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KORYO-SARAM IN THEIR ANCESTRAL HOMELAND: SELF-PERCEPTION AND COMPLEXITIES OF RELATIONS WITH SOUTH KOREAN SOCIETY

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The Koryo-saram associations in post-Soviet countries declared the revival of national traditions, customs, culture and language as a key objective in preserving Korean identity among their members.

On the other hand, South Korean citizens, inspired by their country's "success story", readily embraced the role of cultural "authorities". According to the researcher Valeriy Khan (2001), South Korean businessmen, professors and pastors believe that Koryo-saram should follow the patterns of behavior and consciousness of South Koreans. However, this raises an important question: who has the authority to define what is being "Korean" and what is not? And what is "Korean culture" itself?

At the same time, integration into the globalized world has influenced South Korea's social structure. In an effort to "embrace" ethnic Koreans – whether to address demographic decline or for other reasons – the South Korean government implements various programs that appeal to Korean identity values. Additionally, ROK laws regarding overseas ethnic Koreans grant certain advantages to Koryo-saram.

Many ethnic Koreans arrive to the homeland of their ancestors primarily in search of a better life. Interestingly, Koryo-saram associations also emerged in South Korea. If preserving their "Korean-ness" within the ROK is not the point, then what does motivate the newcomers to unite?

In order to address the questions raised above and examine the current state of relations between the Koryo-saram and their "ancestral home", this paper analyzes relevant South Korean official discourses on "overseas Koreans", explores testimonies on the acceptance of Koryo-saram by South Korean society, and revises evidence from Koryo-saram regarding how they perceive their position within South Korean society.

Keywords: migrant minority; Koryo-saram; identity; globalization; "Korean-ness"; ancestral home; social dynamics; "othering"; integration

Introduction

Adapting to and being assimilated into ethnically alien environments, Koreans in different countries acquire more and more traits that distinguish themselves from each other and transform their initial ethnic characteristics [Khan 2018, *580*]. "Soviet Koreans" became model Soviet citizens, also showing high levels of linguistic and cultural russification [Fumagalli 2012, *80*]. Yet, even within diverse host societies, they have managed to preserve their cultural markers[1].

The sense of ethnic self-identification became especially pronounced with the collapse of the USSR[2]. However, the (re)establishment of contact with peninsular Koreans after decades of isolation presented certain challenges for Koryo-saram[3] in the process of rediscovering their identity[4].

As the Soviet state unraveled, the fifteen new republics suddenly came to independence, and ties with Pyongyang were swiftly replaced with an upgrading of relations with Seoul [Fumagalli 2012, *81*]. Naturally, South Korea became more active in terms of economic cooperation, simultaneously offering attractive policies aimed at Koryo-saram[5].

South Korea's economic success undoubtedly had a significant impact on Koryo-saram communities in post-Soviet countries. It reinforced their sense of kinship and affinity, while simultaneously strengthening ethnic boundary markers to distinguish themselves as Koreans within the titular nations. In particular, "the 1988 Summer Olympic Games held in Seoul was a momentum, when Goryeo saram came to revive a strong sense of connection to South Korea as their ethnic homeland" [Song 2019, *7*].

Media portrayals focused on the "Miracle on the Han River" and continuous economic growth, which helped nurture a stronger sense of belonging to Korean ethnicity. The Koryo-saram associations of the post-Soviet countries proclaimed revitalization of national traditions, customs, culture and language among their members as one of the goals of maintaining Korean identity [Khan 2001, *50*].

On the other hand, South Korea's unprecedented economic development provided its people with a strong foundation to take pride in their country[6]. South Korean citizens, inspired by their country's "success story", readily embraced the role of cultural "authorities"[7].

However, it is also true that the process of rediscovering "Korean-ness" does not entail abandoning the identity tied to the country of their citizenship or residence. Many South Korean citizens perceive Koryo-saram as Russians or Kazakhs[8].

From social and cultural perspectives, the discourses from the Republic of Korea – of economic success, superiority, or acting as "genuine Koreans" – do not fully align with reality, nor with the way South Korean individuals face the exposure of their everyday lives to the dynamics of "globalizing capitalism". The contrasts raise several questions. What in reality is Korean identity or Korean culture[9]? Who has the authority to define what is "Korean" and what is not? While these questions are rhetorical, they undoubtedly prompt reflection on various aspects that arise from the re-encounter between South Koreans and their co-ethnics from post-Soviet countries.

Goals, Structure and Methodology

To this end, the goal of the article is to explore the self-perceptions of Koryo-saram within their ancestral homeland and examine the current state of relations between this migrant community and the land of their forebears, in this case, South Korea. To achieve this, the discussion will be structured as follows.

1) The paper first delves into the social transformations that took place in South Korea following the civil war of 1950–1953. Understanding these changes is crucial for highlighting the differences between Koryo-saram and South Koreans, despite their shared cultural and ethnic heritage. Additionally, this part will analyze how the ROK's official

discourse on Koryo-saram has been shaped by the country's integration into globalization dynamics and the evolving needs of the host state.

2) So far, the aforementioned part will serve as a foundation for analyzing Koryo-saram's self-perception within South Korean society, as well as South Koreans' perceptions of them. Additionally, it will provide insight whether the expectations of "Koreanness" that South Koreans have for Koryo-saram are reasonable or appropriate.

