

CHAPTER 4

Joseonjok and *Goryeo saram* Ethnic Return Migrants in South Korea: Hierarchy Among Co-ethnics and Ethno-National Identity¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

A substantial number of “ethnic return migrants” emerged in many parts of the world in the late 1980s and 1990s. Ethnic return migrants are those who return-migrate to their ethnic homelands after having lived for more than one or more generations overseas (Sheffer 2003; Tsuda 2003). Ethnic return migration (or “diasporic return migration”) occurred in Europe in the late 1980s with the ease of the Cold War and the consequent collapse of the Soviet Union in the end of 1991. It includes the German *Aussiedler* returning from the former communist countries of Eastern Europe to Germany, ethnic Russians from the newly independent republics of Central Asia and Eastern Europe to Russia, and the Jews from the former Soviet Union to Israel (*cf.* Münz & Ohliger 2003; Remnik 1998). In addition, the economic

downturns of Latin America in the 1980s also pushed many ethnic Spaniards, Italians, and Portuguese to return to their ancestral homelands in Europe. Similar ethnic return migrations also took place in East Asia as well. Between the late 1980s and late 2000s nearly 300,000 *Nikkeijin* Japanese migrated from Brazil and Peru to their ethnic homeland of Japan (*cf.* Tsuda 2003; 2009). Almost at the same time, tens of thousands of ethnic Koreans from China (*Joseonjok* or *Chaoxianzu* as they are called in China) migrated to South Korea, and today their number is over 600,000. Though much smaller in scale, ethnic Koreans of the former Soviet Union (*Goryeo saram* or the former “Soviet Koreans”) also migrated to South Korea from the late 1990s.

Previous researches on the ethnic return migration have explored the causes and processes of ethnic return migrations, post-migration ethno-national identity changes, and the policies of receiving countries (*cf.* Gal, Leoussi & Smith 2010; Tsuda 2010). Though some ethnic return migrations took place with political reasons -- i.e., the German, Russian, and Jewish cases, -- most of ethnic return migrations have been due to economic reasons (Tsuda 2009). The common push and pull factors behind most of the recent ethnic return migrations have been the gaps in employment opportunities and wage differentials between the countries of origin and countries of destination. The *Nikkeijin*, *Joseonjok* and *Goryeo saram* ethnic return migrations are attributable to the employment opportunities and wage differences between the sending and receiving countries. Migrating from less developed countries of the Global South to more developed countries in the Global North, ethnic return migrants mostly work as unskilled, low-paid, and manual workers in host societies. They often experience discrimination, alienation and marginalization in their ethnic homelands. In addition, the hierarchical relationship between the ethnic return migrants and their co-ethnics in the host countries tend to give the former a deep sense of ambiguity and disappointment in their ethnic homelands (*cf.* Tsuda 2009). Such negative experiences in their ancestral homeland

make the ethnic return migrants to reflect on their ethnonational identities. In such circumstances, they often reject or weaken their “Japanese” or “Korean” identities and tend to opt for new identities based on their natal homelands. This intriguing phenomena of the occurrence of hierarchy among co-ethnics and post-ethnic return migration identity changes require more academic attention.

In this chapter we will deal with the Korean Chinese (*Joseonjok*) and the former Soviet Korean (*Goryeo saram*) ethnic return migrants in South Korea, focusing on the hierarchical relationship between them and their post-ethnic return migration ethno-national identity changes. So far, most of researches on ethnic return migration have focused on the hierarchical relationships between the ethnic return migrants and their co-ethnics in host societies (*cf.* Chapters 5 and 10 in this volume) and between co-ethnics from developed countries and less developed countries. This chapter, however, deals with the fact that hierarchical relationship also emerges between the co-ethnics from developing countries. The hierarchical relationship between the co-ethnic return migrants of *Joseonjok* and *Goryeo saram*, both of whom are from less developed countries is a unique and interesting case. This chapter explicates this referring to the factors including the differences in their Korean language capacity, which also determines wage disparity and employment position, and the level of their political power in their ethnic homeland.

Joseonjok are the descendants of those Koreans who migrated to Manchuria (the three north-eastern provinces of China today) from the Korean Peninsula between the late 19th century and the early 20th century. The early Korean migrants were mostly poverty-stricken peasants from the north-eastern regions of the Korean peninsula and they were driven by famines and political turmoil of their homeland. As the sacred homeland of theirs, Manchus kept Manchuria populated only by themselves, and they prohibited Chinese or Koreans from entering into the land until the 1860s. Korean peasants of the other side of the borders

migrated there in search of land since the 1860s. Then, the Manchus lifted the migration ban in the face of encroaching Russian power to Manchuria, and more Koreans settled there and soon numerous Korean communities were formed in southern Manchuria.² Later in the early 20th century, when Korea fell into the colony of Japan, more Koreans fled to Manchuria (and the Russian Far East).³ The Yanbian region in southeast Manchuria became the center of Korean community, and by 1920 there were nearly half million Korean settlers residing there. After the establishment of the Manchukuo (1932-1945) by Japan, larger number of Koreans from southern provinces of the Korean peninsula were semi-forced to migrate to northern and western Manchuria to develop the land. Their number reached 1.4 million by 1940, and Koreans in Manchukuo continued to grow in their number until the end of the Second World War. After the war, nearly 700,000 Koreans returned to Korea from Manchuria, but there still were about 1 million Koreans in Manchuria when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949.

