

# Homeland and Diasporic Space: Transnational Practices of Central Asian and Sakhalin Koreans

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the trajectories of movement of Koreans in the former Soviet Union and their new diasporic spaces in migration destinations. While their residence was restricted to certain areas in Central Asia and Sakhalin during the Soviet era, the relaxation of residence restrictions in the late 1980s allowed them to look for new opportunities far away from their places of residence. Emphasizing the diversity of Korean communities in the post-Soviet space, this paper examines their perception of homeland and focuses on two projects aimed at reviving the sense of ancestral homeland, one in the Russian Far East, and the other in the Republic of Korea.

## Introduction

A Central Asian Korean respondent once defined “homeland” as universal and circumstantial. “For us, overseas Koreans, homeland is where we live,” she said.<sup>1</sup> Is this true for all Central Asian and Sakhalin Koreans? Where is their native land? This study attempts to address these questions, examining the relationship between the notion of “homeland” and the construction of diasporic spaces. Homeland may be understood from two points of view – as a state, to which an individual owes allegiance, and locale, with which an individual holds the deepest cultural, psychological or emotional association. The author uses the second, narrow definition of “homeland” in this paper.

In multiethnic states, cultural association is very complex as the individual is naturally influenced by different cultural elements surrounding him/her. More importantly, an individual has an intimate connection with the locale where he/she was born and raised. The separation from this place and the search for a new destination to settle down involve a complex and painful process. When an individual is forced to move to a new place due to various circumstances, it takes time and effort to make a decision.

Although none of the ancestors of the interviewees ever lived in the Korean Peninsula until the end of the Soviet period, the Stalinist settlement policy and the restriction of movement forced them to live in homogeneous villages and towns in Central Asia and Sakhalin, which helped them to preserve their ethnic identity. In this sense, they associated the locales, where they were born and lived, with some elements of Korean culture that, as shown below, were different in Central Asia and Sakhalin. As

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Liliya, aged 26, fifth-generation Central Asian Korean, November 2009.

the residence restrictions were gradually relaxed in the late 1980s, they began moving and soon faced the necessity to reconsider their sense of homeland.

A half million ethnic Koreans of the post-Soviet space represent a very diverse ethnic group.<sup>2</sup> The descendants of migrants who moved to the Russian Empire in the second half of the nineteenth – early twentieth century were forcibly resettled in Central Asia during the Stalinist purges. They are now called “Central Asian Koreans,” although their attachment to this region has been involuntary and temporal. Another group, the “Sakhalin Koreans,” are descendants of migrants, who were brought or came voluntarily to the island to work in coal mines in the 1930s–1940s. The descendants of contract workers from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), who were recruited in 1947–1949 through a USSR-DPRK intergovernmental agreement, comprise another group not covered in this paper. When a ship came in 1949 to take their parents back to North Korea, the contractors from the DPRK silently left for the remote mountains, thus denying “the DPRK” as their homeland and choosing the Soviet Union as a new one.<sup>3</sup> For members of the two groups of Koreans covered in the paper, their cultural identity has become susceptible to the name of their residence. But do they perceive these places as their “homeland”? What country(s) or region(s) do Koreans in the CIS (the Commonwealth of Independent States) consider as their real “homeland”? Why do the members of these diverse groups look for a “home” in different parts of the Eurasian continent? Is their decision to move predicated on their perception of a homeland? Basing on data from in-depth interviews with over 50 respondents and examining some other sources, this paper will address these questions, dealing with key concepts of “homeland,” “space” and “diaspora.”

### **Koreans in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union and their Post-Soviet Mobility**

Throughout the century-and-a-half-long history of Koreans in Russia, who began moving to the Russian Empire from the 1860s, their identity has transformed several times, becoming more intricate in the post-Soviet period. They were allowed and even encouraged to naturalize in the Russian Far East (RFE) by receiving Russian citizenship between 1893 and 1899, and many Koreans also converted to the Orthodox faith. Between 1905 and 1916, thousands of anti-Japanese rebels fled from the Korean Peninsula to Russia's Maritime Province. The Korean population in this part of Russia almost doubled over ten years (1902–1912) from 32,410 to 59,715. After the Bolsheviks took power in 1917, most of 81,825 Koreans<sup>4</sup> chose to stay in the Soviet Union where most continued to raise crops.

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I define “ethnic Koreans” as the descendants of migrants from the Korean Peninsula. Despite the fact that they hold citizenship of different states, most of them have kept their Korean family names. However, as shown below, their collective memory varies from group to group.

<sup>3</sup> Lee Chaimun, “A Tale of Two Nationalities: North Koreans in Kamchatka and South Koreans in Sakhalin Island, Russia.” Paper presented at the international symposium “Diaspora and Transnationalism in East Asia,” Kyungpook University, November 18, 2016. The recruitment of workers in North Korea was halted at the beginning of the Korean War.

