

# Identity Politics of Former Soviet Koreans: One of the Most Prominent Heritages of the 1988 Seoul Olympics

Soon-ok Myong, B.G. Nurzhanov

**Abstract**—This paper applies an anthropological approach to illuminate the dynamic cultural geography of Kazakhstani Korean ethnicity focusing on its turning point, the historic “Seoul Olympic Games in 1988.” The Korean ethnic group was easily considered as a harmonious and homogeneous community by outsiders, but there existed deep-seated conflicts and hostilities within the ethnic group. The majority’s oppositional dichotomy of superiority and inferiority toward the minority was continuously reorganized and reinforced by difference in experience, memory and sentiment. However, such a chronic exclusive boundary was collapsed following the patriotism ignited by the Olympics held in their mother country. This paper explores the fluidity of subject by formation of the boundary in which constructed cultural differences are continuously essentialized and reproduced, and by dissolution of cultural barrier in certain contexts.

**Keywords**—Former Soviet Korean’s Russianization, inferior/superior dichotomy, Seoul Olympic Games, subject’s fluidity.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THIS paper takes an anthropological approach to the fluidity of the subject in boundary making processes and to the erasure of such boundaries within the Korean population in Kazakhstan in the former Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the former Soviet Koreans (so-called *Goryeosaram* or *Goryeoin*) were unknown to South Koreans. Their existence, however, was exposed by the historic event of the “Seoul Olympic Games in 1988” and the “collapse of the Soviet Union.” After the collapse of the Soviet Union the Korean ethnic community became the pilgrimage of research for a number of Korean researchers. Many studies on the Soviet Koreans have been accumulated for 20 years. However, the heterogeneity and conflict structure within the Korean ethnic community in the former Soviet Union have not been acknowledged and thus have been ignored due to their fixed viewpoint of Korean “fraternity,” the language barrier, and limitations in first-hand data even in such research achievements. The Korean population in the former Soviet Union has commonly been considered as a homogenous group sharing the same fate in the Soviet system. However, different historical experiences led to different memories within the presumably homogeneous ethnic group. Those who had settled early marginalized those who moved in later, referring to them as “they,” and excluding them from “we.”

The conflicts and hostility within a single ethnic group were not detected even by other ethnic groups who were sharing the same social space with them.

Soon-ok Myong is with the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Al Farabi Kazakh National University, Al-farabi ave. 71, Almaty, Kazakhstan (e-mail: okmyong@gmail.com).

B. G. Hurzhanov is with the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Al Farabi Kazakh National University, Al-farabi ave. 71, Almaty, Kazakhstan (e-mail: beketnur@rambler.ru).

During our research, we realized that the ethnic Koreans were extremely reluctant to expose their internal conflicts. Former Soviet Korean researchers could not easily deal with this issue because they considered it their weakness.

With awareness of the above problem, this research explores the dynamic cultural geography focusing on the turning point of *Goryeoin* ethnicity, the historic “Seoul Olympic Games in 1988” that stirred up the *Goryeoin* society and restored the ethnic unity from the chronic internal split within it, demonstrating the weakness of exclusively constructed boundaries. For this research, participant observation, in-depth interview and informal interview were conducted one year from June 2010. The participants were Kazakhstani *Goryeoin* who attended a Korean church and were members of the Korean Cultural Center in Almaty. The subjects were 60 years old or older and had experienced the Soviet Union system when they were young. *Lenin-Kichi*, the Korean newspaper in the former Soviet Union, and former Soviet documents were reviewed.

## II. THEORETICAL DISCUSSION ON THE ‘FLUIDIC SUBJECT’

An ethnic group is commonly classified as a discrete category and often viewed as an internally homogenous community. However, the emergence of fluid and ambiguous subjects and the weakening of international boundaries challenge such common viewpoint.

In its pursuit of a unified and homogenous society, the Soviet system tried to cultivate and unify all people into *homo sovieticus* by artificially arranging the land and people. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union disrupted the homogenous integration. Newly emergent post-colonial identities called for a new theory of identity; thus, *diaspora*, *hybridity* and *fluidic subject* emerged as new research themes.

In particular, some contemporary scholars pay attention to the post-modern subject in a society with a multi-dimensional structure since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Stuart Hall emphasizes its changeable nature, and does not view it as a single fixed entity. In his view, such a subject is contradictory and an undetermined subject different from a stable, integrated subject. In his *Politics of Culture*, Hall [1] points out that culture is a space of political struggle, and that to study culture is to uncover power relations, observing that identity is not firmly settled or fixed but also not completely fluid.

Such a space of struggle, however, often has affective dimensions [2]. In accordance with the primordial perspective on ethnicity, people in such groups tend to regard an ethnic community as something given and attach overflowing emotions to their ethnic “community” [3]. A good example supporting Geertz’s viewpoint is the case of the Koreans who showed collective enthusiasm, such as the “Red Devils” of Korea during the FIFA World Cup held in Korea and Japan in 2002. Such enthusiasm is rooted in the primordial solidarity of a community.

