The Impact of Korean Cultural Centers on Russian Korean Ethnic Identity

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1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to address the impact of Korean cultural centers and organizations on the development of Russian Korean cultural and ethnic self-identification in Russia, with a particular emphasis on the Russian Far East.¹ Despite suffering deliberate ethnic cleansing and Russification during Soviet rule, the Korean diaspora in the Russian Far East can be considered an example of an ethnic group that has successfully integrated into post-Soviet Russian society while preserving its distinct cultural identity. This is largely thanks to the work of Korean cultural centers and organizations, which help the Russian Korean community maintain its traditions and foster financial and professional success.² Although they play an important role in preserving Russian Koreans’ culture and ethnic self-identification, Korean cultural centers and organizations are seldom mentioned in academic discussions of the Korean diaspora. This paper uses original research conducted in the Far East of Russia to analyze how Korean cultural centers and organizations help the Russian Korean community navigate the complex process of forming a cohesive political and cultural identity.

2. Methodology

Over the course of five weeks during summer 2016, I traveled throughout the Russian Far East and conducted interviews with community leaders from twenty-three Korean cultural centers and organizations in the cities of Vladivostok, Ussuriisk, Nakhodka, Partizansk, Artem,

¹ This paper uses the terms “Russian Koreans” and “Soviet Koreans” to refer to the diasporic Korean community, also known as Koryo-saram.
² Kim, “Raspad SSSR i postsovetskie koreitys.”
Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk, Korsakov, and Khabarovsk. Since my project mainly centered on the area around Vladivostok, I reached out to the consulate of the Republic of Korea located in the city and requested a meeting with a consulate member. I was approved for a meeting with Consul Kwan Seok Park. I carried out an interview with him and then received contact information for all of the centers and organizations within Primorskii Krai. Olesia Gaida, an assistant translator for the consulate, was present during the interview, translating between Russian and Korean to facilitate communication. Gaida then agreed to help me secure other contacts. She called on my behalf to ask whether leaders of organizations would meet with me. Her involvement allowed me to get in touch with leaders that I had not been able to communicate with on my own. Although many organizations have phone numbers and email addresses posted online, it was not uncommon to find them no longer in service or to receive no response from them when I attempted to establish contact. The initial help from the consulate also allowed me to contact leaders and organizations beyond the ones that the consulate had arranged. These new contacts in turn helped me arrange meetings with other important members of the Russian Korean community. The leaders and directors I interviewed from Korean cultural centers and organizations were all Russian Koreans, and the consulate officials I interviewed were South Korean citizens.

The interview questions were designed to focus on each Korean cultural center’s or organization’s mission goals, the types of challenges it faced, and the type of cultural programming it provided. The questions also examined funding sources and cooperation with other organizations, both domestic and foreign, as well as the impact of each center or organization on the Russian Korean community. I took notes during the interviews and recorded and translated field notes after each interview was completed. I supplemented my analysis of
these interviews with academic literature received from scholars specializing in this field of study from the Institute of History of Archeology and Ethnography of the Peoples of the Far East and the Department of Korean Studies from Far East Federal University (both located in Vladivostok).

3. Historical Background

The origins of the Russian Korean community date back to the first migration of Koreans to the Russian Empire in the 1860s. Koreans began to settle in the Russian Far East to escape droughts and famines that occurred in Korea in 1863 and 1869–70. Further migrations prompted by the annexation of Korea by Japan caused the population of the Russian Korean community to grow to over 50,000 people by 1910. The Russian government’s attitude toward the Korean settlers was mixed: while some Koreans received land grants and became Russian citizens, others remained disenfranchised and landless. The community’s fortunes improved following the Russian revolution. By 1927, the Russian Korean population in the Soviet Union grew to 170,000 people. The early Soviet nationalities policy granted the Russian Korean community some degree of autonomy and funded Korean cultural institutions, including schools, technical colleges, and clubs as well as Korean-language newspapers and journals. The Korean presence in the Soviet Far East was so prominent that in 1925, government officials considered creating an autonomous Korean Soviet Socialist Republic. However, Soviet leaders’ concerns about Japanese influence in the Far East and a growing perception of Koreans as “potentially disloyal”

