way, Koreans had to learn how to operate in a societal structure where they were consistently defined as “other”, as they worked to form a personal and collective identity that was in opposition to an overbearing and suffocating Japanese majority.

⁵¹ Pak 46-5, as quoted in Bumsoo Kim 236

⁵² Lee 209

⁵³ Lie 8

⁵⁴ Kwon 6

⁵⁵ Lie 9

In keeping with the general mood of Korean nationalism, these sentiments routinely resulted in “manifestations of Korean resistance”, whether it was through a series of protests or small, domestic disputes⁵⁶. But despite these constant struggles, the number of Korean laborers in Japan rose to 300,000 in the 1920s, and more than doubled to 800,000 between 1931 and 1938, before the onset of the second world war⁵⁷. This number surged once the war began, as Koreans were forcibly recruited to compensate for labor shortages: In 1939 hundreds of thousands of Koreans were taken to the Japanese mainland to work in mines and factories; this number grew to over two million by 1945⁵⁸. The need for labor, as well as high unemployment rates in Korea, prompted this increased movement across the entirety of the Japanese Empire, as Koreans were involuntarily displaced to compensate for the Empire’s faltering economy⁵⁹. But even before Koreans were forced to migrate and relocate to Japan, hundreds of thousands of Koreans believed that the only feasible opportunities existed outside their impoverished, native communities and in Japan. Many did not feel that assimilating into Japanese society—through the exclusive use of the Japanese language, for instance—or living away from Korea compromised their desires for an independent Korean state; in some cases, it provided a potential pathway away from poverty and towards modernity⁶⁰. But the very need for assimilation, or the need to travel away from home, was indicative of the precarious state Koreans as a whole found themselves in: their fates were intertwined with the success of the Japanese society, especially because of the vast influence and authority of the imperial regime.

⁵⁶ Lie 6

⁵⁷ Lee 208

⁵⁸ Son, In Soo 7

⁵⁹ Saveliev 486

⁶⁰ Lie 9

At around the same time as the number of migrants to Japan increased, a large influx of Koreans continued to settle in Far Eastern Russia and build upon the communities that were already established there in the nineteenth century. Previously referred to in the previous chapter as the “Continental Koreans”⁶¹—as per scholar Igor Saveliev—but commonly referred to in diasporic studies as “Koryo-saram”⁶², these migrants inhabited cities such as Vladivostok and were a valuable community for the cultivation of the local agriculture. Although the rise of the Bolsheviks resulted in the destruction of some Korean farms in the region, by the 1920s Koreans were once again prospering and recognized as a nationality in the USSR⁶³. Their political and societal influence was increasingly felt, as they created Korean schools, established Korean-language newspapers and communist literature, and even endorsed Soviet propaganda; they even developed “rice-growing agricultural communes”⁶⁴ in nearby areas. Elsewhere, the Koreans migrants played an active role in the new Soviet government and in its social organizations, as many Koreans were educated in the universities throughout Russia’s large cities⁶⁵. The increased political influence by Korean leaders of the Communist Party further accelerated the growth of the Korean population⁶⁶. As a result, Japan’s annexation of Korea seemed to only consolidate the Korean migrant presence that already existed in the Soviet Far East, as the population grew to over 150,000 by 1926, even prompting some Soviet officials to contemplate the creation of an autonomous Korean territory⁶⁷. Such a proposal was eventually dismissed after lengthy debates, but it serves to underline the extent of Korean influence in the region towards the beginning of the 1930s. The Korean generation that had arrived because of the farming droughts and poor

⁶¹ Saveliev 485

⁶² Kim, German 69

⁶³ Buchkin 18

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Kim, German 66

⁶⁶ Kim, Alexander 266(a)

⁶⁷ Martin 834

economic conditions in the nineteenth century had risen through the October Revolution and allied themselves closer, in principle, to Soviet ideals. Even though many Koreans were landless and cultivated rented land, their numbers were such that they were nonetheless a noteworthy minority⁶⁸. Unlike the migrants in Japan, the process of assimilation did not initially seem to be coercive or absolute; Koreans in the Soviet Far East continued to practice their language and their heritage, without an overt fear of societal or job persecution. In this way, the Soviet Union appeared as a veritable alternative to the poor and debilitating conditions back in the Korean mainland and in Japan.

Despite those initial successes, however, the Soviet Union and its peoples were increasingly anxious of the rising numbers of Koreans in the Far Eastern regions. Korea throughout this time period was, regardless of its peoples' desires, a subject of the Imperial Japanese government and as such garnered suspicion or, at worst, complete distrust from the Soviet government. Although the Korean migrants may have renounced and even fought against Japanese interests, the USSR's increasing tensions with Japan heightened nerves and "racist attitudes", as the Soviet leaders began to take measures to decrease Korean—and therefore possibly Japanese— influence⁶⁹. The Soviets' seemingly ambivalent attitude towards Korean migration rapidly transformed into resentment and even fear. For the Koreans, a voluntary process of thorough assimilation may have alleviated such anxieties, but it did little to fully eradicate those fears, especially as Koreans continued to move across the Soviet borders. Consequently, Stalin's forces began to deport Korean "kulaks" (peasants) to "inhospitable lands" as early in 1930 and 1931

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Gelb 398

and continued to do so throughout most of the decade⁷⁰. The NKVD, a precursor to the Soviet KGB, were increasingly wary of the possible threat of Japanese espionage, while Stalin himself resented the “bourgeois nationalism” of the Korean political circles in places like Vladivostok⁷¹. As a result, Stalin and Molotov (a high-ranking Soviet politician) created a draft proposal for the deportation and relocation of the Korean migrants in the Far East, one that initially aimed to deport a few thousand individuals, but then later amended to remove “every last Korean” from the region⁷². According to scholar German Kim, this dramatic and large-scale relocation was a “logical continuation of earlier Czarist and Soviet policies relating to national minority populations”, but one could also argue that the Koreans, like other ethnic groups throughout the Soviet Union, were targeted for a myriad of random or disparate reasons, and especially for their complicated relationship with Japan. In this way, even the Korean migrants who managed to escape the immediate control of Japanese authorities could not change their status as colonial subjects; like a mark on their head, their new, imposed identities could not simply be erased or forgotten. For the Koreans who lived in the Soviet society for over a generation and had adopted the local language and traditions, their assimilation ultimately did not spare them, as they were still seen as Koreans—as outsiders to Stalin’s conception of Soviet life. The looming influence of the Japanese and Soviet policies demonstrate the difficulty for migrants in diasporic communities to develop and maintain an individual identity, while the deportation shows how vulnerable these groups can be to sudden changes in administration, policy, and favor.