Furthermore, the paper traces back the initial encounters between Koryo-saram and South Korean society following the collapse of the USSR. These interactions were shaped by contrasting social dynamics in the host country and the distinct socio-cultural background of Koryo-saram. Beyond cultural hybridization and socio-political shifts, the paper also explores other key factors that differentiate Koryo-saram and South Koreans. One significant challenge is the linguistic barrier, which hinders their integration into South Korean society. The paper then explores how Koryo-saram navigate their situation – whether they view South Korea as their new home and choose to integrate or pursue alternative paths. This section also examines the strategies they adopt as a minority to facilitate their integration into South Korean society.

In terms of timeframe, the paper examines the period from the collapse of the USSR to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this does not imply that the situation has changed drastically in recent years. To this end, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of the key trends surrounding the "return" of Koryo-saram to their "ancestral homeland", focusing on identity, adaptation, and the historical and socio-political contexts of both the minority group in focus and the host society. Ultimately, exploring Koryo-saram's perceptions of South Korean society may offer deeper insights into the progress of multiculturalism, as officially embraced by the Republic of Korea.

In order to address the goal of the article, this study employs a qualitative approach that integrates discourse analysis, and examination of primary sources. Methodologically, this paper not only reviews the limited existing literature on Koryo-saram identity but also carefully selects firsthand testimonies from media interviews with Koryo-saram. These narratives are of vital importance, as they provide direct insight into how members of this community perceive their migration experience of adaptation to South Korean society, and the challenges they encounter in navigating a new socio-cultural landscape. Through discourse analysis, the study seeks to identify recurring themes and sentiments expressed by Koryo-saram regarding their self-perception. To ensure a well-rounded analysis, these personal accounts are supplemented and cross-examined with data from South Korean official and academic sources. Official reports and scholarly works provide critical context on South Korea's stance toward Koryo-saram migration, national identity discourse, and policies. Additionally, media portrayals of Koryo-saram are examined to explore how this group is represented in South Korean society and how such representations may influence public perception and integration outcomes.

Given the multilingual nature of the sources, the research process involved translating primary materials from Russian, Korean, and also Spanish. This multilingual approach enables the study to incorporate perspectives, offering a more comprehensive understanding of Koryo-saram's integration experiences.

1. Changes in South Korean Society from 1953 Onward and Their Impact on the State's Official Discourse Regarding Koryo-saram

1.1. Transformations and Social Dynamics at the "Ancestral Home" Shaped by Globalization

Perhaps one of the greatest shortcomings of our globalized world lies in its impact on societies and cultures, since the interactions between human groups often give rise to unequal realities, frequently disadvantaging certain social groups or individuals. The *segyehwa* (globalization) policy had the purpose to (1) create a first-rate nation; (2) rationalize

all aspects of life; (3) maintain national unity by rising above class, regional, and generational differences; (4) strengthen Korea's national identity as the basis for successful globalization; and (5) enhance a sense of community with all humanity [Saxer 2016]. In reality, however, these goals were subordinated to the pursuit of economic efficiency, aimed at fostering autonomy, competition, and liberalization.

The power structures that initiated the process of globalization in Korea – both the government and business elites – basically imposed a new narrative of the ideal of modernity, urging society to transform its everyday practices and their forms. While these changes, perhaps, were not immediately apparent, they have since contributed to a complex sociocultural landscape not only within Korean society, but also in its interactions with the wider world. These shifts impact daily life – much like in other societies influenced by the discursive neoliberalism of globalization – but they have also enabled the Korean State and economic elites to shape the situation in their pursuit of new markets and commercial partnerships.

The government rightfully holds the authority to shape the nation's direction, but it must do so in adherence to democratic principles. What can be questioned, however, is the fact that the state made decisions unilaterally, without involving or consulting society, despite its policies advocated for a participatory democracy, at least in terms of official discourse. Thus, the proclaimed democratizing aspect and the envisioned integral participation of every member of society were sidelined, failing to ensure equal opportunities and social equity. A key contradiction in Korea's globalization process lies in its lack of attention to the implications of sociocultural change in Korean society in its proper dimension.

The process of adopting or hybridizing of various cultural elements brought from abroad, followed by their local reinterpretation in Korea, has been largely haphazard. For example, the Korean State recognized the soft power of *Hallyu* and adopted it as a tool to enhance its global image. However, since the cultural phenomenon of the *Korean Wave* did not emerge from the popular structures of society, the population within Korea itself does not feel a strong connection to the cultural image of the country promoted abroad. For instance, according to our previous research, most young Koreans believe that *Hallyu* does not accurately represent their society or culture overseas. This highlights the lack of identity alignment with the cultural phenomenon, despite its widespread dissemination, which has shaped how Korea is perceived globally. The image of the country, as portrayed through pop culture generated by the entertainment industry, does not align with the identity traits that truly define and represent Korean society and, by extension, the nation itself[10].

Following the 1950–1953 War, Korea's economic development was planned, driven, and implemented by the state structure. Perhaps more importantly, the outcomes of this process had a spontaneous impact on society. In response to this invisible force, as Nestor Garcia Canclini puts it, society has developed strategies to comprehend the context in which it lives, expressed through forms of resistance, such as the intensification of ethnic identity rooted in Koreans' imaginaries of the purity of their origins.

In this context, it is worth providing a brief conclusion of the official discourse surrounding globalization principles and multiculturalism. Although social and cultural elements are evident in the discourse, the goals shaped by a nationalist perspective diverge significantly from the reality faced by Korean power structures in pursuing their primary objective – the liberalization of the economy. Thus, national unity over generational differences has yet to be achieved. For example, Park Geun-hye won the presidency largely due to these generational differences, with older and younger generations holding opposing views on the social realities of the country. Similarly, goal number four has also not been achieved, since inequality persists among different groups of Koreans based on their place of birth or ties to other groups. This leads to a counterproductive effect, where the reinforcement of a national identity ends up excluding otherness. Goal number five has

also yet to be accomplished: while the Korean state has implemented strategies promoting multiculturalism and the acceptance of non-Korean actors in its society, discrimination and phobia of people of non-Korean origin still persist.