The binding force exhibited by such sentiments also becomes tools to exclude others and easily germinates conflicts and division on the other hand. Amartya Sen argues identity is a matter of choice in a given context. He notes when a single identity is stressed, it can cause exclusion and conflicts accompanied by violence to the others [4].

Rather than viewing an ethnic identity as a fixed entity, this paper highlights the fluidity of identity. Such fluidity is demonstrated in the weakening of the chronic division within a *Goryeoin* society, triggered by the Seoul Olympic Games at the end of the Soviet era. An ethnic group repeats the drawing and dissolving of its boundaries, depending on the changes in historical conditions. The difference between the self and the other that is created to draw boundaries, is continuously restructured by specific experience, and can also become neutralized in a specific context.

### III. FORCIBLE RELOCATION AND EXEMPLARY SOVIET KOREANS

The Korean group in the former Soviet Union scattered in the Central Asia region at present are the descendants of migrants who crossed the border at the end of the Joseon period in the late 1800s or during Japanese colonization in the early 1900s. Their ancestors' border crossing due to poverty or political oppression resettled them in a place that made it impossible for them to return to their homeland and made their dream of such a return a distant one. Koreans in the former Soviet Union were thoroughly assimilated to the Soviet system. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, they continued to speak Russian, congratulate the victory day (German and Soviet War in World War II) and use such Russian names as "Sonya," "Lyudmila" and "Alek" rather than their Korean names.

They celebrated the stories of Soviet Korean heroes. They remembered that Korean partisans against Japan led by the legendary heroes, including Hong Beom-do, made significant contributions leading to the victory of the Great Russian Revolution (or called the October Revolution), the origin of establishment of the Soviet regime. Hong Beom-do was a domestic war hero who contributed to the birth of the Soviet regime; Kim Man-Sam, a Korean who led Kolkhoz in Kyzylorda, was a revolutionary hero in harvesting. The Soviet Korean ancestors crossed the Duman River from Hamgyeong-do at the end of Imperial Russia around the 19<sup>th</sup> century and became famous for the cultivation of rice by making a waterway in unfarmed land in the Far East. Their good reputation of harvesting was continued in dry steppes of Central Asian area under suffering the severe hardship of "forcible relocation" in 1937. The number of Koreans who acquired the title "hero of socialist efforts" was overwhelmingly higher than those of other ethnic groups in terms of the population ratio [15, March 7, 1990, 3]. A Soviet Korean was also proud of holding the highest harvesting record in the world at that time.

Furthermore, Soviet Koreans endured sacrifice and pain for the victory in the war by serving in the "rear front of efforts," including coal mines, munitions factories, lumbering area and concentration camps during World War II.

Several young people, including Min Alexander, were recognized as "war heroes" for voluntarily signing up for the army with enthusiastic patriotism, even though they were prohibited from joining the Soviet army due to having been classified as a 'hostile ethnicity' [5].

Soviet Koreans described themselves as faithful Soviet patriots and an ethnic group following the *international* [15]. As exemplary Soviet citizens, the Koreans are known to have faithfully complied with the policies of the Party under the thorough Soviet spirit and the *international*.

However, the achievements above could be acquired only by repressing the memory of collective pain from forcible displacement, which turned over their entire basis for living. The first movement to the Maritime Province started as Koreans crossed the border toward closest area from their home province, Hamgyeong-do, which was the northern tip of the Korean peninsula, during the Imperial Russia period in the 1860s. Those who escaped from poverty and political oppression in the Korean peninsula formed a collective settlement village in the Maritime Province. The area was the hub to lead independent movements against Japan. However, the Korean migrants had to leave the settled region due to the false charge made against them that they were "Japanese spies" [7] in 1937 just before the World War started.

Around this time, the Soviet Union forcibly relocated the ethnic groups in all border areas in the Union which had the possibility of conflict inland regions. With the aggressive threat from Japan, including the Sino-Japanese War in the Far East in 1937, the Soviet Union regarded such preventive action in the Far East region as inevitable. Thus, the Soviet Union commanded the displacement of about 200,000 Koreans in the Maritime Province to Central Asia, which was thousands of kilometers from their settlements.

The trains which the Koreans took due to the sudden command of displacement were cargo stocks for livestock which could not block the wind and cold. They moved from the Far East to Central Asia with insufficient food and water and under conditions which did not allow them to fulfill their basic needs. It took more than one month for them to reach the inland area. A number of the old and the vulnerable, including children, died due to diseases and hunger and all experienced the extreme threat of survival. Though a number of witnesses who have been acknowledged say about the big sacrifice during the forcible displacement, there is no statistical data on the number of Soviet Koreans who died from tragedy situation. The forcibly displaced migrants were left on the barren lands not suitable for settlement. The great purge by Stalin was simultaneously carried out so that about 2,500 Soviet Korean intellectuals were considered as disturbing elements against the Soviet Union and arrested [9]. What aggravated their pain was the betrayal and blame that followed as they reported each other to the regime.

