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Photo Essay

## Far from Distant Shores: Identity Limbo in the Korean Diaspora

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**Note:** This essay accompanies the photo essay of the same title, which can be accessed online at the link above.

Language is the centerpiece of diaspora; it is a marker of identity, ethnicity, and belonging (or exclusion), inseparable from self-perception and the way that others perceive us. As a people disperses, it takes its native tongue with it and blends with other cultures. Likewise, the language itself adapts and evolves according to the new environment the people inhabit. In some unfortunate cases, the native tongue is simply forgotten, leaving no traces behind, but often a new dialect emerges, rich in stories and consequently the identity of its speakers.

This search for identity has been the impetus for my photography. Growing up as a second-generation ethnic Korean in Argentina, my inner conflict between the dominant culture and my ancestral culture was reflected in my broken Korean, seamlessly blended with Spanish. It was only natural that I would reject the simplistic idea of a homogeneous ethnic identity, an idea that ignores the multiplicity of personalities that inevitably stems from displacement, migration, and multilingualism.

While researching issues surrounding language and identity in diaspora, I came across *Koryo-mar*, a rare Korean dialect spoken in the post-Soviet states by descendants of Koreans who call themselves *Koryo-saram*. Heavily influenced by Russian, this dialect is critically endangered, because recent generations have not actively learned it. Intrigued, I was soon on my way to Kazakhstan. I wanted to see for myself how *Koryo-saram* culture had adapted to Central Asia, how it had evolved from the roots we shared. Perhaps, I thought, these people's experiences would provide insight into my own search to understand my identity.

Koreans settled in the Russian Far East after fleeing poverty in the 1860s and Japanese colonialism in Korea in the early 1900s. In 1937, more than one hundred and seventy-two thousand *Koryo-saram* were deported to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. They were the first of a number of ethnic groups forcefully transferred by Joseph Stalin on the suspicion of espionage in light of the Russo-Japanese conflict, an accusation for which evidence has never been found. Thousands, mostly children and the elderly, died during their month-long journey in precarious and

overcrowded cattle trains and the harsh winters following relocation.<sup>1</sup> They were left with no means of survival; starvation and illness became commonplace as they lived in earth dugouts while being forced to grow rice in the arid Kazakh steppe, their first destination. Kazakhstan is the world's largest landlocked country—a far cry from the coasts where the dislocated Koreans' ancestors had lived and formed new identities.

Some *Koryo-saram* continue to uphold numerous Korean traditions, and some aspire to live in Korea. Their ancestors left the Korean peninsula in the 1860s, and yet they still have not lost their Korean identity. Retaining this identity may not be surprising, considering the broader post-communist search for ethnic identity in the region. However, I have learned that, in many respects, this continued identification was in fact forced on the *Koryo-saram*. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, like the former Soviet Union to which they belonged, still require their citizens to document their ethnicities in their passports and on identification cards. Officially recognized as “Koreans” by the state and other communities, they embrace the identity they have been obligated to conserve. Thus, the identity that once served as the basis for their deportation is now an empowering part of their history. Today's *Koryo-saram* are very proud of their ancestry as well as their success despite the hurdles they have faced.<sup>2</sup>

In 2016, I visited a town near Tashkent, Uzbekistan known as the Kim Pen Xva Kolkhoz (collective farm), named after the *Koryo-saram* man who was its leader from 1940 until his death in 1974. Wandering around its streets, I came across a small museum dedicated to the town's history and its former leader, whose stoic portrait hangs with his famous quotation, “I have found a new home in this land.” The portrait shows Kim Pen Xva decorated with Soviet medals; his collective farm had yielded one of the highest amounts of rice across all Soviet states, and he was consequently twice awarded the title of Hero of Socialist Labor. But this “success” was not his alone. The *Koryo-saram*'s strong work ethic and hunger for success, combined with their agricultural tradition, made the cultivation of rice and other crops possible even in seemingly untamable terrain like the Kazakh steppe and the Uzbek marshlands.