<sup>4</sup> Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv Dal'nego Vostoka [The Russian National Historical Archives of the Far East] file no. 87-4-1593, 7–8; Vladimir Grave, *Kitaitsy, koreitsy i iapontsy v Priamur'e: Trudy komandirovannoi po vysochaishemu poveleniiu Amurskoi ekspeditsii* [Chinese, Koreans and Japanese in the Amur

Their fate changed dramatically in 1937, when the Stalinist regime decided to resettle them to remote Central Asia. Within the short period of three months (September to November 1937), almost all members of the Korean diaspora – which had significantly grown over two decades and was now comprised of 171,781 people (36,442 families) – were forcibly moved to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.<sup>5</sup>

Sakhalin Koreans (“*sakhalinskie*” in Russian) are descendants of Koreans who were forced to go or deceived to work in the harsh conditions of Sakhalin by the Japanese colonial regime in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>6</sup> In total, 23,500 Koreans, most of whom were from the southern part of the Korean Peninsula, resided in Sakhalin in mid-August of 1945<sup>7</sup> when Soviet troops landed on the island. They were denied the right to be repatriated to Japan and could not return to the Korean Peninsula because of the outbreak of the Korean War. Some Sakhalin Koreans went to the DPRK in the late 1950s, but most of them soon returned to the USSR, disappointed with the harsh living conditions.<sup>8</sup> North Korea soon lost their significance as a homeland for Sakhalin Koreans.

Sakhalin Koreans were not granted Soviet citizenship and were prohibited from moving outside of Sakhalin until the late 1950s.<sup>9</sup> Only a very few young and gifted individuals received permission to study on the Soviet “mainland,” mostly in the educational institutions east of the Urals. In 1989, just after political reform and democratization had started in Russia, 36,191 Koreans were residing on the island.<sup>10</sup>

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, both Central Asian and Sakhalin Koreans, like many Russians and Russian-speaking people in the former Soviet republics, began leaving these regions. The strict planned-economic controls on migration were relaxed in the late 1980s – early 1990s. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, a classic set of push-pull factors accelerated this process. Newly independent states in Central Asia were engaged in the process of state and national building.<sup>11</sup> High unemployment rates and the occupation of many civil service jobs by representatives of ethnic majorities in most Central Asian states (except Kazakhstan) were the major push factors, while labor shortages in big Russian cities served as a pull factor. As Moya Flynn notes, “the migration of ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking migrants from the other former Soviet republics to the Russian

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*Region. Report of the Expedition Sent by Imperial Order to the Amur Region*] 11 (St. Petersburg: V. F. Kirshbaum, 1912), 129–130.

<sup>5</sup> Anatolii Kuzin, *Dal'nevostochnye koreitsy: zhizn' i tragediia sud'by* [*Far Eastern Koreans: Life and the Tragedy of Fate*] (Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk: Arkhivnyi otdel Administratsii Sakhalinskoi oblasti Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Sakhalinskoi oblasti, 1993), 134.

<sup>6</sup> Bok Zi Kou, *Koreitsy na Sakhaline* [*Koreans in Sakhalin*] (Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk: B. i., 1993), 38–40; Kuzin, *Dal'nevostochnye koreitsy*, 198–199.

<sup>7</sup> Kuzin, *Dal'nevostochnye koreitsy*, 200.

<sup>8</sup> Andrei Lankov, “North Korean Mirage Collapses in Sakhalin,” *The Korea Times*, June 12, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Yulia Din, “Dreams of returning to the homeland: Koreans in Karafuto and Sakhalin” in *Voices from the Shifting Russo-Japanese Border: Karafuto/Sakhalin*, eds. Svetlana Paichadze and Philip Seaton (London: Routledge, 2015), 177–194.

<sup>10</sup> Bok Zi Kou, *Koreitsy na Sakhaline*, 107.

<sup>11</sup> Dagikhudo Dagiev, *Regime Transition in Central Asia: Stateness, Nationalism and Political Change in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 58.

Federation is one of the most significant population movements that has occurred since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991.”<sup>12</sup>

**Table 1. The Korean Population in Central Asian States, 1939–2002**

Country	1939	1959	1970	1979	1989	2002
Uzbekistan	73,000	139,000	148,000	163,000	183,100	169,600
Kazakhstan	n/a	74,000	82,000	92,000	103,300	99,700
Kyrgyzstan	n/a	n/a	7,528	n/a	n/a	19,000('99)
Tadzhikistan	n/a	n/a	8,484	n/a	n/a	6,000('99)
Turkmenistan	n/a	n/a	2,536	n/a	n/a-	3,000('99)
Russian Federation	168,009('26)	n/a	n/a-	n/a	107,100	148,600

Sources: USSR Censuses; Songmoo Kho, *Koreans in Soviet Central Asia* (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 1987), 24, 46–47; Shiro Hanya and Natsuko Oka, *Chuo Ajia-no Choshenjin: Sofu-no Chi-wo Toku Hanarete [Koreans of Central Asia: Moving Far Away from Grandfather's Land]*, Yurashia Bukretto (Eurasian Booklet), 93 (Tokyo: Yurashia kenkyū, 2006), 50; A.T. Kuzin, *Dal'nevostochnye koreitsy: zhizn' i tragediia sud'by [Far Eastern Koreans: Life and the Tragedy of Fate]* (Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk: Dal'nevostochnoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo, 1993), 15; Jeanyoung Lee, “The Korean-Chinese Migration into the Russian Far East: A Human Security Perspective,” in *Siberia and the Russian Far East in the Twenty-first Century: Partners in the “Community of Asia,” vol. 1. Crossroads in Northeast Asia*, ed. Akihiro Iwashita (Sapporo: Hokkaido University Slavic Research Center, 2005), 73. The figures might not be completely accurate as a significant number of Koreans who left Central Asian states for Russia still hold their citizenship and registration in their countries of origin.