The Koreans' 'nightmare' persisted even after the collapse of the Soviet Union from generation to generation. In interviews, the Koreans themselves did not openly share the experience of forcible relocation with others. They refused to testify, saying that they had not heard anything about the tragedy at that time from their grandparents. Such experience was kept only as an individual memory.

The regime severely suppressed any form of ethnic expression, which was targeted as the sign of anti-Soviet sentiments and bourgeois nationalism. Non-Russian languages were devalued due to the limitations placed on the usage of one's mother language. Ethnic schools were converted to Russian schools [8]. Documents written in non-Russian languages were disposed of by the reason that such data did not correspond to the Soviet ideology [8].

The only ethnic heritage that remained was the ethnic newspaper *Lenin Kichi*. However, it was a mere translation of the communist party line into Korean. Most Koreans in the first generation of forcible displacement could not understand Russian, and so *Lenin Kichi* was the means to effectively deliver the instructions from the party. Ethnic poems or literature existed in such a framework that they could not go against the Soviet Union's regime and philosophies.

Koreans were recognized for their contributions in the war in spite of the intense suppression they had experienced under the Soviet rule, and they rapidly became integrated and rooted in the Soviet society as party leaders, intellectuals or specialists. Soviet Koreans' speech and behavior were modeled on the Russians, the dominant ethnic group. Russian-style naming practices became popular as they imitated Russians. Marriages to Russians increased as Soviet Koreans broke away from the taboo of interracial marriage. In some cases, wives changed their surnames to their husbands' surnames in accordance with one surname per family in Russia [6]. Soviet Koreans lost their mother language most quickly among other ethnic groups and were quickly Russified through language [10]. Such Russification was mobilized for their discrimination against became new Korean migrants who were far less accustomed to the Soviet society

#### IV. INFLOW OF SAKHALIN KOREANS AND INTERNAL CONFLICTS

Most Koreans who settled down in Central Asia by forcible deportation were former Primorski Koreans (so-called "Primorski" or "Materikovski") from the Maritime Province (Primorski Krai) in the Far East. In addition to this, there were Korean migrants who had moved from Ural, North Korea, or later on, Sakhalin, seeking better living conditions in continent of the former Soviet Union. In particular, young Sakhalin Koreans left Sakhalin Island and went to industrialized cities, such as Khabarovsk, Tomsk, Novosibirsk and Alma-Ata for better jobs and education. New comer in continent from Sakhalin, who was called as Sakhalinski, stood out because it was hard for them to adapt themselves to the Soviet system unlike Materikovski, who had been actively undergoing the Sovietization process since the early period when they were incorporated into the Soviet system.

Sakhalin Koreans were mobilized laborers in Sakhalin, which was occupied by Japan. They came mainly from the southern region in Korea from the late 1930s until the end of World War II, and left and were incorporated into the Soviet Union as Japan brought only Japanese to Japan when they withdrew from Sakhalin after being defeated in the war. Sakhalin Koreans in the Soviet system worked mainly in coal

mines, on state farms and on construction sites as laborers; very few Koreans worked as office workers or government employees. They were not allowed to contact their families in their homeland and neither returned there [12]. Their movement of residence was strictly restricted until the beginning of Khrushchev's era. Most Sakhalin Koreans looked forward to returning to their homeland someday, having refused to become citizens of North Korea or the Soviet Union.

Koreans in Sakhalin were different from the continental Koreans who enjoyed speaking Russian rather than their mother language. A story from a Kazakhstani Sakhalinski who was born and grew up in Sakhalin, and graduated from the ethnic college of education and lived there until her marriage, showed that Sakhalin Koreans maintained a strong traditional lifestyle they had practiced in their homeland even after they were incorporated into the Soviet Union.

*Although I studied in Russian schools and used Russian outside, my parents didn't want me to use Russian at home, and asked me to use only Korean. We had wild greens, including bracken, and fish as side dishes at home and killed a pig for big events and shared pork with our neighbors. I couldn't go out whenever I wanted even though I was a young woman. My husband's (Sakhalin Korean) parents had insisted he get married to a Korean woman and not a Russian woman. Then, my husband married me (Interview on June 14, 2010).*

Sakhalin Koreans used Russian at school but communicated in Korean in daily life. They held on to the traditional food, etiquette, education for children. It was because they looked forward to meeting their parents and brothers and sisters in their hometown someday; therefore, they were not interested in becoming citizens of the Soviet Union, and were reluctant to enter into marriage with other ethnic groups.