Certainly, the emergence of a minority brings into life the relations of power between the dominant SK host society and the "newcomers", a dynamic common to human social interactions worldwide. However, this situation prompts us to question why certain social practices marginalize, discriminate, or exacerbate poverty in some groups, while celebrating wealth in others, in this case, in a society that continues to promote itself through a discourse of success and example on the global stage.

1.2. Labor Market Needs and Demographic Challenges

Since the early 2000s the Republic of Korea has positioned itself as a model of development and rapid economic growth in the contemporary global context. At the same time, the country identified itself as a nation that has successfully managed to adapt to globalizing dynamics and interaction with the world. However, as C. Johnson points out, Korea's strategy of economic development resulted in a pattern of markedly unbalanced development, which unintended consequence is a loss of societal equilibrium, that is, a loss of coherence between a society's structure of values and its division of labor [Johnson 1989, *63–64*]. Issues such as multiculturalism, sexual diversity, the role of women, migration, income inequality, unequal access to education are just a few examples that highlight the dominance of traditional identity traits, primarily rooted in Confucianism and an ethnocentric sense of identity.

For instance, among many Korean women, the traditional value system associated with Confucian ethics is strongly challenged or even rejected by the adoption of modern economic, social, and legal standards [Chung 2015]. As a result, for the first time in the history of ROK, the birth rate has fallen below one child per woman – specifically, to 0.98 – making South Korea the country with the lowest birth rate among the OECD nations [KBS World 2019]. Given that the success of economic development in the Republic of Korea is closely tied to its human capital, it is easy to see that population trends present a concerning challenge for the country's future [López Rocha and Ryzhkov 2020, *405*]. Thus, rapid industrialization brought with it numerous social and demographic challenges. For example, The Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs announced that South Korea's farm population has halved over past 20 years [Kim 2020].

Therefore, integration into the globalized dynamics is crucial to understanding the ROK government's interest in overseas Koreans:

> South Korea has turned into labor importing country in the late 1980's as a result of the dynamic economic development throughout the 1970–80's. The national administration, however, was cautious about whom to attract as labor force for keeping the pace of the ever-growing economy. […] the South Korean government called for overseas Koreans from China (*chosŏnjok*) and post-soviet Republics (*koryo-saram*) as labor migrants to their old and long-forgotten historical "motherland" [An & Frigerio 2018, *19*].

In an effort to "embrace" ethnic Koreans scattered around the globe – whether to "fill shortages in unskilled labor" [Jo 2018] or combat the demographic decline [KIM Magazine 2019a] – the South Korean government runs various programs through multiple institutions, appealing to values of Korean identity and offering educational and other opportunities. In the opinion of Pavel Em,

> The concept of the third demographic transition suggests that the challenges posed by an aging population can be mitigated through the influx of foreigners who do not yet face the same reproductive model. From this perspective, Russian-speaking Koreans are a lifeboat for Korea. We are ethnically identical [cited in Kim 2018].

Thus, this part briefly outlines South Korea's labor market needs and demographic challenges, emphasizing how rapid economic growth has led to social imbalances. While

the country has successfully integrated into global economic dynamics, traditional Confucian values continue to shape societal structures, affecting issues such as gender roles, multiculturalism, and migration. A key concern is the declining birth rate. Additionally, rural populations are shrinking due to industrialization. To address labor shortages, South Korea has turned into a labor-importing country since the late 1980s, selectively recruiting ethnic Koreans from China and post-Soviet states to sustain economic growth.

1.3. Official Criteria for Ethnic Koreans to Sojourn at "Ancestral Home"

Ethnic homogeneity is so crucial to Koreans that, in order to be(come) Korean, one must prove one's blood and kinship ties, as being born on Korean soil does not automatically confer Korean nationality. Refutation or anxiety towards mestization persist, which is why foreign wives are seen as a challenge or even a threat to the ideas of a nation-state grounded in the consciousness of pure ethnicity or pure blood [Lee 2013, *117*].

The government established criteria to allow ethnic Koreans to stay legally in the country. Right before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic,

> the Enforcement Decree on Overseas Koreans limited the scope of "lineal descendent" to "[a] person, one of whose parents or grandparents had held nationality of the Republic of Korea, and who acquired nationality of a foreign country". In other words, the definition did not include the fourth generation of ethnic Koreans. On July 2, 2019, an amendment removing the restriction says a lineal descendent is entitled to the status of overseas Koreans regardless of generation [Migration Research and Training Center 2019, *42–43*].

Essentially, blood kinship is also an advantage in acquiring Korean nationality:

> According to Article 2.1 of the Provisional Ordinance of Nationality regulating the principles of *jus sanguinis* or bloodline, a person born to a father who is a national of Chosun also has the nationality of Chosun. Until the Constitution was formulated, the Provisional Ordinance of Nationality (the South Korean Interim Government Ordinance No. 11) was in effect. Even after the independence from Japan, the principles of *jus sanguinis* were prescribed in Article 2.1 of the Nationality Act enacted on December 20, 1948 [Migration Research and Training Center 2019, *48*].