As it can be seen in Table 1, the number of Koreans in Uzbekistan has decreased by 2002, while it has gradually increased in the Russian Federation.

Under the same set of push-pull factors, the movement from the Russian Far East, including such remote areas as Sakhalin, to the economically developed big Russian cities is another observable trend for all ethnic groups, including the Russian majority.

The process of choosing migration destination became more complex for Central Asian and Sakhalin Koreans as a result of having an alternative option. The establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the post-Soviet states in the early 1990s granted members of the Korean diasporas an advantage, which Russians in the former Soviet republics did not have – an opportunity to visit the Republic of Korea, work and reside there. The labor shortages in various economic sectors in this country served as an important pull factor.

Excluding economic factors, Koreans in Central Asia and Sakhalin select Russia or ROK as their priority migration destination because they feel attached to Russian or Korean culture. The younger generations of Central Asian and Sakhalin Koreans were educated in the Russian language to the same standard as most Russians, as dictated by the assimilative policy of the Soviet government,<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Moya Flynn, “Reconstructing ‘Homeland’ in the Russian Federation: Migrant-Centered Perspectives of Displacement and Resettlement,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33: 3 (2007): 461–462.

<sup>13</sup> German Kim, “Ob istorii prinuditel'no-dobrovol'nogo zabveniiia rodnogo iazyka koreitsami Kazakhstana [On the history of voluntarily and involuntarily oblivion of the native language by the Koreans of Kazakhstan],” *Diaspory [Diasporas]* 1 (2003): 110–145.

which made them culturally attached to Russia. Additionally, the Soviet government's strict control over the population in this remote part of the country and the concentrated residence of Koreans in the collective farms (*kolkhozes*) in Central Asia and mining towns in Sakhalin resulted in a high degree of homogeneity among Korean communities in the postwar period (1945–1991). Despite having experienced dramatic regime changes in 1917 and the early 1990s, the Koreans of the former Soviet Union managed to preserve few cultural traditions and looked for an opportunity to learn more about Korean culture.

Cultural affinity might be just a symbolic identity marker, signifying diasporians' interest in the ancestral homeland, which is usually expressed, for example, in reading news about the country, learning its language, preserving folklore and/or pursuing customs. However, when an individual faces economic hardship and has to look for a new place of residence, one's knowledge of the languages and customs becomes an important resource. The migration patterns of Koreans in the CIS, revealed in the interviews, show that their movement is greatly influenced by cultural attachment. The following five routes, four of which are transnational, can be considered most typical for their mobility: 1) Sakhalin and other peripheral areas of Russia → Moscow and big cities in “mainland” Russia; 2) Sakhalin (Russia) → ROK 3) Central Asia → Russia; 4) Central Asia → ROK; and 5) Central Asia → Russia → Republic of Korea. These routes of migration keep transforming due to the changing economic situation in various parts of the Republic of Korea, Russian Federation and other post-Soviet states. It must be noted that after almost two decades (the 1990s – 2000s) of Koreans' movement to Russia, their numbers in various cities have increased significantly. Thus, the largest communities in their migration destinations are to be found in Primorsky Krai (36,000), Khabarovsk Krai (15,000) in the Russian Far East and Rostovskaia Oblast' (11,700) and two cities with a special administrative status – Moscow (8,700) and Saint Petersburg (9,000–10,000) in European Russia.<sup>14</sup>

The next section will discuss the relationship between Korean migrants' perception of “homeland” and the (re)construction of their diasporic spaces at the migration destination.

### Reviving the Sense of “Homeland”

De Souza, exploring the notion of “home” for Caribbean returnees, notes that “mobility decision-making is also influenced by *individual* voluntarism and perception” and the “evaluations of

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<sup>14</sup> Nikolai Bugai, *Koreitsy stran SNG: obshchestvenno-“geograficheskii sintez” (nachalo 21 veka)* [*Koreans of the CIS States: Social- “Geographic Synthesis,”* (The Beginning of the Twenty-first Century)] (Moscow: Institute istorii RAN Obshcherossiiskoe ob'edinenie koreitsev, 2007), 295–344; Pavel Leshakov, “Polozhenie koreiskikh migrantov v Rossii [The Current State of Korean Migrants in Russia]” in *Problema nezakonnoi migratsii: realii i poisk* [*Problem of Irregular Migration in Russia: Reality and Search for Solutions*] (Moscow: IOM, 2004), 327–356; Min Young, *Kultura rossiiskoi diaspori v Sankt-Peterburge* [The Culture of Korean Diaspora in St. Petersburg]. Paper presented at the international workshop “Asian Diasporas in Contemporary Context” held at St. Petersburg State University, Faculty of Oriental Studies, November 10, 2008.

home and non-home.”<sup>15</sup> It is also important, especially in the case of Koreans in the post-Soviet space, to take into consideration that “migrants use the “home/land” narrative to articulate both the displacement that has been experienced, and equally the perceived and actual resolution of this displacement.”<sup>16</sup> In the past, Central Asian Koreans experienced displacement at least twice, when they were forced to move from Korea to the Russian Far East because of natural disasters and of Japanese colonization and when they were forcibly resettled into Central Asia in 1937. Their ethnic group’s past *is* a history of being displaced. Did they begin considering the RFE and Korean Peninsula as migration destinations when economic factors forced them to resettle in the post-Soviet times? Do they still maintain a cultural and emotional attachment to these lands? Indeed, some respondents, especially those from the older generation, mentioned their attachment to Primorsky Krai as one of the reasons they selected this region for re-emigration to Russia.<sup>17</sup> Statistics also confirm that most Central Asian Koreans moved to the RFE voluntarily. For example, a survey carried out by Far Eastern scholars in 1999 showed that only 16–17 percent of them moved to Primorsky Krai as refugees.<sup>18</sup>