Meanwhile, the Soviet regime stigmatized Sakhalin Koreans as "immature Soviet people" to be educated. They were the "troublesome group" that had to be specially managed because they were "stained by capitalism"; they spoke Japanese and Korean and could not communicate in Russian. As a counteraction, the Soviet authority sent an "enlightenment team" to transplant the Soviet organization into Korean refugee in Sakhalin and convert their ideology. This enlightenment team was comprised of continental Koreans (Materikovskis) who could speak both Russian and Korean at that time. Most of them had completed higher education and worked as teachers in colleges or schools or held important positions as engineers or managers in Kolkhoz or industrialized cities. They were intellectuals who were registered as members of the Communist Party [11].

The missions of the dispatched Materikovskis were to identify ideologically disturbing elements and control the migrants at workplaces or schools. The situation in which those dispatched Materikovskis enjoyed better conditions in terms of wages or employment was considered by the Sakhalin Koreans as discrimination. An event aggravating the relationship between the two Korean groups in Sakhalin was when those who listened to Japanese broadcasting and had a close

relationship with Japanese were handed over to the police of the Soviet Union as “ideologically disturbing elements.” Sakhalin Koreans believed that the continental Koreans had tattled on them. Moreover, the Sakhalin Koreans always received less wages compared to the continental Koreans even when they performed the same duties. Sakhalin Koreans were ashamed of holding lower positions at the workplace because they were the children of those who had presumably been stained by Japanese ideologies. Speaking Russian, the continental Soviet Koreans acted like Russians and treated Sakhalin Koreans as ‘uneducated and inferior beings’ who were ignorant of Soviet ideologies and the Russian language.

As time went by, the dream of Sakhalin Koreans to return home waned. Since the declaration of the “freedom of movement of residence” in the late 1950s, more and more Sakhalin Koreans had become the citizens of the Soviet Union. The hope was that doing so would help them become successful on the continent. It was popular for Sakhalin Koreans to work in Korean broadcasting companies or the newspaper agency *Lenin Kichi*, where those who could speak Korean were favored. Some old migrants (i.e. continental Koreans) considered that the new comers’ origin was fundamentally different and their personality was also different—points used as the basis for discrimination against the new migrants; the grandparents of existing migrants were independence fighters against Japan and had made sacrifices for the establishment of the Soviet Union, but the new migrants were merely poor laborers; in terms of personality, the old migrants were frank and open-minded like Russians, whereas the new migrants acted like Japanese, who would hid their true feelings behind the smiling face.

The enmity between the two Korean groups was also expressed through the terms they used to refer to each other. Sakhalinskis called those from the Maritime Province “Materikovski” because they were people on the continent, but demeaned them by calling them “Keunttangaegi (large land residents)” or “Keunttangchi (large land fellows)” in Korean. Old comer demeaned Sakhalinskis by calling them “Naejichi (fellows from the homeland, Korea)” while considering themselves those from the Far East in the Soviet Union.

The Sakhalinskis formed their own groups and held their own meetings, which helped alleviate their sense of alienation. The following are narratives illustrating the dissatisfaction and antipathy which the alienated shared with each other.

*They didn't meet with us even though they were Koreans who had black eyes and ate rice and soybean paste stew and whose surnames were also Kim. They used Russian names, acted like Russians and dealt with us as if they instructed us. No rules asked us to change our names to the Russian style. But they changed their names to Russian names of their own will. In fact, I could change my name to a Russian one, such as “Anna Nikolaevna.” But I didn't. We used both hands when taking objects or giving them from or to the elder and were very polite. But people here (from the Maritime Province) took or gave objects with one hand. It was Sakhalin women who served well without any complaints whenever they were invited to birthday*

*parties or other events. Women (Materikovskis) here made themselves look beautiful in the morning without preparing tea or meals for their husbands. People on the continent didn't have our etiquette, food or traditions. They met and married those who used Russian names, but didn't marry those of us using Korean names, including Misuk or Gyeongja. They married Russians rather than Koreans (Interview on June 14, 2010).*

Sakhalinskis described themselves as those who had proudly kept their ethnic traditions, and expressed their hostility against “Keunttangchi” by remembering them as people who dealt with them like their subordinates and as turncoats who had easily changed their names into Russian ones. However, old comers insisted that they could not help living in the Soviet Union in accordance with the Russian style and could not work if they had Korean names; the Soviet culture, including Russian-style naming practices, was a part of their lives. In particular, Materikovski women were equated with Russian women in contrast with the traditional image of a “good wife and wise mother” valued by Sakhalinskis. It was pointed out that “Keunttangaegi women” were not obedient to their husbands at home because they were free and open-minded, imitating Russian women. In other words, they had parted from their traditional roles and virtues, and had problems in terms of their attitudes and lack of servitude to their husbands.