As such, towards the end of 1937, hundreds of thousands of the Korean migrants were relocated to Soviet Central Asia, to regions like present-day Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

⁷⁰ Gelb 398

⁷¹ Buchkin 20

⁷² Martin 851

Although they were given compensation for the property taken over by the Soviet authorities—through wages and stipends—the Koreans were carelessly and hastily transported in “overcrowded, underheated, filthy freight cars”, and almost all the migrants were not fully aware of where they were traveling⁷³. The journey was almost a month long, and the vast distances covered ensured that there were families who were often separated, and other unlucky individuals who died in route to their new homes⁷⁴. Upon arriving to their new destinations, the Koreans could only contemplate upon the wide and sparse terrains, as many struggled to adequately adapt. They were given few amenities and were thus “unprotected from the elements”, as many suffered from diseases like dysentery and malaria⁷⁵. Suffering from poor conditions and neglect, as well as unsuitable farming conditions in some areas, scholars such as Alexander Kim argue that it is possible that “a minimum to 40,000” Korean migrants died as an immediate result of the deportations⁷⁶. After a year of poor administration and consideration, the local authorities eventually provided new “kolkhozes” (or farms) for the Koreans; those who managed to survive the journey and the arduous first years established communities that would later play a pivotal role in the development of agriculture in these regions⁷⁷. In fact, the Korean farms would become “models of efficiency and prosperity”, and the common belief in communist ideology helped maintain a sense of political, if not emotional, connection to the Soviet Union⁷⁸. For the first few decades in this new land, however, the migrants were limited in what they could do: due to Stalin’s policies, Koreans could not move freely within the country, nor could they be inducted into the Soviet army to fight against Japanese imperialism⁷⁹. Although there were signs

⁷³ Gelb 400

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Gelb 401

⁷⁶ Kim, Alexander 284(b)

⁷⁷ Kim, German 66

⁷⁸ Gelb 405

⁷⁹ Gelb 407

of a burgeoning and self-reliant Korean migrant culture within Central Asia, it would not be until Stalin's death that the Koreans could reestablish and reaffirm their identity and language without fear of discrimination. The community would not be subject to further deportations, but they nonetheless had to contend with a continuously changing lifestyle, as they adopted local customs to better adapt to the conditions forced upon them.

These "Continental Koreans", however, were not the only Koreans living within the Soviet sphere of influence. As the political tension between Japan and the Soviet Union continued in the 1930s and 1940s, many Korean migrants found themselves at the crossroads between the two conflicting hegemonies on Sakhalin Island, a territory lying in the North Pacific Ocean, just off the eastern coast of the Russian mainland and north of Japan. Involuntarily organized and dispatched, hundreds of thousands of Koreans traveled to the island from 1939 to 1945 under the pressure of the Japanese government to combat the increasing labor shortages prompted by War World II. At the time, the southern portion of Sakhalin Island was administered by Japan—following the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905—and was recognized as the Karafuto Prefecture⁸⁰. Within years of its conquest, Japan first recruited and later obliged Koreans, from 1939 to 1945, to work in coal and mineral mines, munition factories, constructions sites, and other hard labor positions, with little guarantee of ever returning home⁸¹. According to research by scholar In Soo Son, anywhere from 60,000 to 80,000 Koreans were sent to Sakhalin during this time period, with almost all of them hailing from Korea's southern regions⁸². When Japan lost the war, however, and the island was retaken by Soviet forces, the Koreans on the island were left with nowhere else to go. The Japanese were not willing to repatriate and accept the

⁸⁰ Um 124

⁸¹ Son 8

⁸² Ibid

Koreans as their own, while the increasingly complex Soviet and Korean relationship—especially in lieu of the emerging Korean War conflict, which undermined the notion of Korean sovereignty and nationality—made it difficult for claims of citizenship to be adequately acknowledged by either government⁸³. The Koreans were brought to the island against their volition but suffered from the collapsing political structures that had just recently characterized and organized their lives. They had to adapt to their abandoned and “stateless” position. By 1946, there were around 43,000 Koreans living on Sakhalin Island, but they were effectively left to their own devices, as they could not return to Korea or, like the Koreans in Central Asia, granted permission by the Soviet government to leave the island⁸⁴. In the immediate years following Soviet control, the Koreans in Sakhalin maintained substantive farms, tilling the earth and working in the fields and nearby waters, as they began to form a noteworthy percentage of the local population⁸⁵. Interestingly, the Soviet government attempted to accelerate a process of “sovietization” by sending Central Asians Koreans to teach the Korean population on the island—in their native tongue—about Soviet ideals and the Russian language⁸⁶. But this first generation of Sakhalin Koreans retained a strong connection to their Korean homeland; for decades, thousands of individuals wished to return home without being able to do so. In this way, as some scholars have suggested, these initial Korean immigrants can be seen as some of the last refugees of World War II.