As Conway and Potter point out, “the resultant diasporas are far flung and multi-modal and the cross-border social spaces that are being formed are serving to define, more and more, the social world of those involved.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, as many interviewees pointed out,<sup>20</sup> displacement and communal suffering in the Soviet period made Soviet Koreans rely not on the state but on themselves, creating their own strategies and “cross-border social spaces.” Koreans, moving from Central Asia to both Russia and South Korea, relied mostly on themselves and their own networks. An example of state support was the issuance of the Ordinance of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation “On the Rehabilitation of Soviet Koreans” of 1 April 1993, which acknowledged the Soviet Korean victims of the Stalinist purges and guaranteed assistance in moving to the Russian Federation. It somehow facilitated their re-emigration, settlement and employment. Even in the late Soviet period, many ethnic organizations of Koreans were established across the Soviet Union and the All-Soviet Union Congress of the Representatives of Ethnic Koreans took place in May of 1990.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1990s, as the Russian government tried to address the problem of dwindling population, some programs to facilitate the return migration of compatriots (*sootchestvenniki*) from the former Soviet republics or “the Near Abroad” (“*Blizhnee Zarubezh’e*” in Russian) to Russia were established.

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<sup>15</sup> Roger-Mark De Souza, “No Place Like Home: Returnee R&R (Retention and Rejection) in the Caribbean Homeland” in *The Experience of Return Migration: Caribbean Perspectives*, eds. Robert B. Potter and others (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005), 136–137.

<sup>16</sup> Flynn, “Reconstructing ‘Homeland,’” 463.

<sup>17</sup> A series of interviews carried out in Busan and RFE, September 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Angelina Vashchuk, “Adaptatsiia etnicheskikh migrantov iz Rossii i SNG v Primor’e (90-e gody 20 v.) [The Adaptation of Ethnic Migrants from Russia and CIS in Primor’e, the 1990s]” in *Adaptatsiia etnicheskikh migrantov v Primor’e v XX v. [The Adaptation of Ethnic Migrants in Primor’e in the Twentieth Century]* (Vladivostok: IIAE DVO RAN, 2000), 160.

<sup>19</sup> Dennis Conway and Robert Potter, “Return of the Next Generations: Transnational Migration and Development in the Twenty-first Century,” in *Return Migration of the Next Generations: Twenty-first Century Transnational Mobility*, eds. Dennis Conway and Robert Potter (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Interviews in Busan (November 2007) and the Russian Far East (September 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Hanya and Oka, *Chuo Ajia-no Chosenjin*, 46.

The Russian governmental agencies considered all Russian-speaking people, including ethnic Koreans, compatriots, whose return to Russia “would be a natural re-emigration to their homeland.”<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, ethnic Koreans themselves began considering Russia as a “homeland.” On the local level, the government of Primorsky Krai attempted to revive the symbolic significance of the Krai as their “homeland” (*rodina* in Russian) in the hearts of Central Asian Koreans. In the early 1990s, Krai’s governor E.I. Nazdratenko welcomed Koreans to Primorsky Krai.

The borderland nature of Primorsky Krai and its proximity to the border once turned as a disadvantage for Korean residents. In 1937, the imagined threat of Soviet Koreans’ cooperation with the Japanese army stationed in Korea served as a formal reason for their resettlement to Central Asia. As Toyota notes, “the political construction of the border in ways that allows it to make distinction between inclusion and exclusion is a means of legitimizing the structure of territorial power and its embodiment in the state.”<sup>23</sup> For thousands of Korean residents, the political construction of Primor’e had turned exclusive during the Stalinist purges, yet it suddenly appeared to be inclusive during the democratization of the early 1990s. Major reasons for the local government to invite them to return to the region were the movement called “ethnic minorities’ renaissance (*natsional’noe vozrozhdenie*)”<sup>24</sup> and the region’s dramatic depopulation in the post-Soviet period. The re-emigration of several hundred thousand “compatriots” from Central Asia was expected to compensate the natural outflow of the Russian population from the region.<sup>25</sup> It was even more desirable because of their attachment to Russian culture.

In the early 1990s, the proposal of the Krai’s governor to have ethnic Koreans to return was backed by a set of specific policies. A special commission was formed by the Krai’s government to organize the settlement of returning Koreans “without causing any interest conflicts with the local population.”<sup>26</sup> As the housing in the Krai was expensive, in 1996, the commandment of the Far Eastern Military District permitted Korean returnees to occupy the abandoned apartment blocks previously used by military personnel in the region. There was also a plan to build six homogenous Korean villages

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Professor Nikolai F. Bugai, Moscow, Russian Science Academy Research Institute of Russian History, November 15, 2008; Flynn, “Reconstructing ‘Homeland,’” 465.

<sup>23</sup> Mika Toyota, “Ambivalent Categories: Hill Tribes and Illegal Migrants in Thailand,” in *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory’s Edge*, eds. Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 92.