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3 Gelb, 392.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 396.
8 Martin, 834.
put this autonomy in danger.\textsuperscript{9} Beginning in 1928, new collectivization policies stoked ethnic tensions, culminating in a five-year plan for the forced resettlement of Koreans to the north of Khabarovsk.\textsuperscript{10} By the late 1930s, Soviet policies reflected growing anxieties regarding non-Russian nationalism in the regions along the eastern Soviet border, and Japanese expansion into Manchuria stoked fears about a possible invasion.\textsuperscript{11} In 1937, Stalin ordered the NKVD to deport the entire Korean population of the Far East to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.\textsuperscript{12} This has been described as “the first total nationality deportation” under Stalin’s rule and an example of deliberate ethnic cleansing.\textsuperscript{13}

Scholars disagree on the motivations behind Stalin’s mass deportations of ethnic groups. Some believe the ethnic cleansing began as a security measure, while others cite Stalin’s personal antagonism toward groups considered to have resisted collectivization.\textsuperscript{14} The Soviet Koreans were told that they were deported to protect them from the Japanese, but the document ordering their deportation explicitly states that this was intended to prevent their recruitment as Japanese spies.\textsuperscript{15} The Soviet Koreans deported to Central Asia were provided no immediate resources for shelter and food. Subject to such severe conditions, 23.2 percent of Soviet Koreans died due to “disease, malnutrition, and exposure.”\textsuperscript{16} The deported Koreans encountered significant difficulties in adapting their traditional subsistence on rice farming to their new environment.\textsuperscript{17} Over time, the Koreans in Central Asia became known for their successful

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 835.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 840.
\textsuperscript{11} Pohl, 277.
\textsuperscript{12} Gelb, 390; Martin, 451.
\textsuperscript{13} Gelb, 411; Pohl, 267.
\textsuperscript{14} Ro’i, 154.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 155.
\textsuperscript{16} Pohl, 278–79.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 278.
collective farms and gradually assimilated into Soviet society.\textsuperscript{18} Soviet Koreans were allowed to return to the Far East only after the death of Stalin in 1953.\textsuperscript{19} However, this mobility was restricted by the demands of the Soviet economy, and relatively few actually managed to return.\textsuperscript{20} While they were granted their civic rights as individuals, Soviet Koreans were not fully “rehabilitated” as a collective political group by the authorities until 1991.\textsuperscript{21} The Soviet government deliberately suppressed the native languages and cultures of ethnic groups that were repressed and exiled, including the Russian Koreans.\textsuperscript{22} During the post-war era, the Soviet government implemented a deliberate policy of suppressing Korean culture and enforcing linguistic Russification. In 1926, 98.9 percent of ethnic Koreans in the Soviet Union spoke Korean as their first language.\textsuperscript{23} By 1959, this figure had decreased to 79.3 percent, and by 1989, a majority of the Soviet Korean community spoke Russian as its native language.\textsuperscript{24}

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Soviet Koreans exiled to Central Asia were free to relocate to the Russian Far East. While the majority remained in Central Asia, thousands returned to the Russian Far East as refugees, fleeing political unrest and civil war over the course of the 1990s.\textsuperscript{25} These returnees were not welcomed with open arms by the local Russian population. During my time interviewing members of Korean cultural centers and organizations, I had several off-the-record personal conversations in which Russian Koreans revealed to me the difficulties they experienced in returning to the Russian Far East. They were

\textsuperscript{18} Gelb, 408.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 409.
\textsuperscript{20} Saveliev, 486.
\textsuperscript{21} Gelb, 409.
\textsuperscript{22} Pohl, 288.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 287.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Kim, “Raspad SSSR i postsovetskie koreitsy.”
met with ignorance, prejudice, and discrimination that was difficult to overcome. Russian Koreans nonetheless established their credibility with time.