Despite both living in the Soviet Union, the Korean diasporic communities in Sakhalin Island and Central Asia naturally exhibited distinct worldviews and identities, as the conditions in

⁸³ Son 10

⁸⁴ Saveliev 487

⁸⁵ Buchkin 22

⁸⁶ Um 125

which they migrated, though both coerced, were uniquely affected by the Japanese and Soviet authorities that governed them. As a result, the interactions between these groups, and the ensuing differences in their lifestyles, serve as a great example of the ways in which the means of migration—and the historical contexts that enable them—are fundamental to the creation of collective and personal memories of a given migrant community. As scholar Igor Saveliev suggests, “each diaspora invokes its own place of origin on the Korean peninsula and a distinct historical background”, with different interpretations and constructions of their shared homeland⁸⁷. These differences then affect the process of assimilation and the traditions that are maintained or practiced by these migrants. The Koreans who initially settled in the Russian Far East, for instance, exhibited strong nationalistic, anti-colonial fervor and advocated for the national liberation movement, while the Sakhalin Koreans, as a result of living within Japanese society, had to exhibit loyalty and quiet acceptance⁸⁸. Some Sakhalin Koreans even included families of Korean women who married Japanese men, and they spoke both Japanese and Korean and made efforts to consciously distinguish themselves from fellow Soviet Koreans⁸⁹. But most of the community on the island continued to live with a firm belief that they would one day be able to return to the Korean mainland; they maintained a strong connection to cultural traditions and the Korean language and emphasized a genealogical connection⁹⁰. Part of this may have been possible because these migrants had lived away from the Korean peninsula for only a generation or so, while other Soviet Koreans had lived on the continent for more decades. This temporal aspect should not be overlooked, as it is easier to maintain a language and a connection to a “homeland” when the migration occurred in the more recent past. In fact, the Koreans of

⁸⁷ Saveliev 487

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ Buchkin 26

⁹⁰ Saveliev 488

Central Asia struggled to preserve the Korean language—and possible relations with relatives—precisely because of their longer history of settlement and forced deportation, as they grew increasingly detached from their original culture. The contact with the Russian language and then Central Asian tongues instead led to a unique Korean dialect called “Koryo-mar”, which through its own use exemplified the migration history of this Korean community. The deportation of the Soviet Korean community in 1937 was noteworthy in this sense for how it created several layers of identity displacement: they were taken away from their “ancestral homeland and their new homeland” simultaneously and had to carve new lifestyles in lands that were further removed from the Korean peninsula⁹¹. Both Sakhalin and Central Asian Koreans were victims of overt political processes that reduced their cultural value to labor forces, but they did not both seek to reestablish links to Korea. For the former, the connections were still obvious and possible to recreate, while for the latter, the idea of the “Korean homeland” was just that—an idea. Their memories of Korea were interlinked with their memories of the trauma or hardships they suffered, and this in turn shaped their respective identities.

The Japanese conquest of the Korean peninsula and the subsequent colonization of its peoples naturally precipitated numerous migration waves that would result in the diasporic communities across East and Central Asia. As the political might of the Japanese and Soviet governments strengthened in the years preceding and during WWII, the extent of the Korean community expanded to further reaches of region. The Koreans in this time period had to frequently adapt, on numerous occasions, to the shifting narratives and perspectives of the larger authorities. They were victims insofar that they were displaced and confined to their value as a potential labor force, but they nonetheless demonstrated resilience against policies that aimed to diminish their

⁹¹ Saveliev 488

connections to longstanding cultural traditions. These diasporic communities, though emerging around the same time and from the same place, exhibit different understandings of what it means to be Korean and the spaces they inhabit. The Koreans who traveled to Japan voluntarily and later coercively had to reconcile with their nation being absorbed into the larger, subjugating Japanese hegemony, while simultaneously having to affirm their Korean identity to overcome indifference and discrimination. The Koryo-saram had to adapt twice—first in Russia and then in Central Asia. Upon establishing a new home in the Soviet Far East, they then had to migrate and struggle again following Stalin’s mass deportations. The Koreans in Central Asia thus forged an alternative identity to other Korean diasporic communities in Japan and abroad, as their multiple displacements reinforced the notion that they were a people without a true, established home. They grew strength not from an idea of possibly returning home—wherever that may be—but in surviving and then succeeding in unknown lands as a collective unit, drawing upon the fragments of a shared language and familial ties to carve a future that was, for better or for worse, detached from life and events in their ancestral Korean homeland. The Sakhalin Koreans, meanwhile, lived between conflicting Japanese and Soviet interests and created their own communities, one that sought to distinguish itself from other Korean diasporic communities in the Soviet Union. Though they longed to return to Korea, the shifting global influences after the end of the world war confined their fate to the island, as they embodied the displaced and detached Korean identity during this part of the century. The movement of Koreans across these countries established long-standing communities and cultural-exchanges, but the subsequent decades would start to question the role of these Koreans with regards to their relationship with a quickly metamorphosing Korean state, as well as ponder the lasting influences of these traumatic years of displacement and subjugation. The following generation of migrant Koreans would have these

memories of their diasporic predecessors to dwell upon, and these experiences would influence the way they would look back and interact with their ancestral homeland.

Expansion and Dispatchment: Voluntary Migration and Diasporic Communities in South America and Germany from the 1960s to 1980s following the Korean War

With its defeat at the end of World War II, Japan was stripped of its imperial acquisitions and Korea regained independence and its sovereignty, thereby ending over thirty-five years of Japanese occupation. This sudden shift in the postwar, global paradigm did not, however, alleviate the growing tensions in the Korean peninsula; instead, this new era prompted the division of the country into North and South Korea and later led to the Korean War. Although Japanese influence had diminished and could no longer dictate Korean migration, the Korean diaspora faced unprecedented challenges and transformations, as many migrants attempted to return to Korea in the hopes of developing their country and reclaiming their past lives. They were sought to return to their homeland and, in the process, eradicate the history of trauma of forced migrations they experienced at the beginning of the century, thus “restoring the proper state of congruence between territory and population”⁹²—as Koreans in Korea. As such, almost immediately following Korea’s liberation, the movement of Korean peoples greatly increased, as more than 1.4 million individuals—almost 70% of the entire Korean population—repatriated from Japan; and most of these immigrants returned to South Korea, as many originated from the southern part of the peninsula⁹³. Other mass return movements sparked similar, though smaller, migrations from communities in Manchuria, China, and other nearby regions.