<sup>24</sup> Tamara Troiakova, “‘Koreiskaia derevnia’ v Primor’e: odin iz proektov ‘natsional’nogo vozrozhdeniia’ [‘Korean Village’ in Primor’e: A project of ‘Ethnic Minority’s Renaissance],” *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 4 (2008): 37–43. Ethnic minority groups in Russia were encouraged to pursue their cultural traditions and preserve their cultural heritage through establishing ethnic associations and organizing various events.

<sup>25</sup> See Kazuhiro Kumo, “Migratsiia naseleniia v postsovetsoi Rossii [Migrations of Population in post-Soviet Russia]” in *Ekonomicheskaia nauka sovremennoi Rossii* 2 [*The Economics of Contemporary Russia* 2] (Moscow: Central Institute of Economics and Mathematics, 2007), 132–145.

<sup>26</sup> Larisa Gerasimova, “Rol’ organov vlasti v obustroistve migrantov v Primorskom Krae (1990-e gody) [The Role of State Agencies in the Settlement of Migrants in Primorsky Krai (the 1990s)]” in *Adaptasiia etnicheskikh migrantov v Primor’e v XX v. [The Adaptation of Ethnic Migrants in Primor’e in the Twentieth Century]* (Vladivostok: DVO RAN, 2000), 179–180.

in the Krai<sup>27</sup> with the financial assistance from the Association of Small and Medium-Size Construction Companies in the Republic of Korea and other South Korean sponsors. A village called “Friendship” (“*Druzhiba*”) was built near Ussuriisk. Initially there were plans to construct houses for 460 families. However, due to the financial crisis of 1998 and some bureaucratic barriers, only 33 houses were built. Twenty-five of them were granted to Korean families from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>28</sup> In 1990, a Korean Cultural Center was established in Ussuriisk, which supported a Korean-language school, Korean traditional dance group “Arirang” and a Korean-language newspaper *Koryo Shinmun*,<sup>29</sup> making the city of Ussuriisk a new important diasporians' space at their migration destination.

As shown above, settlement policies by the government of the Krai, to some extent, affected the selection of destination by Central Asian Korean returnees and facilitated their adjustment to a new social environment and cultural activities. However, in reality, Central Asian Koreans faced multiple obstacles to settlement and integration. The passport registration system (*propiska*), a hallmark of Soviet-era command economy, often impeded settlement and naturalization of migrants in Primorsky Krai. As residence and entitlements remain under strict state control, this institutional factor works to the disadvantage of Korean returnees, complicating their employment and everyday life. At a seminar on migration policy and citizenship in the city of Artyom, it was pointed out that over 11,000 Korean migrants from Central Asia had difficulties obtaining Russian citizenship in Primorsky Krai.<sup>30</sup>

Despite this drawback, the number of Koreans in the Krai grew significantly. While in 1959, there were 6,597 Koreans in the Krai,<sup>31</sup> because of the local authorities' policies, their numbers increased from 8,125 in 1989 to 18,000 in 1996 and already 26,000 in 1997. Some sources even estimate that there were 36,000–40,000 Korean migrants from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in the Krai in the early 2000s.<sup>32</sup> They became the largest migrant group from “the Near Abroad” in the region in 1999, overcoming the two other big migrant minority groups – 25,000 Armenians and 21,000 Azerbaijanis.<sup>33</sup>

However, the plan to create homogeneous Korean villages was later considered by the local law-enforcement agencies and locals as contradicting the region's value of mixed residence of diverse ethnic groups. A highly ranked local official addressed Krai's governor E.I. Nazdratenko in the official letter requesting to restrict the entrance of foreigners into the Krai “due to their aspiration to build religious labor villages” on deserted lands.<sup>34</sup> The concept of Korean villages was also criticized in a

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<sup>27</sup> Troiakova, “Koreiskaia derevnia,” 40. In 1997, the settlement program was named “On the Non-Restitution Transfer of Open Military Towns in the Territory of Primorsky Krai to the Krai's Foundation of Russian Koreans.”

<sup>28</sup> A series of interviews carried out in Friendship Village, September 2007; Troiakova, “Koreiskaia derevnia,” 39–41.

<sup>29</sup> Interview in Friendship Village, September 2007; Troiakova, “Koreiskaia derevnia,” 39.

<sup>30</sup> Troiakova, “Koreiskaia derevnia,” 39.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Viktor, aged 55, fourth-generation Central Asian Korean, self-employed; Troiakova, “Koreiskaia derevnia,” 38–39; Vashchuk, “Adaptatsiia etnicheskikh,” 159.

<sup>33</sup> Vashchuk, “Adaptatsiia etnicheskikh,” 159.

<sup>34</sup> Troiakova, “Koreiskaia derevnia,” 42.

group letter to the Ussuriisk-based newspaper *Kommunar*.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, Tamara Troiakova quotes a Russian Korean entrepreneur who explained that the expectations of Central Asian Korean returnees for some privileges had been too high. The mixed residence with the Russian majority and other ethnic groups should have been considered a precondition for building new villages.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the governmental policies greatly affected the selection of a migration destination by Central Asian and Sakhalin Koreans. Thanks to them, some Korean communities were reconstructed in the Krai sixty years after they their forced resettlement to Central Asia. However, as shown below, this movement could not develop into a large-scale migration, as predicted by the local government and some Korean community leaders in the early and mid-1990s.