Hence, blood kinship can be seen as a fundamental official criterion for accessing better opportunities, at least in the context of the South Korean labor market. Given the existing challenges of globalization, the South Korean government decided to bring labor force to the country by inviting overseas Koreans. However, the social dynamics within the country show that being ethnically Korean is not enough to fit in.

Unlike many countries, South Korea does not grant nationality based on birthplace but instead relies on kinship ties, reflecting a strong emphasis in ethnic homogeneity. South Korea's nationality laws have historically followed the *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) principle, reinforcing the idea that nationality is inherited rather than geographically determined. The government initially restricted the definition of "lineal descendant" but amended this in 2019 to include all generations of ethnic Koreans. While blood kinship can provide advantages, particularly in the labor market, being ethnically Korean alone does not guarantee full social integration within South Korea, as deeper cultural and social challenges persist.

2. (Re-)encounter of Koryo-saram with South Koreans in the Republic of Korea

2.1. Challenges for Koryo-saram Marked by Social Dynamics

Since the introduction of a new employment system for ethnic Koreans from the former Soviet countries and China after the revision of the Overseas Koreans Act in 2007[11], the number of Korean immigrants to South Korea has risen sharply [Sim 2019, *102*]. Many ethnic Koreans arrive to the homeland of their ancestors in search of a better life (or for various other reasons).

On the other hand, as mentioned briefly above, the "homeland" has undergone considerable transformations. Unaware of the intricacies of local dynamics, Koreans from post-Soviet countries arrived with their own perceptions of Korean culture. The culture of Koryo-saram stems from the Korean culture brought from the "ancestral home", yet it has undergone considerable transformations over time. As Kwang-kyu Lee points out, the ritual life of the Koryo-saram community has changed in various respects, such as in the case of marriages [Lee 2000, *249*]. Hybridization[12] and adaptation, influenced by the hosting societies, have shaped many cultural elements. A spicy carrot serves as an example in gastronomy. Meanwhile, other traits have been preserved in their traditional form: Lee mentions, for example, rituals for the first birthday and sixtieth anniversary, or many dishes of Korean cuisine close to that of North Korea [Lee 2000, *249–250*]. Other common traditions for South Koreans and Koryo-saram are celebration of 추석 *Chuseok* (a major Korean holiday, a harvest festival often referred to as Korean Thanksgiving) or 설날 *Seollal* (Korean Lunar New Year, one of the most important holidays). To this end, Valeriy Khan describes the culture of Koryo-saram as a multi-layered, which includes elements of traditional Korean, Russian, Soviet, Central Asian and European cultures [Khan 2001, *49–56*].

Thus, the newcomers face social characteristics basically shaped by the unique pace of local development. The Koryo-saram find themselves in a society characterized – at all levels – by new practices based on the globalized capitalist system, which imposes a competitive reality and consequently, strong social stratification.

Undoubtedly, the way present day South Korean society is organized into groups is different than how it was in the past. It is no longer systematized by *bon*[13] or clan; now the reorganization forms are diverse. Many aspects of social inter-relation are now tied to capitalist values: it definitely matters which school or university one graduates, where one lives, whether one's family can afford to send them abroad to study, etc. It even matters which church one attends. This transformation of South Korean reality has also led to a revalorization of image: the way one looks and is perceived has become extremely important, and material things are essential.

At a social level, the country's modernization focused rather on fostering personal growth and the pursuit of goals related to independence, professional fulfillment, and economic security through professionalization [López Rocha and Ryzhkov 2020, *405*]. Under such circumstances, Koryo-saram are forced to integrate and settle in a socio-cultural environment entirely different from their place of origin, despite their prior familiarity with Korean traditions. As previously mentioned, despite certain cultural traits being "preserved by Koryo-saram in their traditional form" [Lee 2000, *249–250*], a wide range of customs and practices have been acquired or developed within South Korean society over the past decades, particularly those influenced by globalization. For example, "Cultural acquisitions" range from numerous English loanwords to well-known "by-products" of corporate culture, such as the 빨리빨리 *ppallippalli* phenomenon, which was unknown before South Korea's full-scale industrialization during the developmental state era. At the same time, Koryo-saram share many cultural markers that remain relevant in South Korean society. As one testimony states, "[…] we are also Koreans and we know what 'nunchi' is, we were brought up in the best Korean traditions" [Kogay 2020].

Therefore, for Koryo-saram, the standards and dynamics of present-day South Korean life must be learned anew:

> "After spending time in South Korea, […] became enthusiastic about Korean culture, particularly Korean food, and also adopted a South Korean way of thinking".
>
> "Although it may be difficult for people here to understand, certain things that seem reasonable by South Korean standards can only be fully grasped after spending time in South Korea" [Oh et al. 2016, *131*].
>
> "While I identify with Kazakhstan, living in another country for a long time allows you to understand its culture and perspective" [WEproject 2019].

Undoubtedly, ethnic homogeneity is highly important to Koreans. To be recognized as Korean, one must prove their bloodline and kinship ties, as being born on Korean soil does not automatically grant nationality. Miscegenation often provokes refutation or anxiety. This also applies to cultural or behavioral markers. According to some testimonies from South Korean, "In anything beyond the most basic Korean tradition, the culture and spirit are completely different from ours" [Oh et al. 2016, *128*]. Similarly, younger generations of Koryo-saram studying in Korea perceive South Koreans in much the same way:

> "It was a bit easier for me to adapt because my grandparents raised and taught me according to Korean traditions. However, my mentality is still different, so at first, I struggled to adjust to many things.
>
> I enjoy the local food and culture, but Koreans still think and are raised differently. They have different values. Therefore, no matter how long I live in Korea, Kyrgyzstan will always feel closer to me" [WEproject 2019].
>
> "I deeply respect our customs and traditions, and I believe I grew up as a true Korean, despite the many ways in which we differ from South Koreans" [Kim-Pacher 2016].