The post-Soviet period has also been a transitional period for a separate Korean diaspora discussed in this paper: the so-called “Sakhalin Koreans.” These are the descendants of Koreans who migrated to southern Sakhalin in the 1930s and 1940s when it was a part of the Japanese Empire. Following the Soviet conquest of the island in 1945, they were not allowed to return to Korea and were denied the right to move within the Soviet Union, remaining effectively stateless until the end of Soviet rule. In contrast to the Russian Koreans on the continent, the Sakhalin Koreans more effectively retained their language and culture due to their relatively recent migration and the collective nature of their exile. Nevertheless, the younger generations of Sakhalin Koreans face many of the same challenges as Russian Koreans throughout the Russian Far East.

4. Korean Cultural Centers

In the final years of the Soviet Union, Soviet Koreans throughout Central Asia and the Russian Far East established associations, organizations, and cultural centers with the goal of reviving Korean culture. These cultural centers and organizations provided a platform for preserving and maintaining the Korean traditions that had been largely forgotten after several decades of exile and forced assimilation. Cultural centers also created a new public space to form a coherent Russian Korean identity, allowing individual members of the community to see

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26 Saveliev, 487.
27 Ibid.
28 Kim, Ethnic Entrepreneurship of Koreans in the USSR and Post-Soviet Central Asia, 57.
29 Vladimir Vladimirovich Khan (president of the Public Association “Unity,” Partizansk) in discussion with the author, July 2016; Raisa Moroz (director of the Korean National Cultural Center of Vladivostok) in discussion with the author, July 2016; Valentin Pak (chairman of the Association of the Korean Organizations of Primorskii Krai, Vladivostok) in discussion with the author, July 2016.
themselves as a united ethnic group. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Korean cultural centers and organizations have also helped guarantee the legal rights of the Russian Korean community. Gaining citizenship has been and continues to be a difficult task for many returnees. To this day, organizations such as the Regional Public Charitable Foundation for Primorskii Krai Koreans (“Revival”) work tirelessly to help any Russian Koreans struggling with Russian laws. Khon Ger Kim, the president of “Revival,” articulates the importance of Korean organizations for the survival of the Russian Korean returnees:

When they came to Russia, they came with legal issues. Migration policies are always changing. […] People come to me for laws they don’t understand. I explain to them how [and what] to do. I helped one lady get an apartment. There was another woman whom the government wanted to deport, but I helped her. If people come here and ask for help, we help them with those questions. For free.³⁰

Korean cultural centers and organizations thus serve as community hubs that help organize a collective identity by addressing the cultural and material needs of their community members. To this end, they have welcomed cooperation and support from the South Korean government to further guarantee the preservation of Korean culture and identity in the Russian Far East.

Cultural Programming

Korean cultural centers provide a public community space for activities and events that bring the Russian Korean community together. The cultural centers host multiple organizations and facilities that allow them to offer a wide range of services to the community’s members. The

Ussuriisk Korean Cultural Center, one of the most prominent such centers in the worldwide Korean diaspora, regularly hosts Korean dance and drumming ensembles and a taekwondo federation, provides Korean language classes, and publishes a monthly newspaper. The center contains a library and a historical museum dedicated to the history of the Russian Korean community. The center also holds celebrations of traditional Korean holidays. Nikolai Kim, the president of the center, said that: “We celebrate Chuseok [the harvest festival] by ourselves, spending time outside in nature and seeing it. For Tano (a Korean holiday that celebrates the start of summer), we go out in nature and cook plov and other foods. For Korean New Year, we rent a restaurant.” The center’s annual celebration of Chuseok attracts over 2,000 participants. Smaller organizations rely on the active participation of their group members for planning cultural events. In meetings of the organization “Revival,” elderly Russian Koreans gather together for performances of traditional Korean songs followed by a collective potluck featuring homemade Korean dishes. Korean cultural centers often house multiple cultural organizations in the same building and encourage close cooperation to meet the needs of the community. The Korean Cultural Center in Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk, for example, houses a number of organizations that serve various