### **“Old Memories” and Economic Realities: Construction of Diasporic Spaces**

As mentioned above, some respondents from the older generation stated that their attachment to Primorsky Krai was a major reason for selecting the region for settlement in the late 1980s–early 1990s. A few “early birds” managed to return to Primor’e after the 1950s as migration restrictions were relaxed for the first time.<sup>37</sup> Even earlier, the Soviet authorities recruited some college-educated Communist party members of Korean origin to develop industries in the Far East. Thus, a son of such an expert remembers:<sup>38</sup>

The [Communist – I.S.] Party sent party functionaries here, to the Far East, to develop industries. And my father worked in many places across Primorky Krai.

All these diverse groups of Korean migrants that moved to Primor’e in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods or were sent there by the government, identified Primor’e as the “homeland” of their parents and a desirable place of residence. It helped them to develop their cross-border networks, which connected their communities in Central Asia and Primor’e, and later strengthened their communities.

However, the rate of economic development should be taken into consideration. As mentioned in the first section, labor demand always plays a powerful role in the selection of a migration destination. Most interviews carried out in various regions of Russia showed that big cities in the European part of the country with developed infrastructure proved to be more attractive for Central Asian Koreans, especially those who had obtained a college education. As the study suggests, Korean migrants enjoy comparatively higher incomes because of their professional skills and higher lifestyle, in contrast to their origin in Central Asia. They persistently demonstrated their willingness to establish themselves in

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Viktor, aged 55, fourth-generation Central Asian Korean, self-employed. See also Troiakova, “Koreiskaia derevnia,” 38.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Fedor, Central Asian Korean, male, 56, university professor, September 2007.

big cities.<sup>39</sup> A respondent in Vladivostok qualified the place of Primorsky Krai in the post-Soviet migration of Central Asian Koreans in the following way:<sup>40</sup>

Where can a Korean go? Those who have connections move to Moscow; those who don't have any because of old memories try hard here. They, in general, are the poorest group of those [Koreans - I.S.] who are moving...

As the same respondent states, Koreans who were unable to rely on their compatriot networks in big cities and selected Primorsky Krai as a destination had humble incomes. Moreover, in Primorsky Krai itself, instead of the administrative centers of Vladivostok and Khabarovsk, the much smaller city of Ussuriisk became a major destination for thousands of Korean migrants from Central Asia. Here, they were attracted by the low cost of living as the narrative of a respondent confirms:<sup>41</sup>

Look, those migrants who arrived from Central Asia settle neither in Vladivostok nor anywhere else; they go farther, straight to Ussuriisk. Because they can't buy even a garage for the sum that they obtained, having sold their three-bedroom apartments in Tashkent. Besides, they have to pay for their transportation. That is why those who live in our region are in a very hard situation.

However, as many investment projects in the Krai did not succeed, the region could not provide enough jobs to migrants. Many of them found employment in the informal or semi-informal sector of the Krai, for example, in open-air markets that sold inexpensive Chinese goods. Their usual monthly income comprised no more than some 15,000 rubles (approximately \$500) in 2007.<sup>42</sup> They got even more jobs in that market after the introduction of the regulations of 2006 and 2009, prohibiting foreigners to work in Russian markets.<sup>43</sup> They were hired by Chinese petty entrepreneurs, who, while maintaining control of their business outlets often under the disguise of porters, needed to hire local shop assistants. Having East Asian roots and being ready to work for comparatively low wages, Korean migrants were perfectly suited for this role.

Even with these economic disadvantages, many Central Asian Koreans, especially of the older generation, settled down in Ussuriisk and other small towns of Primor'e. It is in Primor'e where they

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<sup>39</sup> Alena Chagay, "Social Status and Labor Mobility of Uzbek Koreans in the Post-Soviet Era, Twenty-fifth Biennial AKSE Conference Proceedings." Paper presented at the Association for Korean Studies in Europe, Moscow State University, June 17–20, 2011, 1, 182.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Viktor, aged 55, fourth-generation Central Asian Korean, self-employed, September 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Leshakov, "Polozhenie koreiskikh migrantov v Rossii," 327–356; Feng Anquan, "Churo Kokkyo Boeki: Kokuryukosho-no tai-Roshia kokkyo boeki-wo chushin-ni [China-Russian Cross-border Trade: Focusing on the Heilongjiang Province]." *Annals of the Japanese Association for Russia and East European Studies* 36: 146–158.

<sup>43</sup> Feng Anquan, *ibid.*; "Vstupaiet v silu riad ogranichenii na trudovuiu deiatel'nost' inostrantsev v 2009 [Some Restriction on the Employment of Foreigners is Introduced in Russia in 2009]." Accessed January 29, 2009: <https://pravo.ru/news/view/7306/>

encountered Chinese of Korean descent (*Joseonjok*) at the Chinese markets<sup>44</sup> and with Sakhalin Koreans<sup>45</sup> in Far Eastern cities. Although there is little interaction between ethnic Korean returnees to Primor'e and *Joseonjok* (and South Koreans), the returnees found themselves in the same kind of multiethnic environment of a border region that existed in the pre-revolutionary and early Soviet periods.

In Ussuriisk, for example, some of them purchased inexpensive wooden houses, living side by side with their fellow relatives, who also moved to Primor'e. This is the only city in the region that provides a low-cost dormitory to involuntary and low-income migrants.<sup>46</sup> Settling down with other family members, Koreans were able to successfully reproduce some forms of community life that they enjoyed in Central Asia. Together with "old memories," these new diasporic spaces provided a sense of stability to some of them, especially to the people of the older generation.