Since the 2007 revision of the Overseas Koreans Act, more Koryo-saram have migrated to South Korea, seeking better opportunities. However, they face challenges adapting to a society shaped by globalization, capitalism, and materialism. While they share some traditions with South Koreans, their culture has evolved through Soviet and Central Asian influences, making integration notably difficult.

Despite their Korean ancestry, Koryo-saram struggle with identity and acceptance, as South Koreans emphasize ethnic homogeneity but also perceive cultural differences. Many find South Korea foreign, even after adapting, highlighting the gap between shared heritage and lived experience.

However, there is another crucial aspect of Korean identity and social cohesion that presents challenges for Koryo-saram in South Korea.

2.2. Linguistic Barrier for Koryo-saram

Another factor that reinforces the sense of homogeneity among Koreans is their language. Korean is both the mother tongue and the official language solely on the Korean peninsula. It serves as a powerful element of identity, and integration into society relies on mastering it [López Rocha, Ryzhkov 2020, *410*].

Proficiency in the language is not a requirement for ethnic Koreans to arrive in the country and reside there. However, it creates an invisible social barrier, fostering prejudices among the "majority" and acting as a stratification marker between the principal minorities. Thus, according to Changzoo Song, a hierarchical relationship emerges among the three Korean co-ethnic groups: South Koreans, Joseonjok[14] and Koryo-saram [Song 2019, *12*]. However, a deeper distinction exists based on the linguistic abilities of ethnic Koreans from former USSR countries.

In South Korean official discourse, there are terms that distinguish two "sub-groups" within the Koryo-saram community: 사할린 출신 동포 *sahallin chulsin dongpo* "compatriot(s) from Sakhalin" (referring to the 1st generation of Sakhalin Koreans who speak the language) and 대륙 출신 고려인 *daeryuk chulsin goryeoin* "continental Koryo-saram" (referring to Koreans from former USSR states who don't speak Korean). It is worth noting that even among Sakhalin Koreans and Koreans from CIS states, there has been a lack of acceptance of each other, which has led to derogatory labeling[15].

Meanwhile, the language barrier is seen as a disadvantage:

> People who tried to hire Koryo-saram often expect them to speak Korean perceiving them as compatriots at first. But then, since Koryo-saram can't speak Korean, employers don't think they're compatriots. […] I think there should be a factor that forces them to learn Korean [Oh et al. 2016, *118*].

According to An and Frigerio, "there is a distinguishable line between chosonjok and koryo-saram: the latter are worse off in comparison to the former because most of the times they cannot speak Korean" [An, Frigerio 2017, *21*]. As Changzoo Song points out, "as Goryeo saram do not speak Korean well while Joseonjok from China are fluent in Korean, sometimes they face each other at work places, and they are normally put in an unequal relationship both in terms of jobs and payments" [Song 2019, *12*].

Some South Koreans might think Koryo-saram don't want to learn Korean because of lack of attitude or disposition [Oh et al. 2016, *118*], whereas the situation is not as simple as that.

> "Since most Koryoin parents hold temporary jobs in construction, manufacturing and farming, they leave for work early in the morning and return home late at night, […] they […] don't feel the need to invest much time and energy in learning Korean" [Lee 2018].
>
> "I find it difficult to combine work and language learning, but I continue doing it" [WEproject 2019].

Therefore, the language proficiency becomes a crucial factor for Koryo-saram to navigate life in their "ancestral home", especially in terms of employment opportunities:

> Our compatriots, ethnic Koreans from the CIS countries, arrive here without formal education and knowledge of the Korean language. As a result, they are considered unskilled labor and typically work on construction sites or in factories.
>
> Overseas Koreans have an advantage only if they possess sufficient Korean language skills [WEproject 2019].

Korean language proficiency is key to social integration in South Korea but acts as a barrier for many Koryo-saram. Those from Sakhalin often speak Korean, while others from former USSR states typically do not, which limits job opportunities for them and reinforces social hierarchies. Employers initially see them as compatriots but reconsider upon realizing the language gap. While some view this as a lack of effort, difficult labor conditions often hinder language learning. At the same time, mastering Korean remains essential for employment and social mobility.

2.3. Koryo-saram Associations in South Korea

Interestingly, Koryo-saram associations emerge not only in the countries of the former USSR, but also in South Korea. If preserving their "Korean-ness" in the ROK is not the concern, what then drives ethnic Koreans to unite in their "historical homeland"?

In fact, some of these organizations exist to address the practical needs of Koryo-saram in South Korea, helping them settle and improve their living conditions. For example, the main projects of the Koryo-saram Village Cooperative include operating a resident counseling center, a house for preschool children, and a center for after-school care[16].

Others, such as the Association of Koryo-saram in the Republic of Korea, not only address administrative issues and practical needs, but also seek to engage in "dialogue with the governments and public organizations of the Republic of Korea and the countries of the former USSR to support the adaptation of ethnic Koreans to their historical homeland" [Assotsiatsiya Koryo-saram v Respublike Koreya 2021]. In this regard, the slogan of the aforementioned association catches attention:

> 1) Together, both independently and in cooperation, we will revive the shattered lives and strengthen our self-awareness and sense of belonging to the Korean people.
>
> 2) We respect the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, as well as Korean culture and history, and are committed to studying them.
>
> 3) We will live alongside our brothers and pledge to become valuable members of society in the Republic of Korea [Assotsiatsiya Koryo-saram v Respublike Koreya 2021].