Both groups showed sharp conflicts when it came to the topic of marriage. The children of Sakhalinskis were considered by Materikovskis to be disqualified for marriage partners. Such a marriage was not easily accepted. Discrimination against Sakhalinskis also occurred in the public sector. In particular, stage actors from Sakhalin were not allowed to stand on the stage in *Goryeo Theater* except one Sakhalinski, Mun Gong-Ja, the singer from Sakhalin who had distinguished ability. Most of the audience was composed of Koreans who were Russians like and most of the actors were from old settlers because art was really Soviet art that informed them of the ethnic art. However, Korean news agencies and broadcasting services were exceptions. *Lenin Kichi* wrote all of its articles in Korean; therefore, it had to substantially depend on those from Sakhalin who had distinguished competence in Korean.

Sakhalinskis listed the following merits as the reasons that they had moved to the continent: urban life that allowed for a higher quality of life; for better education; milder climate compared to the long winters or scorching summers in Sakhalin; and an abundance of fruit on the continent. However, they revealed that the most important reason was that the discrimination by the whites against non-Europeans such as Kazakhs and Uzbeks as indigenous people in the continent was not severe than it in Sakhalin. New comers from Sakhalin felt less discriminatory and more comfortable living with the non-white in the continent. The movement of Sakhalinskis to the continent was a kind of escape from the severe discrimination by whites. However, there was another group waiting to oppress them on the continent. The group was the continental Koreans who treated them like subordinates, thus acting like the whites in the past. Sakhalinskis were alienated as “aliens” who were not allowed to join the mainstream *Goryeoin* society

#### V. PATRIOTISM STIMULATED BY THE SEOUL OLYMPIC GAMES IN 1988

The Seoul Olympic Games in 1988 was remembered as a great festival harmonizing the East and the West since 12 years by overcoming the boycott declaration by each party in turn under the influence of the cold war system. It was recorded that 160 countries joined the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988; there were 13,800 athletes, 250,000 spectators and about 4,700 reporters, thereby making it the largest event in the history of the Olympics until that time. The Seoul Olympic Games was a significant event in global history as the catalyst ending the cold war era between the East and the West [13].

The Seoul Olympic Games promoted positive images of South Korea, stimulating the ethnic consciousness of Koreans who were scattered all over the world [14]. This historical event was connected to the collapse of the oppositional structure between the two groups in the *Goryeoin* society. Before 1988, most Soviet Koreans had the fixed idea that North Korea was their homeland, and South Korea was its enemy due to the territorial division. Their fixed idea was intensified by the regional difference between those from the Maritime Province who considered North Korea their homeland and Sakhalinskis who considered South Korea as their homeland. Soviet Koreans viewed North Korea as their motherland and the communist Soviet Union as their brother country; however, they showed enmity to South Korea. Soviet Koreans had the engraved imagination that South Korea was ruined due to the Korean War in 1950s and the poorest capitalist state. Both groups of Koreans put away their hostility for the first time in the meeting between South Koreans and Soviet Korean artists in the World Culture and Art Festival held before and after the Seoul Olympic Games.

The Koreans enthusiastically welcomed the Korean artists from the Soviet Union, who came to their "homeland" for the first time. The performance stage of the Russian Art Troupe, which visited major cities in Korea, turned into a space for the dramatic meeting between long separated compatriots. The story of Nam Lyudmila, the Soviet Korean vocalist, about her grandfather made the entire audience cry. Her grandfather was shot to death for being accused as a Japanese spy in the Far East and all the Koreans were falsely charged and had to forcibly move to regions far away in spite of their homeland being at a close distance. The tragic story made everyone in the audience share the pain as Koreans, and the artists and audience became united and confirmed their "thick blood relationship." [16: *Kyunghyang Daily* April 9, 2007]

The impressive performance in Korea was delivered to the Soviet Korean society as it was. In the interview with Lyudmila regarding her visit to South Korea reported by *Lenin Kichi*, she confessed with tears in her eyes that she could not describe how much heartwarming welcome she received from South Koreans. Furthermore, she emphasized that South Koreans were deeply touched by their true sense of fraternity.

*(The female singer sat without saying anything for a while because she couldn't hold her tears; she was very excited and touched and she continued expressing this). I keenly felt the*

*calling from the homeland soaring deep from my heart for the first time in my life when I arrived in Seoul...For me, as someone with Korean blood, how close the country of my ancestors and the people close to my heart are can't be described as something holy. I can't describe how sincerely they treated me because my expression is so limited. I felt true great happiness during my visit to Korea....* [15: Oct 15, 1988, p.4].

The musicians of the Soviet Union as well as the Korean athletes of the Soviet Union used the words "goodwill," "consideration" and "sincere treatment" in their interviews when speaking about their impressions of South Korea during the Seoul Olympic Games; and these words became the words symbolizing warmhearted fraternity [15: Jan 21, 1989, p. 4]. At the same time, the prosperity of South Korea was even more impressive to them. South Korea, which they had seen on TV and experienced firsthand through their participation in the Seoul Olympic Games, was described with words and phrases such as "modern cities," "elegant clothing of women," "globalized industry country," and "high standards of living." The term "rich South Korea" was emphasized in such reports.