However, young and middle-aged ethnic Koreans often look for new migration destinations soon after their movement from Central Asia to Primorsky Krai.<sup>47</sup> In this respect, the Primorsky Krai as a border region provides a variety of opportunities in terms of the proximity to the Republic of Korea and other countries. For them, like for a respondent quoted at the very beginning of paper, "homeland is where they live."

### **Another "Home(land)"?**

A food outlet's sign in a multiethnic area in Seoul is written in Russian – "The Native Land." Inside the small restaurant, the food reminds you of Central Asian cuisine. The bowls are Uzbekistan-made. Vodka is popular liquor there. The people who run it moved to Seoul from Central Asia. What is "the native land" for them and their customers – Central Asia, where they were born, or South Korea, where they work, live and run their businesses? The restaurant's name is a manifestation of their multiple identity and complex perception of "homeland."

The dwindling South Korean population and structural requirements of the country's economy created a large demand for non-skilled and semi-skilled labor. In the late 1990s, the South Korean government introduced a two-year F-4 visa for trainees under the Industrial Technical Training Program (ITTP). In September of 2007, in addition to the F-4 visa, restricting the employment of its holders to unskilled jobs, a five-year H2-1 visa for people of Korean descent (*gyopo* or "overseas compatriots") was introduced. This encouraged many individuals of Korean ancestry from Russia and Central Asian states to move to the ROK for long-term stay and work, and later sponsor their relatives to join them. Some Central Asian Koreans used the RFE as a transit point on their way to the ROK. For example, a family from the Tashkent Oblast' in Uzbekistan moved first to Ussuriisk as had many of their neighbors around the year 2000. A few years later, they re-emigrated to a big South Korean city and opened their own bakery there. The black bread and sausages that they began producing became popular in the city

<sup>44</sup> Leshakov, "Polozhenie koreiskikh migrantov v Rossii," 328.

<sup>45</sup> As interviews showed (Interviews in the Tashkent Oblast', November 2009).

<sup>46</sup> Vashchuk, "Adaptatsiia etnicheskikh," 183.

<sup>47</sup> For example, Chagay, "Social Status."

and other areas in Korea.<sup>48</sup> This pattern of re-emigration in search of a new “homeland” was quite typical. Not everyone was lucky enough to run his own business or assist his relatives in running one. Many Korean migrants from the CIS found only unskilled jobs at construction sites and plants.

Despite facing difficulties in communicating with the locals and other obstacles, many see the ROK as an opportunity. A female respondent working as a waitress in a small restaurant and three male respondents working in a small plant stated that even temporary low-paid work in the ROK allowed migrants to support their families still living in the former Soviet Union, and to accumulate savings for future settlement in South Korea.<sup>49</sup> Another female respondent said that she saw more opportunities in South Korea than in her native Uzbekistan and shared her plan to save a certain amount of money and open a coffee shop or restaurant.<sup>50</sup> A male respondent from Tashkent noted that he was really grateful to his employer for taking him onto a tour across South Korea and showing him the beauties of his ancestral homeland.<sup>51</sup>

Most unskilled workers and small business owners of the younger generation have struggled to obtain permanent residence status and stable, well-paying jobs. Their attitudes towards the host society and their plans for the future vary from person to person. Some complain that they are underpaid, even when compared with other groups of migrants such as Chinese of Korean descent (*Joseonjok*).<sup>52</sup> In South Korea, ethnic Koreans from the CIS and from China become competitors. The language barrier and little knowledge of contemporary Korean culture usually impedes integration. Marked status differences are apparent between educated Korean-language-speaking skilled professionals and entrepreneurs and those lacking sufficient proficiency in the Korean language. Inability to speak Korean fluently naturally affects their job advancement prospect and makes those less proficient in the language reliant on Korean-speaking compatriots.

Central Asian Koreans usually prefer to construct their own social spaces. For example, the owner of a Russian-food outlet in a city not far from Seoul stated that almost all his customers are migrants from the post-Soviet states. At night, they order Russian food and spend long hours (until five in the morning) on the weekends dancing and socializing with each other.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, three visitors of the Uzbek-Korean food restaurant in Seoul explained that they liked to spend time on Sundays and days-off at the restaurant because there they are able to communicate with the restaurant owner, her employees and other visitors in Russian. During the interview, they began talking and sharing drinks with newly arrived customers who they had not previously known. These food outlets represent an informal space where migrants from Central Asia reproduce their lifestyle and ways of socializing, which differ from the surrounding South Korean society. Here, in this temporal informal space they feel “at home” – at their “native land.”

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with Inna, aged 44, fourth-generation Central Asian Korean, self-employed, April 2008.

<sup>49</sup> For example, interviews with Svetlana, aged 46, second-generation Sakhalin Korean, salaried employee (April 2008) and Ivan, aged 61, second-generation Central Asian Korean, plant worker (April 2012).

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Kseniia, aged 26, fifth-generation Central Asian Korean, salaried employee, April 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Ivan, aged 61, second-generation Central Asian Korean, plant worker, April 2012.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with a food outlet owner, April 2008.

On the contrary, as a series of interviews showed, first- or second-generation returnees from Sakhalin, who have been granted Korean citizenship and provided with a pension and some other allowances, have successfully established themselves. Many have learnt the Korean language in their childhood and, though it was the North Korean version of the language, they can still communicate with the local population. The difference of languages and the gap in their experience of the Korean society often do not allow them to establish relationships with the local people.