Essentially, it is a manifesto from those who have chosen to stay in South Korea, to internalize its local culture and adapt to the dynamics of social life. On the other hand,

the discourse serves as evidence that Koryo-saram do not feel fully properly integrated into the "historical homeland" and are aware that, in the eyes of the majority, they remain a minority.

Indeed, the challenges for Koryo-saram of getting integrated into South Korean society are particularly evident among the younger generations. As one testimony highlights, "[…] the problem with children arises immediately, they haven't yet learned Korean, start to forget Russian, and have nothing to do after school" [Koryo saram 2018]. Therefore, "If the Koryoin children fail to put down roots here, South Korea as a whole fails to develop as a mature and democratic multicultural society" [Lee 2018].

2.4. Othering and Integration

On the other hand, the simple fact that Koryo-saram speak other language(s) often puts them into uncomfortable situations. According to some testimonies, speaking Russian provokes odd reactions: "People stared at me. Often I felt as if something was on my face. They looked into my mouth when I spoke, checking how my tongue moved and why such a different language, not Korean, was being spoken" [Jo 2018]. Sometimes the discrimination even goes deeper – some people even scorn Koryo-saram because of their foreign accents and treat them as opportunistic foreigners [Jo 2018]. Some ethnic Koreans from the CIS countries perceive this in the following way: "I have got the impression that the local Koreans do not like our folks, they believe we are gangsters and that all their problems are caused by us" [Kim-Pacher 2016].

All in all, even after migrants pass through the narrow gates into South Korea, they experience being othered by South Koreans [Jo 2018]. As one of the testimonies shows: "Now I am here in Korea, the land where my grandfather and grandmother were born, my ancestral home. Yet I don't understand why I have to be called a foreigner. Honestly, that kind of talk weighs heavily on my mind" [Jo 2018].

It is almost impossible to de-label someone marked as minority, marginal, or peripheral against majority, dominant, or central [Sim 2019, *103*]. All the aforementioned beliefs, impressions and perceptions held by South Koreans towards Koryo-saram are counterproductive to integration efforts and the state's multicultural discourse. The discriminatory perceptions have a harmful impact on the lives of ethnic Korean migrants in South Korea. The following poem, written by Vladimir Kim, an Uzbek Korean and former Russian literature professor now living in a Koryo-saram district in a Korean province, expresses a common sentiment of frustration:

Я не хочу! обидное Вигук	I do not want! an insulting "외국"
Ведь я кореец, я Хангук	I am Korean, I am "한국",
По духу совести и крови […]	In spirit, conscience and blood […]

[Sim 2019, *105*]

Thus, the self-perception of being "the other" within the host society is reflected in the quoted lines. In this context, the acceptance of Koryo-saram by the majority and their assimilation into the host society today is seen as a task that will likely require considerable time and effort:

> Even after mastering the Korean language, simply being Koryo Saram still matters. Victoria, who speaks nearly perfect Korean, said, "I was at first just happy to be in the homeland of my ancestors. If I did well at school and work, even as a Koryo Saram I was treated as Korean, with the same blood. However, if I made a mistake or didn't perform well enough, then I was a foreigner" […] "I thought I could lead a good life as a Koryo Saram here, but that's not the case" [Jo 2018].

Evidently, the current situation provides very few reasons for ethnic compatriots to feel "at home". Under these circumstances, life in another globalized country may not be any more difficult than in the ROK.

But on the other hand, it is also true that full-scale integration into the host society is not the goal for many Koryo-saram. From their perspective, South Korea is primarily a place to earn money, pursue education, or acquire skills they consider important:

> "If something goes wrong, I can always return to Kyrgyzstan and promote Korean culture there".
>
> "I will work in Korea for the next two years, and in the future, I plan to move to America".
>
> "I plan to return to Russia because I came here to work. Here, I have no time to live, nothing but work and home" [WEproject 2019].
>
> "To be honest, in Korea, I feel like a black sheep, I don't know why. […] In Russia, we are seen as representatives of a different race […] I see myself more in the USA, in a multinational environment" [Kim 2018].

Another aspect to consider is how the term "ancestral home" connects to the cultural concept of 고향 *gohyang*. According to the dictionary, the latter refers to a place "where one was born and raised", "where ancestors lived for generations", "that one deeply misses and cherishes in their heart"[17]. It is an ontological space of origin and ultimate existence, transcending the semantics of ideology or nostalgia [Kang 2009, *10*], that serves as a foundation for explaining and understanding identity [Kang 2009, *23*]. In this sense, the term "ancestral home" aligns more closely with the second meaning of the broader concept of 고향 *gohyang*. Strictly speaking, neither the Korean peninsula as a whole nor the Republic of Korea in particular can be considered as a "full-fledged" homeland for Koryo-saram.

For that reason, "Koryo-in who migrate to Korea […] often find themselves continuing to 'wander' even in their ancestral home, realizing the fact that this country cannot be his or her final destination" [Sim 2019, *100*]. As a result, "Korean diaspora communities […] are a minority both in their ancestral home and current residential home" [Sim 2019, *99*]. This dynamic often shapes the dual self-perception of Koryo-saram: "In Tajikistan, I am Korean. Outside Tajikistan, I identify as Tajik" [Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting 2020]. An alternative perspective suggests: "There is a paradox in our lives – we are strangers both here and there" [Kim 2018].