⁹² Brubaker and Kim 32

⁹³ Kwon 6-7

These migrations, however, were overshadowed by the political and ideological divides between the two Koreas, especially as Koreans had to now understand and reconcile their identity within the context of a now-divided nation. In returning home, for instance, the Japanese government had Koreans choose their nationality between South and North⁹⁴, while other Koreans, like the ones on Sakhalin Island, could not return because they no longer belonged to any specific government. Korean identity was not easily definable and now depended upon more specific locations and traditions within the peninsula; this identity conflict was felt even further for those migrants returning from or living in foreign countries. When the Korean War erupted in 1950, the turbulent conditions resulted in further migrations, especially into the United States, as large number of women, students, and orphans (including those of mixed blood) traveled abroad and formed the basis for later communities and immigrants in the subsequent decades.⁹⁵ Though migration abroad was limited until the 1960s, the Korean War nonetheless presented itself as a new incentive for Koreans to emigrate, and like most aspects of Korean society at the time, the war and its longstanding effects came to dominate the individual and collective memories of its diasporic communities. The war and its debilitating effects temporarily limited the movement of Koreans, but it planted the seeds for many individuals with the desire to find success abroad, in the hopes of ultimately sharing and returning that success within the developing North and South Korean nations.

Whereas Korean migration had hitherto been contextualized and understood through the lens of forced travel, deportation, and labor potential, the Korean diaspora in the second half of the twentieth century would be characterized by voluntary migration and an ever-complicating series

⁹⁴ Kwon 8

⁹⁵ Kwon 9

of return movements. This wave of migration targeted the creation of long-distance settlements in the new world and was enabled by a series of policies that encouraged such travel. For the first time, the Korean government was taking an active role in the emigration of its peoples; it saw the potential of a growing diasporic community outside of its borders. After Korea gained its independence from Japan and as South Korea consolidated itself as a nation in the 1960s, its economy began to slowly develop, and the government adopted an active emigration policy to benefit its industrialization goals. In order to assist its people, the government passed a policy in 1962 that would facilitate migration, particularly as they believed it to be a “means of controlling population, alleviating unemployment, and earning foreign exchange”⁹⁶. South Koreans⁹⁷ seeking better economic opportunities in other more industrialized countries were especially helped by more favorable initiatives that planned to send migrants and workers to Latin American countries, Germany, and later the United States⁹⁸. These communities would maintain stronger connections to their Korean homeland, insofar that they aimed to contribute to Korea’s economy—through remittances and government-sponsored deals—and retain hopes of one day returning to their homeland in the future. Despite this, however, the Korean migrants of this era had to navigate the influences of conflicting cultures and interests; they had to forge an identity while overcoming economic and discrimination, while simultaneously trying to financially and socially contribute to their Korean heritage. As sociologist Robin Cohen asks when discussing the role of remittances, “How are migration and development linked through diasporas?”⁹⁹. The interaction of diasporic communities and their native Korea would shed light onto the influence and even importance of migrant workers and settlers in an increasingly globalized world.

⁹⁶ Kwon 8

⁹⁷ For the sake of clarity, from this point onwards “Koreans” will be used to specify movement of South Koreans abroad, unless otherwise noted.

⁹⁸ Kwon 8

⁹⁹ Cohen 169

As such, one of the more significant Korean migrations in the 1960s was the movement of miners and nurses to West Germany, many of whom would later settle in Europe or travel onwards to other Western nations. In the hopes of maintaining the German mining industry and hospital system, and in providing the South Korean government with a much-needed source of steady remittances and economic income, the Federal Republic of Germany and South Korea actualized a bilateral labor recruitment agreement in 1963 that was in effect until 1976¹⁰⁰. In that time period, around 20,000 South Koreans—7,936 miners and 10,723 registered nurses¹⁰¹—were sent to West Germany to work as contract migrants. They typically worked for a formal guest work program called *Gastarbeiter*, where migrants would travel to West Germany and temporarily settle for a few years before ultimately returning to their home country¹⁰². In theory, there were benefits for both nations: For Germany, the Korean migrants could fulfill a large labor demand in the health and mining industries, while for South Korea, and its president Chung Hee Park, the exported human labor force could form an indispensable part in rebuilding the Korean economy following the Korean War¹⁰³. Echoing this sentiment, it has been considered the Korean government's "first attempt to relocate Korea's workforce overseas"¹⁰⁴, as these immigration agreements pushed Koreans to engage with foreign nations. In this way, the Korean migrants were like their ancestors who traveled abroad at the beginning of the century as a part of labor-incentivized migrations; but unlike those communities, the Koreans here were contributing to domestic financial interests. According to some estimates, about 50 million US

¹⁰⁰ Roberts 28

¹⁰¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission Korea 53

¹⁰² Roberts 28

¹⁰³ Cho and Roberts 2

¹⁰⁴ Commission 54

dollars were raised and sent by Koreans living in Germany¹⁰⁵, which comprised anywhere from 1-2% of Korea's total export value in years like 1965, 1966, and 1967¹⁰⁶. They were thus encouraged and endorsed by their government to work abroad and contribute to its national cause; the labor agreement was arranged in such a way to suggest that South Koreans could alleviate the turmoil of the Korean War by undertaking these recruitment offers. These sentiments formed the basis for the "p'adok" or "German displacement": the political term that idealized and defined the labor emigration to West Germany, under President Chung-hee, as a patriotic act¹⁰⁷. Koreans were made to believe that their efforts were beneficial on both a personal and collective scale.