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31 Valeriia Kim (vice president of the Ussuriisk Korean Cultural Center) in discussion with the author, July 2016; Ermak and Tabunshchikova, 130.  
32 Ibid.  
33 Мы празднуем Чусок сами, проводя время снаружи в природе и видя это. Для Тано (корейский праздник, который празднует начало лета), мы идем на природу и готовим плов и другую пищу. Для корейского Нового года мы арендуем ресторан. Nikolai Petrovich Kim (president of the Ussuriisk Korean Cultural Center) in discussion with the author, July 2016.  
34 Ibid.  
35 Khon-Ger Kim (president of the Regional Public Charitable Foundation for Primorskii Krai Koreans (“Revival”), Ussuriisk) in discussion with the author, July 2016.
sectors of the local Russian Korean population. The Sakhalin Oblast’ Public Organization of Separated Sakhalin Korean Families works alongside the Public Organization of Sakhalin Korean Elders. Both of these organizations are supported by the Regional Public Organization “Sakhalin Koreans,” which coordinates their activities and publishes Se kore sinmun, a Russian Korean regional weekly newspaper. The Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk Korean Cultural Center also hosts the Center for Education and Culture of the Republic of Korea, which offers courses on Korean language and culture. All of these organizations regularly interact with one another and hold collective events: for example, in the summer of 2016, the Center for Education and Culture of the Republic of Korea provided government funding to send young Russian Koreans to learn about their ancestral history through a cultural and historical field trip to the city of Korsakov.

South Korean Government Involvement

The South Korean government’s interaction with the Russian Korean community is not limited to the cultural center in Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the South Korean government has played a key role in developing and maintaining Russian Korean cultural identity through supporting cultural centers and organizations. Many cultural centers and organizations rely on funding from South Korean government to fund cultural programming. Timofei Li, the president of the Partizansk Seniors’ Association (“Noindan”), explained that the South Korean government has financed the activities of his organization since 2015. The South Korean government also provides material resources, including drums, books, and traditional

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36 Oksana Vladimirovna Pak (president of the Sakhalin Regional Public Organization of Separated Sakhalin Korean Families, Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk) in discussion with the author, August 2016.
37 Timofei Nikolaevich Li (president of the Partizansk Seniors’ Association “Noindan,” Partizansk) in discussion with the author, July 2016.
Korean clothes, as well as training for personnel in Korean cultural centers. Li describes how the South Korean government affects his organization:

> The South Korean people came to teach us Korean songs and how to cook Korean food, since food is a part of tradition. The South Korean government can’t come to Partizansk directly, so it happens through the Ussuriisk [Korean] Cultural Center. They taught us how to cook kimchi.”

This support occurs on large scale as well. The Ussuriisk Korean Cultural Center, for example, was constructed in 2009 largely thanks to funding from the South Korean government. Valeriia Kim, the vice president of the center, explained to me that

> the South Korean government originally bought the building and carried out some construction, but they left all responsibility to us. We rent out 40 percent [of the building], and we use 60 percent for ourselves. With that money from rent, we pay for [our own] rent, utilities, and salaries. […] The South Korean government sometimes helps pay for holiday celebrations, but usually not too much.

The leaders of Russian Korean cultural organizations often welcome cooperation with the South Korean government as part of a larger strategy of gaining political recognition as a united ethnic group. The Russian Far East and Siberia Association for Korean Organizations, for example, invites all Koreans to participate in their events. The Cultural Festival for the City of

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38 Южнокорейский народ пришел, чтобы научить нас корейским песням и как готовить корейскую пищу, поскольку еда является частью традиции. Правительство Южной Кореи не может приехать прямо в Партизанск, так это происходит через культурный центр Уссурийска. Они научили нас готовить кимчи. Timofei Nikolaevich Li (president of the Partizansk Seniors’ association “Noindan,” Partizansk) in discussion with the author, July 2016.

39 Jin Youn Lee (director of the Korean Education Center of the Republic of South Korea) in discussion with the author, June 2016; Wonchan Jjang (director of the Center for Education and Culture of the Republic of Korea) in discussion with the author, August 2016.

40 Правительство Южной Кореи первоначально купило здание и произвели какое-то строительство, но они оставили нам всю ответственность. Мы используем 40% в аренду и 60%, используем его для себя. С этими деньгами от аренды мы платим за аренду, коммунальные услуги и зарплаты. […] Иногда правительство Южной Кореи помогает оплачивать праздники, но обычно не слишком много. Valeriia Kim (vice president of the Ussuriisk Korean Cultural Center) in discussion with the author, July 2016.