In this context, it is important to highlight that social identities, in general, can be understood as a set of symbols shared by a group of individuals bound by common values, beliefs, customs and socially constructed meanings. In other words, an individual's social and cultural identity becomes functional within a given social framework. These identities interweave across different sectors and strata of society, forming a system that operates dynamically and moves in a specific (intended) direction. For Koryo-saram, however, being othered by the dominant majority creates a sense of not fitting in. The push factors from their country of origin, the insufficiency of pull factors in the host society, and a lack of sense of belonging – combined with psychological and socio-economic challenges – ultimately drive some Koryo-saram to seek better opportunities in other countries.

Conclusions and Discussion

Regrettably, embracing differences and celebrating diversity still remain an ongoing challenge. Official rhetoric amounts to little more than words, while in practice, Koryo-saram are merely tolerated in South Korean society – so long as they conform to the prevailing social and cultural norms imposed by the majority.

The strategies devised to navigate globalization were driven by political and business elites, leaving South Korean society with no choice but to adapt as best it could. This led to social and cultural conflicts, exacerbating inequality – including among ethnic Koreans.

However, the steady growth of South Korean economy, coupled with a declining population, created a demand for labor force. As a result, for many reasons the government saw ethnic Koreans as an ideal group to help meet this need. To facilitate their arrival, various public policies were introduced to attract Koryo-saram to the country.

Kinship and affiliation among ethnic Koreans extend beyond genetic ties, emerging from their own perceptions of "Korean-ness" and shared cultural practices rooted in past customs and traditions – preserved since their ancestors settled in various non-Korean regions. And those perceptions face significant challenges upon their arrival in South Korea.

Under these circumstances, the cultural practices of Koryo-saram – which have long reinforced their sense of Korean identity outside the Korean peninsula – are often regarded by South Korean society as secondary or less significant. The "Korean culture" perceived by ethnic migrants from the former USSR differs from that of South Korea, having either undergone transformations over time or, if not, "Korean-ness", perhaps, no longer aligns with the same notion, compared to several decades ago, when the vision of a globalized Korea was just taking shape. Therefore, alternative values and criteria should be applied to determine the place of these newcomers within South Korean society. The expectations of "Korean-ness" that South Korean society places on Koryo-saram should be reevaluated. For instance, demanding a high level of Korean language proficiency upon arrival is unreasonable, and the income of Koryo-saram should not be determined by their linguistic abilities. The integration process should be gradual, requiring increased effort and attention from both the government and civil society at this stage.

Disillusionment can arise from being "othered" or from confronting the harsh realities of existing social dynamics, which are often criticized even by members of South Korean society itself. Ultimately, the process of self-perception within the new environment does not necessarily result in acceptance of the prevailing patterns of life. These patterns may, in turn, be misinterpreted by the "majority" as an inability to adapt or as a failure to interpret the surrounding reality "properly" or as expected.

Meanwhile, those Koryo-saram who have come to Korea to stay are unconditionally required to accept the cultural impositions of the majority, including language proficiency, corporate culture, and other societal elements. As a result, the decision to stay implies not only obedience to but also acceptance of the "Korean culture" as it is interpreted in contemporary, globalized Korean society, which has undergone significant transformations. On the other hand, kinship and genetic ties are sufficient only for legal residence within the country, and, if necessary, the acquisition of South Korean nationality.

Generally speaking, Koryo-saram consider themselves to be in a privileged position regarding employment opportunities compared to other foreign nationals. This, incidentally, highlights the unfavorable position of foreigners in South Korea. Furthermore, the issue of education for Koryo-saram children is one that requires urgent attention and a prompt solution. Unless these social and political issues are addressed, the "ancestral home" may not become the final destination for many ethnic Koreans.

Overall, the paper provides a concise overview of how Koryo-saram perceive and experience their "ancestral home". Building on these initial findings, future research could further explore and compile additional evidence on the living conditions of this minority within the host society. Such a perspective is valuable in the search for effective public policies that promote safer social integration for newcomers. In this context, special attention should be given to Koryo-saram from Ukraine, who began migrating to South Korea following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Future research could focus on their adaptation within Koryo-saram enclaves in the ROK, their acceptance by the host society, and their future aspirations, providing more empirical examples to support the pursuit of multicultural symbiosis in the Republic of Korea.

[1] See: [Sim 2019, *103*]. "It is remarkable that their ethnic solidarity, shared sense of belonging, and attachment to their ancestral traditions have been preserved below the Soviet regime, despite

the Soviet effort to equalize ethnic differences […]. Ethnic Koreans, who lacked their own territorial basis and autonomy, were not entitled to the same privileges that titular nationalities enjoyed. This in turn helped them to nurture and enhance a sense of national consciousness".

[2] See: [Khan 2018, *584*]. "During the period of perestroika, all Soviet Koreans suddenly felt that they were Koreans and, in any event, wished to be like genuine Koreans. Korean language courses, as well as the etiquette and behavior of Koreans from the peninsula (both North and South) became fashionable. Everything that they did provoked admiration, resulting in a phenomenon of mechanical, blind imitation".

[3] The term Koryo-saram, as used here, can be also found in scholarly literature in the form of "Koryo Saram", "Goryeo saram", "koryo-saram", "Koryoin", etc. It is the term ethnic Koreans from the post-Soviet states use to refer to themselves.

[4] See: [Khan 2018, *584*]. "However, soon it became clear that attempts to imitate 'genuine' Koreans would only lead the Koryo Saram to inferiority complexes. Soviet Koreans vividly demonstrated a sense of national inferiority (telling themselves that they were not genuine, that they were deformed Koreans), and their self-abasement and self-reproach began to lead both North and South Koreans to take an arrogant, mentoring, lecturing position towards the Koryo Saram. Representatives from the Korean embassies started openly meddling in the activities of Korean organizations, newspapers, TV, etc".