Despite these profits and economic successes, however, it is important to consider that these policies did not disclose the entire truth of the lives of the Korean miners and nurses in Germany. As scholar Yong-suk Jung argues, the administrations in charge of the migrations attempted to cover the problematic, structural context of the recruitment policy under the veil of a "bifurcated myth", where the economic benefits for both nations were prioritized over the potential issues regarding a large-scale labor export from a weakened Korean state to a stronger German one¹⁰⁸. In other words, although many Koreans may have accepted these migrant contracts through patriotic devotion, many also traveled to escape the poor conditions of their country, and the reality of life in West Germany was much more complex and challenging than their government may have suggested. By their very nature, the bilateral contracts aimed to fulfill a labor demand, and thus were not designed with "the individual migrant in mind"; the guestworkers were thus

¹⁰⁵ Roberts 28

¹⁰⁶ Commission 54

¹⁰⁷ Jung 230

¹⁰⁸ Jung 255

often reduced to their labor output¹⁰⁹. They were expected to return to their home country once the allotted time had passed—regardless if the migrants had established communities or local connections. Furthermore, Korean miners and nurses alike were encouraged by their government to work passively and efficiently, with the ultimate goal of helping the poor Korean economy¹¹⁰. But the Korean migrants often saw the contracts as opportunities for personal gain, especially as many of the travelers were of the middle-class and trying to escape the impoverished conditions that resulted from the Korean War. Korean nurses, for instance, left for Germany for reasons ranging from better pay and financial security, to a “desire to escape the strict social expectations” that existed in Korea¹¹¹. Although they found assimilation initially difficult and were often characterized by the Germans for their supposed passivity¹¹², the nurses nonetheless forged their own unique identity, particularly through engagement in political protest. Refusing to accept the return conditions of their contracts, the nurses campaigned for their right to stay in Germany, and in the process worked against the stereotypes and expectations placed upon them by both German and Korean societies¹¹³. Their petitions ultimately worked, as the nurses and miners were granted permission to live in the country; some Koreans subsequently adopted other professions and raised a second generation of immigrants. Though often contextualized within a larger, idealized narrative of Korean patriotism, the movement of nurses and miners to Germany was propelled by migrants who were willing to adopt restricted lifestyles and adapt to foreign cultures for personal and collective profit. The economic contribution these migrants provided was both real and substantial, but it came about as a result of a group of individuals who saw the opportunity to travel abroad as a means to take personal agency and improve upon the poor

¹⁰⁹ Roberts 36

¹¹⁰ Roberts 37

¹¹¹ Roberts 32

¹¹² Ibid

¹¹³ Roberts 34

conditions

at

home.

At the same time that South Koreans were traveling to West Germany on labor contracts, the Korean government began endorsing travel to South America, particularly to Brazil and Argentina. Korea had recently established diplomatic relations with these Latin American countries in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and as Korea was poorer than both Brazil and Argentina, the government saw the potential for overseas settlers in these regions¹¹⁴. To combat a growing population, limited land space, and a lack of natural resources, the Korean government promoted travel to South America and advertised it as a destination of many opportunities, with unsettled land and an accepting immigrant culture¹¹⁵. According to scholar Kim Ill Soo, the emphasis on emigration politics was primarily to deal with the fallout from World War II and the Korean War, where more than three million individuals, including refugees from the North, returned or entered South Korea and prompted serious population difficulties¹¹⁶. As such, in order to further endorse its “development policy”, the Korean government implemented the Overseas Emigration Act in 1962 and prioritized agricultural immigration to countries in the New World¹¹⁷. South American nations like Brazil were hoping to recruit these Korean farmers—typically in collective and groups—to settle and develop the country’s “virgin lands”¹¹⁸. In return, the Korean government, like in its agreement with West Germany, hoped that the better living conditions would enable these settlers to contribute to the development of the national economy via remittances¹¹⁹. In this way, countries like Brazil and Argentina seemed

¹¹⁴ Park 487

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ Kim Ill Soo, through Mera 313

¹¹⁷ Park 487

¹¹⁸ Park 489

¹¹⁹ Guimaraes 4

to be ideal locations to escape the political instability and societal difficulties of the present Korean state, while nonetheless offering conditions through which to contribute to its nationalistic causes.

As was the case for the first Koreans in Mexico and Hawaii, however, the plans did not materialize in the same way that they were originally promised out to be. The first generation of Korean migrants in South America, from the 1960s and 1970s, had to reconcile with below-par living conditions and limited access to the lands they were originally planned to settle. In 1963, 103 Korean immigrants departed from Busan and arrived at Santos, Brazil; most of the migrants were members of the middle class, and many were North Korean refugees¹²⁰. They then settled in the state of São Paulo, before then moving and establishing communities in other states like Rio de Janeiro and Paraná. The Koreans expected to work on farms and plantations that the Korean government had purchased and arranged for them prior to their arrival, but much of the farmland, was neither suitable for adequate production nor sufficient in terms of size and location¹²¹. In most cases too, the property rights to these farms and rural sites were owned by third-parties or did not exist at all¹²². In these conditions, the migrants failed to properly adapt, and because many of these Korean immigrants belonged to the middle class and were not originally farmers, many chose to move to more urban areas and establish small family businesses or work in textile factories¹²³. This scenario was not only exclusive to Brazil but to almost all of the neighboring South American countries: the Korean government could not guarantee its offers, and consequently the Korean migrants had to forsake their plantations and

¹²⁰ Park 487

¹²¹ Joo 329

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ Mera 7

engage in a series of remigrations or subsequent movements. Since many Koreans traveled as a family unit, it was advantageous for the migrants to seek communities in populated cities, even if it meant traveling to different countries illegally, as was in the case with Korean settlers in Paraguay hoping to find new homes in Argentina or Brazil¹²⁴. But even the cities were no guarantee of success, as migrants in large cities like Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, and Asuncion frequently moved again, hoping to find other textile job opportunities¹²⁵.

The agricultural migration policy was therefore one that was not thoroughly in touch with the reality of the conditions in South America and thus prompted many Koreans to move frequently from region to region. In its enthusiasm to send Koreans abroad, the government undermined the potential assimilation conflicts its peoples would encounter. The Koreans who voluntarily accepted the proposals and migrated to Latin America were ill-prepared for these challenges; in their eagerness to avoid the impoverished and restricting lifestyles at home, they unfortunately encountered more hardships in their travels. Despite this, their settlements in these new lands only confirmed the growing presence of the Korean diaspora in all corners of the world. The recent memories of the Korean War and of a weakened Korean state urged many migrants to undergo the risk of travel. Whether through a series of remittances or through their rise in developing global cities, they laid the foundations for migration patterns and pathways for decades to come.