My research on Korean identity extended beyond Central Asia. I continued my investigation in Mexico and Cuba, where approximately one thousand Koreans arrived in 1905, having been promised future prosperity in a paradisiacal land.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the exact number of deaths is not known, some scholars estimate that about forty thousand people died during and after the deportations (Pohl 1999; Kim 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Along with other ethnic groups, the Koreans were repressed by the government of the Soviet Union before and after the deportations (Kim 2012; Lee 2002). Their movement was restricted to designated areas, and Korean-language books were destroyed (Kim 2009; Yoon 2000). However, their situation changed considerably after Stalin's death in 1953. The Soviet Union ultimately recognized the hard work of the *Koryo-saram* in the agricultural sector, and they were allowed to leave their collective farms. They quickly took leadership roles in industry, government, and academia, and by the 1970s they became the ethnic group with the highest number of university graduates (Kim 2003).

However, once they arrived on the Yucatán Peninsula, they were sold off as indentured laborers to harvest henequen, an agave plant with thorny leaves, known as Yucatán's "green gold" and used to produce fabric and rope.<sup>3</sup> Their new reality involved earning pitiful salaries by working long hours under the scorching sun. They worked side by side with local Yucatec-Mayans, often learning their language (rather than the Spanish of their masters) and intermarrying with them. By the time their contracts ended in 1910, Korea had been incorporated into the Japanese Empire. With no homeland to return to, they decided to stay in Mexico, and many eventually migrated to Cuba.

More than a century later, the descendants of the henequen workers have adapted to the local culture and no longer speak Korean. Given the small number of Koreans who initially migrated to Mexico and Cuba, they did not hold on to their ancestral culture as the *Koryo-saram* did. The language inevitably forgotten, the once-unified country that their ancestors left behind lingers only as distant shores in their collective imagination.

Joaquin Poot Lee, a second-generation Korean-Mayan, told me the story of his father, who had escaped the henequen plantation with a fellow countryman. They survived in the Yucatán jungle by sleeping in trees, fearing the local tigers (a genuine fear on the Korean peninsula at the time). In reality, the animals were most likely jaguars; tigers never inhabited the region of Yucatán, but the workers perceived their new world through their collective imagination and East Asian eyes.

Despite the fact that Korean-Mayans have not retained their culture to the same degree as the *Koryo-saram*, their sense of identity as ethnic Koreans remains remarkably strong. When I asked which country they felt more identified with, I was often told, "We're not Korean, but we're also not Mexican. We are Korean-Yucatec [or Korean-Mayan]." Similarly, many ethnic Koreans in Central Asia identify neither with Korea nor Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, but with both simultaneously. Contrary to common notions of a homogeneous Korean identity, these subgroups of the Korean diaspora show signs of identity fluidity and rejection of conventional categories.

When I visited Anna and Aliona Kim's house, in the district of Eskeldy-bi, Kazakhstan, the two sisters sang a Korean song titled "Seoul, Forever Seoul." They had written down the lyrics phonetically in Cyrillic and memorized the song, because they do not know how to write in Korean. The yearning for a country they barely knew was strangely familiar, and we communicated in our own variations of broken Korean, which were more similar to each other than to the standard dialect spoken in Seoul. Like the sisters' song, my work attempts to evoke nostalgia for a homeland that is sometimes as foreign as it is familiar. Looking into their identity is, for me, like looking through a broken mirror that reveals the vestiges of a shared past as well as

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<sup>3</sup> The Koreans were recruited by British-Mexican broker John G. Meyers, who had been hired by the henequen plantation owners of Yucatán. Meyers initially intended to recruit Japanese laborers, but the Japanese government did not allow it for a variety of reasons. Consequently, he founded the Continental Settlement Company (sometimes called the Continental Migration Company) in Korea in collaboration with Japanese associates (Park 2006).

a glimpse of the possible fate of other Korean enclaves throughout the diaspora, such as my own in Argentina.

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## About the Artist

Michael Vince Kim is a photographer based in Buenos Aires and London. During his final year studying linguistics at the University of Edinburgh, his interest in *Koryo-mar* (a Korean dialect spoken by ethnic Koreans in the former Soviet Union) took him to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where he documented the language and lives of the descendants of Koreans who had been deported there from the Russian Far East in 1937. He continued working on issues of diaspora and identity with a photo essay titled *Aenikkaeng* (2016), which told the story of Koreans who, in 1905, were deceived into indentured servitude in Mexico. He is a recipient of the Magnum "30 Under 30" Award, the Royal Photographic Society's Postgraduate Bursary, and the Magnum Graduate Photographers Award. In 2017, he won first prize in the People Stories category of the World Press Photo Contest and was selected to take part in the Joop Swart Masterclass in Amsterdam.