[5] For instance, The Special Act on Support for Koreans in the former USSR in its Article 6 (paragraphs 4 and 5) establishes the following: 4. Assistance for cultural activities, including the establishment of Korean culture centers; 5. Assistance for educational activities, including teaching Korean language and information and technology [Migration Research and Training Center 2019, *46*].

[6] However, the "miracle on the Han River" was not the only reason. According to Jeongsuk Joo, since Korea has never previously enjoyed regional or international acclaim for its popular culture, the transnational recognition has become a source of national pride [Joo 2011].

[7] See: [Khan 2018, *585*]. "South Korean businessmen, professors and pastors constantly stress the principle of shared blood ('we are all Koreans'). They deduce from this basis a principle of absolute obligation ('you should', 'you must') that practically leads to the fact that, in everything, the Koryo-saram must follow South Korean models of behavior and consciousness".

[8] See the testimonies of South Korean citizens found in the research of Oh, Kim and Song [Oh et al. 2016, *126*]. "They think they're Russian or Kazakh. They don't have the same concept of compatriotism as we [*South Koreans*] see it". "Local Koryo-saram in first place are proud to feel themselves Kazakhs, and only then think Korean blood runs in their veins". Hereinafter, all translations of the original sources from Russian, Korean, or Spanish into English are ours.

[9] As far as "culture" is concerned, this paper follows its definition suggested by Raymond Williams. For him the word "culture" meant both "a whole of life" (culture in the anthropological sense, synonymous with everyday life) and the forms of signification (novels, films, but also advertising and television) that circulate within a society [Williams 1989, *91*].

[10] For a more detailed analysis of Hallyu, see the work of Lopez Rocha and Ryzhkov [López Rocha, Ryzhkov 2017], who examine the rhetoric framing *Hallyu* as "Korean popular culture", highlight the role of society, and argue that this discourse primarily benefits specific groups, representing only a small segment rather than the entirety of Korean society.

[11] Although it was ruled unconstitutional in 2001, there was previously a practice of issuing F-4 visas predominantly to ethnic Koreans from "developed countries" [KIM Magazine 2019b].

[12] Hybridization refers to the "socio-cultural processes in which discreet structures or practices, previously existing in separated form, are combined to create new structures, objects, and practices" [García Canclini 2002].

[13] The Korean family bloodline, which is closely tied to the surname. For more details on this term, see, for example, the paper of Ryzhkov [Ryzhkov 2020].

[14] Ethnic Koreans from China. Commonly referred to as *Joseonjok*, *Chosonjok*, etc.

[15] Such as "큰땅배기" *keunttangbaegi* or "얼마우제" *eolmauje* used by Sakhalin Koreans to refer to their Central Asian co-ethnics, while continental Koryo-saram respond with pejorative terms such as "내지치" *naejichi*. For more details, see: [Lee, Kim 2013].

[16] See: http://www.koreancoop.com (accessed May 8, 2025).

[17] See: https://ko.dict.naver.com/#/search?query=고향 (accessed May 8, 2025).

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Корьо-сарам на землі предків:
самоідентифікація та відносини з південнокорейським суспільством

Свого часу численні асоціації корьо-сарам пострадянських країн проголосили збереження корейської ідентичності, відродження національних традицій, звичаїв, культури та мови однією зі своїх засадничих цілей.

Водночас громадяни Республіки Корея, натхнені “історією успіху” своєї країни, охоче беруть на себе роль “авторитетів” для етнічних корейців у царині культури. За словами Валерія Хана (2001), південнокорейські бізнесмени, професори та пастори вважають, що корьо-сарам мають наслідувати моделі поведінки та ментальність корейців Півдня. Однак у цьому контексті постає питання: хто має право визначати, що насправді є “корейським”, а що – ні? Або що саме слід розуміти під “корейською культурою”?

З іншого боку, процес інтеграції в глобалізований світ суттєво вплинув на соціальну структуру самої Південної Кореї. Прагнучи “асимілювати” етнічних корейців – чи то як спосіб подолання демографічних викликів, чи з інших причин, – уряд Республіки Корея запроваджує різноманітні програми, що апелюють до системи цінностей корейської ідентичності. Крім того, законодавство РК передбачає певні пільги для корьо-сарам щодо перебування на території країни та працевлаштування.

Більшість етнічних корейців приїжджають на землю своїх предків переважно в пошуках кращого життя. Цікавим видається той факт, що асоціації корьо-сарам виникають не лише в пострадянських країнах, звідки походять етнічні корейці, а й у самій Південній Кореї. Здавалося б, ніщо не перешкоджає збереженню їхньої “корейської” ідентичності в РК, тож що саме спонукає їх до гуртування на землі пращурів?

Щоб відповісти на всі поставлені питання та збагнути сучасний стан відносин між корьо-сарам і “батьківщиною предків”, у цій розвідці аналізуються відповідні офіційні дискурси РК щодо “іноземних етнічних корейців”, подаються свідчення самих корьо-сарам про те, як їх сприймає південнокорейське суспільство, а також наводяться їхні міркування щодо того, яким вони бачать власний статус у країні перебування.

Ключові слова: мігрантська меншина; корьо-сарам; ідентичність; глобалізація; “корейськість”; “батьківщина пращурів”; соціальна динаміка; “відторгнення”; інтеграція

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