¹²⁴ Joo 330

¹²⁵ Park 490

From Emigration to Immigration: The Korean Diaspora's Lasting Influence on South Korea, and the Rise of Return Migration

Following the waves of voluntary migration to countries around the world, the Korean diaspora continued to grow in importance through the end of the twentieth century, as its communities consolidated their unique political and cultural status and paved the way for unprecedented domestic and international success. More than a hundred years on from the first large-scale emigration from Korea, in the last thirty years the Korean diaspora has assumed greater relevancy and influence in the Korean homeland, as the contributions from its overseas peoples has shaped disparate facets of Korean life, from the economy to even language. The South Korean immigration policies in the 1960s prompted intensive emigration, as Koreans were encouraged to travel to destinations as varied as Germany to Paraguay, often under the impression that they were fiscally contributing to the development of their nation or creating prosperous environments for subsequent immigrants. It is no surprise then that during this time, from 1962 to 1990, 727,949 Koreans emigrated abroad—even if the majority were settling in the United States—and solidified the presence of previously established communities in those regions¹²⁶. During these decades, the movement of Koreans abroad could also be contextualized within the greater trend of globalization, insofar that advances in telecommunications and travel greatly blurred the distance between Korea and its overseas peoples and facilitated ongoing communication¹²⁷. Unlike in previous generations, where migrants frequently lacked the ability to engage with their country of origin, the Korean migrants of this era were no longer as isolated from the events or changes in their homeland. Departures were not definitive; they could remain in touch with their hometowns, extended family, and current events despite living thousands of

¹²⁶ Jo *Homing*, Kindle ed.

¹²⁷ Kim, KiChung 265-266

miles away. As Professor Ji-Yeon Jo suggests, Korean migrants assumed a “transborder” role; and according to her, the term better highlights the growing “multiplicity, intersectionality, movability and permeability of the borders that migrants...form and re-form throughout their lives”¹²⁸. With changes in the way in which they frequently interact with their homeland, whether on a personal or collective level, the Korean migrants have also changed the way they exercise their heritage.

In this way, these years of voluntary migration were not so much about assimilation but rather ones of ongoing adaptation; they were, in fact, indicative of a different form of diasporic movement. As was the case with migrants to South America, for instance, the Korean migrants in the latter half of the century often undertook several series of migrations, and it was not uncommon for many to settle in one location before moving and establishing new homes elsewhere. Once settled, many Koreans, like those in the United States or in New Zealand, would live “surrounded by their own social, economic, religious, and cultural institutions”, like churches, chambers of commerce, and Korean-language services¹²⁹. In such an environment, traditional Korean values, like the importance of education and strong family and kinship ties, were thus readily emphasized, as migrants nonetheless maintained a “fear of community dissolution” and therefore sought to retain their newfound connections abroad¹³⁰. This new fluctuating migration pattern, coupled with the potential for faster, increased exchanges between Korea and its constituent diasporic communities, changed the nature of Korean migrant lifestyles, and further called into question the notion of Korean citizenship and, even more broadly, of Korean identity. How did this generation of migrants, for instance, compare with the ones who

¹²⁸ Jo *Homing*, Kindle ed.

¹²⁹ Ibid

¹³⁰ Kwon 10

left decades earlier, and did the increased exchanges between Korea and its migrants constitute a new social dynamic or economic force?

One of the ways to view the changing trends and transformations in the Korean diaspora is through the South Korean's government renewed interest for its economic and social potential. The large numbers of migrants abroad and their decades-old communities would become increasingly relevant as they ultimately paved the way for subsequent emigration and, more importantly, collective return migration. To begin with, while the Korean government did engage in labor agreements with countries like West Germany and Japan after the Korean War, in the intermittent years they had distanced and even ignored its diasporic communities until the late 1990s¹³¹. The two million Koreans living in China and the half million or so living in the former Soviet Union were recognized for their size and as welcoming destinations for migrants, but they were mostly left to their own devices, for these communities were not yet seen as an asset. It is during this time when the Koreans in these regions affirmed their unique identities in tandem with the traditions of the country where they resided. Between 1960 and 1990, however, the total Korean diaspora had reached over six million, and although it paled in number to the Chinese and Indian diasporic communities, the percentage of the Koreans who had moved abroad and “into the world economy” was considerably greater than that of any other Asian country¹³². As such, the increased population allowed for a greater burgeoning of Korean culture and opened the possibilities for frequent cross-country interactions.

¹³¹ Lim and Seol 639

¹³² Bergsten and Choi 3

Hoping to rekindle official engagement with the Korean diaspora, Presidents Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae Jung introduced initiatives to better address the needs and status of Korean migrants abroad, like the Overseas Koreans Foundation in 1997¹³³. To strengthen the connections between diaspora Koreans and their homeland, the foundation sought to “foster a Korean identity” through educational support, “enhance economic and political cooperation”, and establish widespread “networks among the diaspora Koreans” throughout the world¹³⁴. In December 1999, the Korean government then enacted the Overseas Korean Act, that allowed eligible overseas Korean social benefits and “quasicitizenship rights that ranged from economic to health benefits”¹³⁵, in the hopes of attracting investment and support from diaspora Koreans—especially in the wake of the Asian financial crisis¹³⁶. The OKA was controversial and riddled with inadequacies—it often excluded Koreans living in China and Central Asia, but it nonetheless was a turning point in the government’s attitude to those living outside its borders¹³⁷. As a result, Koreans abroad could send remittances back to their homeland and exercise their national ties; in doing so, they advanced the notion that the current Korean diaspora was not only valued by its home government, but also necessary. In 2003, the Overseas Koreans Foundation supported this claim by estimating that the economic value of the Korean diaspora was approximately \$120 billion, around 25 percent of South Korea’s GDP, and in this way comparable to Chinese and Jewish diasporic communities¹³⁸. The economic incentive was thus prioritized and deeply emphasized. Even though the rate of emigration diminished from 1991 to 2012¹³⁹, the Korean diaspora and its members grew in stature, as their transnational connections

¹³³ Lim and Seol 640

¹³⁴ Song “Engaging the diaspora in an era of transnationalism”

¹³⁵ Jo *Homing*, Kindle ed.