The development of South Korea, a capitalist state, had a great impact on the Soviet Union and communist states, and it was recognized as a good model which they wanted to resemble [16: *Sisa Journal*, June 17, 1990]. The change of viewpoint of the Soviet Union on South Korea enhanced the ethnic pride of Soviet Koreans. The newspapers of the Soviet Union replaced hostile and ideological expressions used to describe South Korea in the past with fraternal expressions. In other words, expressions like "We shall overthrow South Korea, the capitalist state by the USA" were now replaced by the phrases "land of our ancestors" and "one ethnic group in the same blood." Furthermore, he reports of Soviet Koreans showed solidarity with South Korea by expressing "USA insulting South Korean" and "compatriots encouraging the athletes of the Soviet Union rather than USA." [15: Oct. 5, 1988, p. 3] Now, both South Korea and North Korea were referred to as the motherland. Such a change weakened the perspective that those from the Maritime Province were North Korean and Sakhalinskis were South Korean, gradually erasing the oppositional dichotomy within the *Goryeoin* society in the Soviet Union

#### VI. ETHNIC LANGUAGE FROM "OBSTACLE FOR SUCCESS" TO "NATIONAL PROPERTY"

The Seoul Olympic Games was the important event that restored the ethnic pride of Koreans in their residential communities in the Soviet Union. The rich "homeland" successfully hosting the Olympic Games, the warm-hearted welcome from the homeland, and others' recognition of South Korea created synergy effects; thus, Soviet Koreans expressed a strong sense of kinship based on their blood relationship. Soviet Koreans who had tried to blend in with Russians now asserted their *Goryeoin* identity. The natives exposed themselves and tried to go back to the past.

What was the most frequently mentioned in the “Find Ethnic Root” campaign was Soviet Koreans’ realization of their ignorance of their own language. The environment for learning ethnic languages since the forcible relocation was very poor. It was due to a lack of teachers due to the purge of intellectuals, no textbooks on the mother language, and the burden to learn Russian as the mother language. Now, many Soviet Koreans blamed themselves for failing to keep their mother tongue.

There emerged a new discourse that emphasized the preciousness of the Korean language. The following are excerpted from articles in *Lenin Kichi* on language revitalization movements.

*“It is not true Soviet patriotism and internationalism if we don’t know our own language, culture or tradition.” “It is difficult to say that we are of the same race if the language is different in spite of our being of the same blood. All ethnic groups can’t hand over their own cultural heritages to their descendants if they don’t know the writings and language which their ancestors used.” “If we don’t restore and develop our own language and culture, our descendants will ask the present generation to bear responsibility.”* [15: March 17, 1990, p.3; Aug 2, 1989, p.4; Aug 10, 1989, p.4]

The growing trend of language revitalization did not exclude young Soviet Koreans who were further separated from the tradition. They were the Russified generation which had considered their ethnic language as a survival from their grandparents’ generation. A young Soviet Korean student insisted on his right to know his ethnic language and culture. However, he could not find a way to learn his ethnic language even though he wanted to, and he lamented that he did not know anything about Koreans or the Korean language. He pointed out that there was no educational support, and that the situation was much worse than that of other non-Russian languages such as Kazakh or German [15: March 2, 1990, p.4].

An ethnic theater showing ethnic art in Russian was recognized as a more serious case. Young actors, as members of a generation following the forcible displacement, showed Soviet art in the name of ethnic art [15: Jan 20, 1989, p.1]. Some critiques insisted on performing in Korean to restore the national spirit. Meanwhile, ethnic newspapers demonstrated the most visible change in the Mother Language Restoration campaign, turning away from merely translating Russian articles into Korean. Its content also changed from promotion of the Communist Party, including the victory of socialism, exaltation of Leninism, and activation of labor productivity in Kolkhoz, to the news on the Seoul Olympic Games and ethnic culture and tradition along with the increasing number of pages on such articles. It presented a variety of cultural traditions including folk games, traditional food, the kinship system, language learning, and literature. The increasing value of the Korean language highlighted the difference between those who could speak the language and those who could not.

## VII. MEANING OF LIBERATION OF THE MINORITY

As “one blood” was emphasized, South Korea was accepted as another homeland. This had special significance to

Sakhalinskis, who had been despised as the group with “South Korean mentalities.” It was to emancipate the minority from the naturalized discrimination by the majority. The national language and traditions were now reevaluated.

The discourse of “one blood,” which had become prevalent in the Soviet Korean community since the 1988 Olympic Games, was like magic destroying the shackles of Sakhalinskis. This magic enabled the minority to voice their opinions in front of the majority. Even now, a Sakhalinski who worked at “Korean Broadcasting Service” remembered their excitement at the time of the Seoul Olympic Games.

*I watched the Olympic Games on TV for all 17 days while working in the broadcasting service. I can’t tell how much I cried while watching the Olympic Games. I didn’t know that South Korea was so perfect. I imagined that I was in Korea, watching the games in Seoul and Busan* (Seminar Presentation on July 14, 2008).

