

The Korean Diaspora : A Sourcebook

- History of the Korean Diaspora
- Topics and Issues of the Korean Diaspora
- Korean Diaspora Worldwide
- South and North Korea's Overseas Koreans Policy

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Perceptions of the Korean Diaspora in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Regarding Korean Traditional Cultural Heritage and the Current State of Cultural Heritage Transmission

Byong-Jo Lee (Al-Farabi Kazakh National University)

1. Introduction

“Transnational” and “transnationalism” are terms that frequently appear in the literature on the Korean diaspora in the CIS (i.e., post-Soviet states), China, Japan, and the United States. The terms refer to a situation that occurred within the territory of a country, transcending its psychological and physical boundaries or a situation created beyond the territory and border of a country, and that occurred mainly in another country. A perfect example of the latter concept is the Korean diaspora in China. Presently, there are several Korean ethnic enclaves in China originating from this diaspora by those who crossed the Chinese border. Other immigrants settled in different countries around the world—about 380,000 individuals in South Korea, 50,000–60,000 in Japan, 80,000 in North America, and 20,000–30,000 in Russia, according to 2009 statistical data. Given that the total population of the 1.5-century-old Korean diaspora communities in the CIS have reached between 45,000 and 50,000 people, the growing number and importance of the Korean-Chinese living in South Korea are not surprising.

Although incomparable to the Korean-Chinese in terms of significance, the magnitude of the Korean diaspora migrating from CIS countries to South Korea and other countries around the world is on a steady rise as well. These immigrants are quite different from the Korean-Chinese not only by the number of ethnic Koreans in the CIS who migrated to other countries, but also the ways in which they acquired new nationalities or settled in new countries. An increasing number of young and middle-aged ethnic Koreans from Central Asia to South Korea are entering under the Working Visit (H-2 visa) program, which was implemented in the latter half of 2007, or for reasons such as international marriages or to study abroad in Korea. This phenomenon signifies their growing role in South Korea’s multicultural/multinational social transition and in the ultimate reunification of the Korean Peninsula.

The migration history of Koreans in Russia and Central Asia commenced at the same time as that of the Korean-Chinese, during the mid-19th century. This

history can be divided into three periods: the Far East period (1864–1937), Central Asia period (1937–1953), and the Eurasian Continent period (1953–present). Notably, since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there has been a wave of migration of ethnic Koreans into the Ukraine, South Korea, Canada, and the United States. Nevertheless, the majority still reside in Central Asian countries and Russia. Within the CIS, members of the diaspora have been returning to the Korean Peninsula, migrating nomadically from one country to another or ultimately settling in one place. Over the past 150 years of settlement in Central Asia and Russia, the Korean diaspora has been generating traditional historical and cultural Korean resources in various forms (including intangible cultural heritage) such as literature, photographs, and videos. These resources are invaluable for research on the Korean diaspora. Even more notable is that, unlike the Korean-Chinese who live in an autonomous province in China, the Korean diaspora in the CIS has been transmitting an abundance of Korean traditional cultural heritage despite countless migrations and wanderings.

Research projects on the Korean diaspora in the CIS have taken on various perspectives—including history, literature, and folklore—since the 1990s; however, only a few focused on intangible cultural heritage and mostly took a folkloristic approach. The same trend has been observed in research projects commissioned by academic institutions in South Korea. Neither individual researchers nor academic institutions have conducted much research on the intangible cultural heritage of the Korean diaspora in the CIS.

This study focuses on the current state of traditional Korean cultural heritage (i.e., intangible cultural heritage) transmission among the Korean diaspora in the CIS and their perception of that cultural heritage. This subject is worthy of study the traditional cultural heritage of the diaspora in the CIS group of countries reflects transnational conditions. Despite a long period of isolation from the Korean Peninsula, the Korean diaspora in this region has been transmitting Korean traditional cultural heritage shared by ethnic Korean communities on the Korean Peninsula, in Central Asia, and in Russia. Moreover, there is more commonality than divergence between the traditional cultural heritage being preserved by the Korean diaspora in Central Asia and on the Russian mainland and in Sakhalin, Russia. In other words, given the way the Korean diaspora in Central Asia and Russia perceive and transmit Korean traditional culture, despite differences, trans-regional commonality among the regions of the Korean Peninsula, the Asian continent, and Sakhalin remains even as new cultural heritage forms have emerged on account of modification from their original forms.

The questions investigated in this study are how the Korean diaspora in the CIS is transmitting Korean traditional cultural heritage, and how the ethnic Koreans perceive their cultural heritage. As such, a month-long field study (from July 11–31 and August 6–14, 2012) in three Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) and Russia was conducted. The study subjects were categorized based on the seven domains of intangible cultural heritage designated by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). Further details of the seven domains, interviewees, subjects of study, research content, and research methods are presented and explained in Section 3.

the drive to preserve minority populations' intangible cultural heritage through policy measures.

Over the course of this month-long survey, Korean diaspora communities in the CIS were found to be taking great pride in their collective intangible cultural heritage. Other researchers have contacted Korean diaspora immigrants to study the heritage from the folklore perspective (primarily fable and folk song) and they too might have sensed, while interviewing them, how proud this group is of its cultural heritage. Every interviewee I met in the CIS actively participated in interviews, even though the interview questionnaire, which was composed of seven sets of questions in line with UNESCO's seven domains of intangible cultural heritage, was lengthy, in-depth, and time-consuming. Most interviewees expressed their appreciation to the Korean researchers for showing interest in their heritage and asking such detailed questions about their intangible cultural heritage. They could have envied what other ethnic groups around them have but they did not, instead considering that the best way to build a strong and vocal minority ethnic community is to be well-informed of one's own culture and cherish it in order to preserve their ethnic identity. Interviewees who represent the first generation of the Korean diaspora expressed that the lack of understanding of one's traditional culture means the end of that ethnic community.

This field survey on the intangible cultural property of Korean diaspora communities living in major enclaves within the CIS is a fact-finding and geographically limited survey. Considering the advanced age of the deportation survivors in the CIS, surveys of areas not covered by this survey should be conducted as soon as possible; moreover, the Korean government should establish a cultural heritage preservation system that safeguards existing tangible and intangible cultural heritage and, if possible, restore what has been lost. This well-conceived system should serve to safeguard the cultural heritage of the Korean diaspora in the CIS and other regions outside the Korean Peninsula through sufficient review and consultation. Maintaining constant interest in communication channels with Korean diaspora communities is the optimal approach that the Korean government can undertake to improve their welfare.

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