41 Ku Sen Beik (president of the Association of Korean Organizations of the Far East and Siberia, Khabarovsk) in discussion with the author, July 2016.
Artem held in the summer of 2016, which I attended, was organized by the National Cultural Autonomy of Koreans in Artem with support from Korean cultural organizations from different cities in the region. The Russian Korean community in nearby Vladivostok commemorated the 150-year anniversary of the first Korean emigration to Russia in August 2015. Valentin Pak, the chairman for the Association of Korean Organizations of Primorskii Krai (AKORP), claimed that his diplomatic connections helped make the commemoration a truly international event recognizing the Russian Korean community: the event was attended by consuls and other government officials not only from Russia and South Korea, but also from the United States, North Korea, India, and Vietnam as well.\textsuperscript{42} Korean cultural centers and organizations have created platforms for discussion and established professional relationships and partnerships with governments to acknowledge and secure the existence of Russian Korean identity and culture.

\textit{Local Investment}

Russian Korean businessmen also contribute significantly to the maintenance of these cultural centers and organizations. For example, En Gun Im, the president of the Regional Public Organization “Sakhalin Koreans,” owns a real estate business that allows him to invest a certain amount of his profits into supporting Russian Korean institutions in Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk.\textsuperscript{43} Tat’iana Kim, the president for the National Cultural Autonomy of Koreans in Artem, explained that funding from Russian Korean philanthropists plays a crucial role in keeping the community together through Korean drumming practices and performances.\textsuperscript{44} Some smaller organizations, in contrast, largely rely on small donations and voluntary fundraising by their members. The

\textsuperscript{42} Valentin Pak (chairman for the Association of the Korean Organizations of Primorskii Krai) in discussion with the author, July 2016.
\textsuperscript{43} En Gun Im (president of the Regional Public Organization of Elderly Sakhalinsk-Koreans) in discussion with the author, August 2016.
\textsuperscript{44} Tat’iana Kim (president of the Korean Cultural Education Center, Artem) in discussion with the author, July 2016.
members of the Sakhalin Oblast’ Public Organization of Separated Sakhalin Korean Families invest their own money into helping their organization and also help out of their own free will. Timofei Li explained that members of “Noindan” raised funds themselves to ensure the continued existence of the organization:

Noindan wasn’t working, there needed to be something done. So I asked [choir director] Emma Nikolaevna [Li] to teach Korean songs. After they sang and sang, we got sponsors for Noindan. So they donated money to Noindan little by little. I made an effort for Noindan to keep working.\textsuperscript{45}

These disparities in organization size and resources attest to the difficulties involved in reviving Russian Korean cultural identity in the Russian Far East. Despite many examples of cooperation between various Russian Korean institutions and communities, creating a united Russian Korean community has proved challenging.

8. Conclusion

The Russian Koreans have overcome decades of political repression and exile in establishing themselves once again in the Russian Far East. Korean cultural centers and organizations have been instrumental in reviving Korean cultural traditions and language. Furthermore, their multifaceted services—including legal assistance, educational resources, and providing communal spaces for activities and events—make these cultural centers the cornerstone of the Korean cultural revival in post-Soviet Russia. The creation of such community hubs in turn encourages local investment to further support the preservation of Korean culture. The relatively recent introduction of funding and other kinds of support from the South Korean

\textsuperscript{45} Ноинданд не работал, нужно было что-то сделать. Итак, я попросил Эмму Николаевну учить корейские песни [sic]. После того, как они пели и пели, мы получили спонсоров для Ноиндан. Таким образом, они мало [sic] пожертвовали деньги Ноиндану. Я приложил усилия для того, чтобы Ноиндан продолжал работать. Timofei Nikolaevich Li (president of the Partizansk Seniors’ Association “Noindan,” Partizansk) in discussion with the author, July 2016.
government has helped further helped maintain this effort. Russian Koreans have thus managed to overcome the trauma of exile to form a distinct political and cultural identity in the Russian Far East.

Works Cited


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46 Oh, 24.