*Soviet Korean kids and women who wanted to learn Korean after watching the Olympic Games visited the broadcasting service. We, Sakhalinskis, used Korean, but Keunttangchi had forgotten it. Keunttangchi needed interpretation when they talked with Koreans. A few of them could say “How do you do?” in Korean. Keunttangchi were jealous because we could speak in Korean so fluently* (Interview on July 8, 2010).

She was in tears while remembering her pride for her “homeland” at the time of the Seoul Olympic Games. It seems that her homeland enabled her to assert her Sakhalinski identity to the majority within the same ethnic group for the first time in her life.

The ‘superior’ Materikovskis confessed that “we were very ashamed because we could only smile when South Koreans asked us questions; we couldn’t speak in Korean” in front of the ‘inferior’ beings. The language competence of Sakhalinskis became more visible as the exchange between the Soviet Koreans and South Koreans increased. The inability to use the mother language was no longer a source of pride but of shame. Materikovskis’ purported ‘superiority’ was subverted as they learned the Korean language and traditions from the ‘inferior’ Sakhalinskis.

*Keunttangbaegi sang in Russian and we sang old songs and traditional Korean songs at their own meeting. But now, everything was changed, including even marriage between a Soviet Korean and a Sakhalinski. Keunttangbaegi hadn’t celebrated the Korean national holidays in the past, but now, they visited their ancestors’ tombs to pay respects at Hansik (Cold Food Day) more than us. Keunttangchi celebrate the Korean national holidays and visit the public tombs as well as celebrate Korean Thanksgiving Day, the first anniversary after birth and a person’s 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. We teach and keep the etiquette of bowing to each other. Children also learn the etiquette under the influence of their parents. Keunttangchi didn’t used to cook Korean food. They used to use edible oil on all kinds of edible greens as Russians do, but they follow our style nowadays. Keunttangchi didn’t know how to make*

*songpyeon (rice cake) and did not know about events such as the first anniversary after birth and the 100<sup>th</sup> day anniversary after birth. However, now, they prepare traditional clothing (for kids) and invite us to such events (Interview on June 14, 2010).*

Now the majority group imitated the minority group. The most liberating for Sakhalinskis was to be able to choose Materikovski spouses. Those who opposed marriage with Sakhalinskis in the past regretted, saying that there was no difference between them and Sakhalinskis because all of them were Korean. A Sakhalinski daughter-in-law is now greatly valued for her politeness and her ability to cook Korean food. The conflict in marriage between a Materikovski and a Sakhalinski was resolved by the discourse of “the same Korean” and both groups were dramatically reconciled with each other. Thus, Sakhalinskis were liberated from the restraints of what had appeared to be a marriage war in the past.

Most of all, the liberation of Sakhalin was the liberation from the contemptuous gaze of the majority. The rejection as a spouse was because she/he was considered as an inferior and ignorant being. As new migrants became “Soviet people” accustomed to the Soviet system, another negative image followed them. The majority laughed at the minority by calling them “closed-minded Japanese with dual personality.” By contrast, the majority had a sense of superiority as honorable independence activists because their ancestors had fought against Japan. Furthermore, they could not forget that the minority were “humble laborers.” Furthermore, the hostility was aggravated because the minority’s ancestors were natives of South Korea which was ideologically different from both Soviet Union and North Korea.

The cognitive violence from the majority toward the minority was, in fact, projected onto their own past and the self which resembled them the most. Just as Sakhalinskis refused to become Soviet citizens, the majority had also refused to become Russian subjects, kept a collective traditional lifestyle, and fought for the independence of the mother country while they were in the Maritime Province. Moreover, both groups had in common the past memory that they were suppressed as being suspected as Japanese spies helping Japan or ‘disturbing elements listening to Japanese broadcasting.’

Although it seemed as if the deep-rooted oppositional structure of discrimination could never be resolved, reconciliation did occur as a result of the ‘primordial emotion’ of sharing ‘one blood,’ stirred up by the Olympic Games held in the motherland

### VIII. CONCLUSION

Koreans in the former Soviet Union were in chronic conflicts and hostility. During the Seoul Olympic Games, they watched the magnificent change of South Korea, which had been considered as the enemy. South Koreans’ sensational welcoming of them and their meetings in South Korea shocked the Soviet Koreans and triggered the “Find Ethnic Root” campaign, which in turn resolved the internal conflicts.

In the Goryeoin society, the old migrants who had experienced the Soviet system first were considered to be like

Russian; the new migrants were considered to be like Japanese. In such a dichotomous structure, the ‘inferior’ could not marry the ‘superior.’ Moreover, the inferior were thoroughly excluded from public sectors, including ethnic associations. This dichotomy was strengthened by the fact that those from the Maritime Province were from North Korea and Sakhalinskis were from South Korea. The framework of exclusion of the minority by the majority continued as the contrast of ‘Russian-like’/ ‘Japanese-like’ replaced that of ‘the exemplary Soviet person’ / ‘immature Soviet person.’