¹³⁶ Song, “Engaging the diaspora in an era of transnationalism”

¹³⁷ Lim and Seol 649

¹³⁸ Lim and Seoul 653

¹³⁹ Jo *Homing*, Kindle ed.

were of great value to South Korea's future development. According to scholar Inbom Choi, South Korea trades more "with a country where more ethnic Koreans reside" than a country with a smaller number¹⁴⁰, and there is enough data to support the notion that the diaspora engagement policies further increase trade and investment¹⁴¹. This can be seen in places like the United States, for instance, where the presence of Korean migrants were responsible for a 15 to 20 percent increase in trade between the US and South Korea¹⁴². These numbers, beyond demonstrating the economic value of the Korean diaspora, also highlight its maturation, insofar that through these contributions, its overseas migrants have consolidated their place as an indispensable part of Korean society. Their recognition on the part of the South Korean government is noteworthy, for it also opened social discussions on the identity of these Korean migrants and the ways in which they are understood and incorporated into mainstream Korean life. On the other hand, however, as stated by Professor Jo, policies like the Overseas Korean Act "redrew the imaginary ethnic and territorial boundaries of who could constitute the Korean peoplehood and who could not", without fully acknowledging the complex histories of certain migrant communities¹⁴³. Despite its recognized status, the Korean diaspora was still prioritized for its economic potential, and not completely for the diversity of its growing population. The further development and integration of these overseas settlements was never wholly endorsed or addressed.

While the South Korean government was enacting these immigration policies and deepening ties with its diasporic peoples, it was also establishing the foundations for sustained return migration. The increased interaction with overseas communities, along with the economic and social

¹⁴⁰ Choi, Inbom 21

¹⁴¹ Song "Engaging the diaspora in an era of transnationalism"

¹⁴² Bergsten and Choi 3

¹⁴³ Jo *Homing*, Kindle ed.

incentives in an expanded, globalized world, prompted a significant change in Korean migration patterns. In the early 1990s, the dominant form of migration in South Korea transitioned from emigration to immigration, as it began to accept many foreign residents and workers; at the same time, the rate of migration to other countries slowly declined¹⁴⁴. A large portion of the surges in immigration to Korea can be accounted for by the *Hallyu* wave and the “branding” and soft power of the South Korean government¹⁴⁵, but overseas Koreans were also targeted and noteworthy contributors. The global market, relative easier accessibility, and organizations like OKF convinced many diasporic Koreans—even those of third and fourth generations—to travel to Korea and find new opportunities there. In fact, diaspora Korean remigration has been led by a “high proportion of later-generation returnees”, many of whom lack any immediate connections to Korea and have lived under foreign cultures and raised under different languages¹⁴⁶. It is no surprise that many of these return migrants struggle to wholly adapt and feel at home in their ancestral home, especially when they must overcome linguistic and generational disadvantages. But in this way, the diasporic communities were not only reengaging with their homeland, but also coming full circle by returning to Korea. Professor Jiyeon Jo describes this process better as “homing”, where legacy migrants—those from subsequent diasporic generations—undergo a series of “border crossings” that occur on a spatial, mental, and cultural level, and try to access or reconcile the range of complex emotions they experience in their “putative ancestral homeland”¹⁴⁷. As such, despite the years of relative isolation between Korea and its population abroad, subsequent migrant generations are reconnecting with their roots, and in their interaction with Korean culture, bringing attention to their own unique personal stories. The diverse Korean

¹⁴⁴ Jo *Homing*, Kindle ed.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ Ibid

diasporic migrants adapt differently to the challenges of mainstream Korean culture; in their assimilation and struggles, they underline the characteristics that define their mixed heritage.

Although diaspora Koreans from all around the world have returned to South Korea within the last few decades, the majority have been Korean Chinese, Korean Americans, and Koreans from the former Soviet Union (and now Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan)¹⁴⁸. These return migrants, because of their backgrounds and their skills, are selected and primed for different sections of the Korean economy. For instance, the Chinese Koreans traditionally constitute a cheap yet necessary source of labor, while Korean Americans contribute to a “highly skilled workforce”¹⁴⁹. According to Jo, the type of return migrant can further be classified as either victims, ambiguous, or desirable: the victims are “refugees who suffered in diaspora” (like those from China, Japan and Russia following Korean liberation); the ambiguous are “low-skilled workers who are socially undesirable”; the desirables are those migrants who are highly educated and can provide immediate capital¹⁵⁰. Although the classifications are not definitive and more permeable than their definitions may suggest, they nonetheless serve to demonstrate the variety of the Korean overseas experience. Every migrant community has a singular history that affects the legacy and the subsequent conditions of its individuals; the way they collectively remember Korea thereby affects the ways in which they can “reintegrate” to its traditional society and dictates the type of opportunities that are available. Some migrant Koreans return to Korea for motives ranging from work to marriage to education, but many are inspired by their imagined portrayal of Korea. This process is in keeping with Robin Cohen’s aforementioned definition of diaspora, as the narratives of the “imagined homeland” are met with the dissimilar

¹⁴⁸ Jo *Homing*, Kindle ed.

¹⁴⁹ Song “Engaging the diaspora in an era of transnationalism”

¹⁵⁰ Jo *Homing*, Kindle ed.

realities upon returning home. The way in which they consolidate their perceptions of Korea with those that currently exist there affects how the migrants see themselves—both individually and collectively. Regardless of where they come from and where they ultimately work in the hierarchy of Korean society, however, these Koreans share a “narrative of triumph”, or a strong pride of the difficulties that they had to overcome to simply survive in their new countries¹⁵¹. As such, in addition to being mutually beneficial to both individual and state, return migration affirms the strong migrant identities of Koreans abroad, even if they unfortunately struggle and face unjust prejudices in their ancestral home.