They have long awaited repatriation to South Korea.<sup>54</sup> Four and a half decades after the end of the war, when diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the ROK were established in 1990, their repatriation became reality. Not all first-generation Sakhalin Koreans, who were born in Korea, or their children chose to return to the ROK for permanent residence. Many were not in very good health because of age and were reluctant to separate from their children and grandchildren. However, interviews showed that those who returned to the ROK and obtained South Korean citizenship were attracted by an opportunity to live in their ancestral homeland and be protected by the developed social welfare system. Members of the first and second generations born before 15 August 1945 then received permission to move to a specially built “Native Village (*Gohwangmaeul*)”<sup>55</sup> in the city of Ansan, and later to municipal apartment blocks in Incheon and other cities under a Korean government support program. “Native Village” is another symbolic representation of “homeland,” another attempt (like in the borderland region of Primor’e) to revive the psychological attachment to a new place of residence. The returnees are granted South Korean citizenship; they enjoy a monthly pension and other allowances. Will a “Native Village” become a real “home” for them? Their initial separation from their families in the ROK was now followed by a new traumatic family rupture – this time from their children and grandchildren who were ineligible for the program of repatriation to South Korea. Age limits in the selection of returnees by the governmental agencies and the inability of their relatives from younger generations to join them in the ROK have caused new family disruptions and psychological suffering.<sup>56</sup>

In the 2000s, the so-called Russian ethnic business districts appeared in Seoul and Busan, being evidence of the strengthening of the community of Russian-speaking returnees in the ROK. The shift of some Koreans from contract employment to self employment can be observed. It shows that their communities in the ROK have been transforming not only numerically but also structurally, resulting in more community stratification.

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<sup>54</sup> Yulia Din, *Koreiskaia diaspora Sakhalina: problema repatriatsii i integratsii v sovetskoe i rossiiskoe obshchestvo* [*The Korean Diaspora in Sakhalin: The Problem of Repatriation and Integration in Soviet and Russian Society*] (Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk: Yuzhno-sakhalinskaia oblastnaia tipografiia, 2015), 107.

<sup>55</sup> The construction of “Native Village [*Gohwangmaeul*]” was funded by the Japanese government as compensation to Sakhalin Koreans for their sufferings during the war and postwar periods. It represents eight apartment blocks and a community center built in the city of Ansan.

<sup>56</sup> For example, interview with Ilia, aged 73, Sakhalin Korean, retired, April 2008.

## Concluding Remarks

Migrants move across physical spaces to reach their destinations. They construct, shape and re-shape new spaces, formal and informal ones, virtual or even hidden ones. Return migration might be seen as an easier pattern for integration into a host society. Then why do return migrants need to construct their own social spaces in the country that is perceived to be their “homeland”? The long-term residence outside their ancestral homeland signifies a rupture between them and the society that used to be their natural social environment decades before. The more time passes, the more generations are born and raised outside the “homeland,” the more difficult it becomes to “rediscover” their homeland.

This paper examined two projects aimed to revive and/or strengthen psychological attachment of ethnic Koreans to a region that used to be their “ancestral homeland,” which were launched by local and central governments in the Russian Federation and the Republic of Korea. In Primorsky Krai, the project and the idea of “homeland” to some degree helped consolidate diverse communities of Koreans and construct social spaces. In general, the low cost of living has allowed Koreans to reproduce their former lifestyle. Moreover, the psychological attachment to the “homeland” of their parents and grandparents initially made Primorsky Krai attractive for them. Nonetheless, Sakhalin Koreans do not have any special attachment to this region. Their homeland is Sakhalin. Primorsky Krai is just a comparatively proximate part of mainland Russia that provides more opportunities to study and work than their remote native island. The Krai’s nature of a borderland has provided a place for inter-ethnic interactions and contacts with people from neighboring East Asian states. However, the project of a “homeland” did not prove to be very successful due the combination of various factors – the financial crisis of 1998, insufficient administrative support and, most importantly, the general weakness of the regional economy. This also demonstrates the existence of a gap in economic development between the “center,” which includes Moscow and a few other industrial areas, and the periphery in Russia. Well-educated young and middle-aged Koreans, like most Russians, Tatars or Jews, usually prefer to move to “the center.”

The younger-generation of diasporians seem to be looking for more opportunities to re-emigrate outside the CIS, in particular to the ROK, in contrast to the elderly, who prefer to stay at their first migration destination. Seeing growing economic opportunities in the ROK, many Korean returnees to Primorsky Krai have sought out employment opportunities there, creating new transnational spaces. Their communities in the ROK are characterized by the comparatively high degree of closure. Their diasporic spaces have much more rigid boundaries. The question of whether they see their Korean origin more as an advantage to realize some of their specific economic goals or an attempt to find a true “homeland” remains an object for further studies.

In both countries, we see the fragmentation of migrants’ spaces. The diversity of Koreans in Russia – the differences of “place” from which they discover new spaces, the differences in education and language proficiency and the generational differences – all of which affects their sense of “home/land.” This diversity inevitably impedes the unity of a single diasporic space. The case of the Koreans of the former Soviet Union shows that, even moving by themselves, migrants are not entirely

free to create spaces. Many various actors are involved. Authorities, police, employers – all of whom shape and re-shape the trajectories of their movement, their sense of “homeland” and social spaces that they attempt to construct.