This paper showed that the majority had marginalized the minority by creating and reproducing boundaries, for which they mobilized a series of oppositional frameworks, i.e., old vs. new migrants, North vs. South Korea, and Russian-like vs. Japanese-like. This recursive structure was unexpectedly collapsed by an event that enhanced the solidarity and homogeneity among the Goryeoin population. The weakening Soviet system and the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988 dramatically united the majority and the minority. This shift in thought neutralized the mutual hostility, and strengthened the ‘primordial feeling’ for the “the same blood, demonstrating that a fluid subject can strengthen ethnic boundaries in some contexts and weaken them in others.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Soon-ok Myong and B.G. Nurzhanov would like to thank all members in Korean church and the *Goeryeoin* Cultural Center in Almaty who acted as informants and contributed to this research

### REFERENCES

- [1] Procter, *Jigeum Stuart Hall*. Translated by Son Yu-kyong. Seoul: Alphy, 2006, pp 23-26; 220-225.
- [2] Kwang-ok Kim et al, *Jongjok-gwa minjok: geu dan-il-gwa bopyeon-ui sinhwa-reul neom-eoseo* (Beyond the Myths of Ethnicity). Seoul: Akanet, 2005, pp. 25-26.
- [3] C. Geertz, *Munhwa-ui heseok* (The Interpretation of Cultures). Translated by Mun Ok-pyo. Seoul: KKachi, 1998, p.304.
- [4] Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. New York: Norton, 2006, prologue
- [5] S.M. Han, and B.S. Han, *Goryeosaram, Uri-neun nugu in ga ?* (Koryosaram, Who Are We ?). Translated by Kim Tae-hang. Seoul: Godamsa, 1999, pp.82-84.
- [6] Song-mu Ko, *Ssoryeon-ui hanin-deul* (Soviet Koreans). Korean National Commission for UNESCO. Seoul: Iron-gwa silcheon, 1990, p.70
- [7] D.V. Men, W.C. Chang, T. H. Bak et al, *Istoria korejcev Kazahstana* (The history of Koreans in Kazakhstan). Sbornik arhibnyh dokumentob tom1, 1937-1998. (Collection of Archival Documents vol.1, 1937-1998). Almaty Education Center of the Republic of Korea. 1998, pp. 55-56.
- [8] Y. Yorozu, M. Hirano, K. Oka, and Y. Tagawa, “Electron spectroscopy ] D.V. Men, W.C. Chang, T. H. Bak et al, *Istoria korejcev Kazahstana* (The history of Koreans in Kazakhstan). Sbornik arhibnyh dokumentob tom2, 1937-1999. (Collection of Archival Documents vol.2, 1937-1999). Almaty Education Center of the Republic of Korea. 1999, pp. 186-187; 335.
- [9] Hui-young Kwon, *Segye-ui hanminjok: dongnippugka-yeonhap* (Koreans in the world: the Commonwealth of Independent States). Segye hanminjok chongseo 5. Seoul: Tong-ilwon, 1996, p. 77.
- [10] ] Naselenie SSSR 1983 (The 1983 population of the USSR). Izdatelstvo politicheskoi literatury, Moscow, 1983, pp.128-129.
- [11] G. N. Kim and D.V. Men, *Istoria i kultura koreitsev kazakhstan* (History and culture of the Koreans in Kazakhstan). Natsionalnaya akademiya nauk Respubliki Kazakhstan (National Academy of Sciences

- of the Republic of Kazakhstan), Tsentr Vostokovegenie (Center of Oriental Studies), Almaty: Gylm. 1995, pp. 265-272..
- [12] Geun-sik Jun and Mi-gyong Yom, "Diaspora, gwihwan, chulhyeon-jeok jungcheseung: Sahalin han-in-ui yeoksa-juk gyeongheom" (Diaspora, Return, and Emergent Identity: Historical Experiences of Koreans in Sakhalin), *Studies of Koreans Abroad*, Institute of Overseas Koreans, 2000, p.4.
- [13] Shin-pyo Kang and John J MacAloon, "The Seoul Olympics and torch relay: an ethnographic approach," *Korean Culture and Seoul Olympic Studies and Kang, Shin-pyo: His Olympic Academic Movement*, The National Folk Museum of Korea, 2010, pp. 284-299; 303-305.
- [14] Shin-pyo Kang, "Comparing the Seoul Olympics and the Barcelona Olympics: torch relay and TV broadcast," *Korean Culture and Seoul Olympic Studies and Kang, Shin-pyo: His Olympic Academic Movement*, The National Folk Museum of Korea, 2010, pp. 303-305.
- [15] The former Soviet Korean newspaper *Lenin Kichi*.
- [16] Korean newspapers and magazines (*Sisa Journal, Kyunghyang Sinmun, Money Today*).