The Chinese Koreans are some of the return migrants that most often face difficulties in fully adapting to Korean social structures, even if they form the largest ethnic return migrants to Korea. Frequently called the Joseonjok, the Chinese Koreans initially traveled to Manchuria in large numbers following the Japanese conquest and steadily grew. In 1952, the Chinese Communist Party established the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture and granted the community there the right to self-govern and maintain Korean traditions¹⁵². During this time, direct contact between China and South Korea was mute, even as many Yanbian Koreans traveled to North Korea and even the South; it wasn't until 1990 when diplomatic relations between the two countries were reestablished¹⁵³. From this point onwards, the presence of South Korea—the ancestral home to a significant portion of the Chinese Korean population—became more tangible, as the renewed relations provided an increase in trade and even paved “channels of labour export” from Yanbian to Korea¹⁵⁴. There are currently more than 300,000 Chinese Korean workers in

¹⁵¹ Jo *Homing*, Kindle ed.

¹⁵² Jo *Homing*, Kindle ed.

¹⁵³ Luova 431

¹⁵⁴ Luova 440

South Korea¹⁵⁵, and according to scholars Seol and Skrentny, they can be categorized as either migrant workers and job seekers, wives or husbands of Korean citizens, and students or other short-term visitors¹⁵⁶. The Joseonjok were often legally classified as foreigners, despite the inherent connections to their homeland, and thus were subjugated to work in jobs that were typically shunned by Korean society or reserved for low-skilled workers of other countries¹⁵⁷. Chinese Koreans did not enjoy the same success or appeal as Korean Americans, who were more readily accepted into Korean society. This was first seen in the Overseas Korean Act, which tended to select individuals of Korean ancestry who lived in western countries or who displayed experience in skilled, professional jobs; it did not include those migrant communities who had emigrated before the Korean War¹⁵⁸.

This conflicted perception of Chinese Koreans—as somehow being less “Korean” than other migrants or citizens—highlights the social hierarchy present in Korea, and only reinforces the complex questions of identity diasporic Koreans encounter in their day-to-day lives. In this way, the Joseonjok are often understood through the “daughter-in-law” metaphor: the Chinese Koreans are daughters who must exercise loyalty to their marital households and submit to the “rules of the new home”¹⁵⁹. Seol and Skrentny argue that such a mentality, or stigma, is indicative of a greater “hierarchical nationhood”, where a social structure distinguishes between the different types of return migrants and also finds discrimination between people of the same ancestry but differing levels of foreignness¹⁶⁰. These observations show that “returning home” is

¹⁵⁵ Song “Engaging the diaspora in an era of transnationalism”

¹⁵⁶ Seol and Skrentny 152

¹⁵⁷ Seol and Skrentny 154

¹⁵⁸ Seol and Skrentny 157

¹⁵⁹ Jo *Homing*, Kindle ed.

¹⁶⁰ Seol and Skrentny 151

not always straightforward, and that the unique history of a certain migrant community can work against its best interests. That being said, the growing role and presence of the Joseonjok—as well as their large, extensive networks—is challenging those social structures, as they are slowly changing the way they are perceived through an affirmation of their heritage and the customs they have adopted throughout the generations.

Although not nearly as large as their Chinese Korean counterparts, ethnic Koreans from the former Soviet Union and present-day Central Asia—the Koryo-saram—also faced tribulations upon their return to their homeland that are unique to their tumultuous and conflicted identities. While the Koryo-saram in countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have thrived in their respective fields and have integrated themselves to their surrounding cultures in the last decades, they have struggled to retain major characteristics of their Korean heritage, and thus meaningful emotional connection to their ancestry. Because Koreans in Central Asia are more ethnically integrated than other Korean diasporas, there is a lack of cohesion between the disparate communities in the area, especially when compared to the tight connections found in the Joseonjok and in Korean American circles¹⁶¹. The Koryo-saram, unlike other Korean diasporas however, have experienced several generations of displacement and life beyond the Korean peninsula, and as such relied on family narratives or collective memory to maintain their ethnic ties¹⁶². Third and later generation of Koreans had to reconcile with the physical distance from Korea, the limited return opportunities, and the sheer time that has passed since they or their relatives interacted with their homeland¹⁶³. In such circumstances, the few Korean organizations

¹⁶¹ Kim, German 27 “Koryo-Saram...”

¹⁶² Jo *Homing*, Kindle ed.

¹⁶³ Ibid

throughout the USSR would seek to revive the use of the Korean language and basic traditions and customs, as they sensed that they were losing important, if distant, facets of their identity¹⁶⁴.

These Koreans therefore “formed images of Korea in absentia”, until the South Korean policies of the 1990s and increased communication reignited a desire to experience Korean life first-hand; there was now a real opportunity to reconnect with seemingly long-forgotten roots¹⁶⁵. South Korea became the de facto migration destination for many Koreans in Central Asia who were willing to move abroad, primarily because they felt this strong nostalgic attachment for their homeland¹⁶⁶. Like the Chinese Koreans, the Koryo-saram return migrants worked in non-skilled and semi-skilled labor, but subsequent immigration policies, like the one enacted in September 2007, allowed for longer-stays and for the sponsoring of relatives back in Central Asia¹⁶⁷. There are now over 30,000 Koreans from the former USSR living in South Korea with foreign and naturalized citizenship, including the Sakhalin Koreans who were granted provisions to return to Korea¹⁶⁸. For these Korean return migrants, the difficulties lie in adapting to a country where the cultures and traditions that have been imagined throughout the generations are now a reality; where the language is different and where they must frequently inhabit multiple social and ethnic spaces, between their Korean and Central Asian identities. Living in Korea is as much a learning experience as it is a personal odyssey through the memories of a particular migrant community: what the returnees have lived through in their own experiences resurfaces within the context of their ancestral home. This migration pattern urges diasporic peoples to continuously re-evaluate

¹⁶⁴ Kim, German 57 “Ethnic Entrepreneurship of Koreans...”

¹⁶⁵ Jo *Homing*, Kindle ed.

¹⁶⁶ Savaliev 32

¹⁶⁷ Savaliev 39

¹⁶⁸ Jo *Homing*, Kindle ed.

and contextualize their own place of belonging in an ever-shifting analysis and understanding of Korean identity.

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