With the establishment of the PRC, ethnic Koreans in Manchuria became PRC citizens and in 1952 the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture was established. Living in their own autonomous communities, Korean Chinese were able to maintain their culture and ethnic identity (Kang 2008; Kim 2010). During the Cold War, the PRC recognized North Korea as the only legitimate Korean state, and the Korean Chinese did not have any contact with their co-ethnics in South Korea. This changed in the late 1980s when the Cold War eased and China opened herself to the outside world. During the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, which was broadcasted in China, Korean Chinese came to have a more realistic view of South Korea, particularly its economic prosperity in contrast to the poverty and ideological rigidity in North Korea. This changed the formerly negative perceptions of Joseonjok toward South Korea. By the late-1980s they began to visit South Korea and many of them chose to stay

there as migrant workers regardless of their visa status. When China and South Korea established formal diplomatic relationship in 1992, much larger number of Joseonjok entered into South Korea as migrant workers.

The early Korean migration to the Russian Far East was similar to the Korean migration to Manchuria. Just like those who went to Manchuria, the Koreans who migrated to the Russian Far East before the 20th century were almost all from the north-eastern part of the Korean Peninsula (North Hamgyeong Province). The first Korean immigrants in the Russian Far East were reported in the early 1860s, and by 1883 there were over 30,000 Korean settlers.

Sometimes the Russian authority accepted Korean migrants and even encouraged them to settle. Some other times, however, Koreans were dealt with suspicion and hostility. By 1910 there were over 50,000 Koreans in the Russian Far East, and most of them were residing around the city of Vladivostok (Gelb 1995). As Japan occupied the Korean peninsula and colonized Korea in 1910, more Koreans fled to the Russian Far East. The Russian Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922 attracted more Koreans to the region. By the end of the 1920s there were nearly 200,000 Koreans in the Russian Far east, and their number grew continuously. In 1937, however, the Stalinist government suddenly forced them to relocate to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in Central Asia. This was not to let the Koreans to provoke Japan with their anti-Japanese activities as this might provoke Japan at the time when the Soviet Union was expecting a war with Germany in Europe (*cf.* Huttenbach 1993). There was also a strong need to develop Central Asia's agriculture in preparation for the imminent war with Hitler's Germany. In the process of the forced migration, however, the Soviet Koreans were branded as an "enemy nation", and were stripped of their rights as the citizens of the Soviet Union. This harsh treatment of Koreans in the Soviet Union distinguishes the latter from their co-ethnics in China, Japan, and the USA (Min 1992).

Goryeo saram had to rebuild their life anew in the wild fields and semi-deserts of southern Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where they were relocated. Not having any freedom to move or travel to other areas or cities, they had to concentrate on agricultural activities. They were very successful in their agricultural activities, and Korean collective farms became the wealthiest ones in the Soviet Union. This made *Goryeo saram* a “model minority” within the Soviet Union and they regained their rights as the citizens of the Soviet Union after Stalin’s death in 1953. Since then, many of Soviet Koreans moved to big cities throughout the Soviet Union while others stayed in the local collective farms in Central Asia. Then, new challenges came when the Soviet Union collapsed in the end of 1991. As the new republics gained independence, there rose local nationalisms and this made the life of *Goryeo saram* extremely difficult (German 2003). Particularly in Uzbekistan, those who do not speak the vernacular language were not allowed to keep their professional positions, and most of *Goryeo saram* elite lost jobs. Many of them moved to private business sector including truck farming, in which many Soviet Koreans have been engaged since the 1970s.⁴ Russian population in Central Asia had to return to Russia and many *Goryeo saram* also chose to “return” to their old homeland in the Russian Far East, which is near to their ancestral homeland of Korea.

II. DIASPORIC RETURN OF JOSEONJOK AND GORYEO SARAM: MIGRATION PROCESS AND HIERARCHICAL RELATIONSHIP

As mentioned above, for *Joseonjok* in the PRC and *Goryeo saram* in the former Soviet Union, South Korea was not a legitimate country and there were not any contacts between them and their co-ethnics in South Korea during the Cold War. It was only after the late

1980s when both of them came to have more realistic information on South Korea. In particular, the 1988 Summer Olympic Games held in Seoul was a momentum, when both *Joseonjok* and *Goryeo saram* came to revive a strong sense of connection to South Korea as their ethnic homeland. As they learned more about South Korea from the media before and during the 1988 Olympic Games, both of the ethnic Koreans in China and the former Soviet Union felt strong ethnic affinities toward South Korea and their co-ethnics there. In particular, *Goryeo saram* came to consider South Korea as a part of their ethnic homeland (Myong & Nurzhanov 2012). *Joseonjok* started to arrive in South Korea from the late 1980s, and after the establishment of diplomatic relationship between PRC and South Korea in 1992, increasingly more *Joseonjok* came to South Korea as migrant workers. In the case of *Goryeo saram*, ethnic return migration happened later in the end of the 1990s, and through the 2000s their number in South Korea grew steadily. Today there are over 40,000 of them in South Korea and if undocumented migrant workers are included, the number would be higher.

The rising sense of ethnic affinities to ethnic homeland was not only among the *Joseonjok* and *Goryeo saram* in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In fact, similar sense of ethnic sentiments rose among South Koreans toward their long-lost co-ethnics from China and the former Soviet Union, and both *Joseonjok* and *Goryeo saram* were generally welcome by South Koreans in the 1990s. South Korean government, however, did not recognize any special status of Korean diasporic returnees until 1999 when it legislated the “Act on the Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans” (or commonly called as “Overseas Koreans Act”) (cf. Seol & Skrentny 2009; Park & Chang 2005). This law bestows special status to ethnic Koreans to visit, stay, work, and conduct business in their ethnic homeland. Nevertheless, *Joseonjok* and *Goryeo saram* were excluded from the special treatments offered by this law. This was due to the protests from China and the former Soviet Union

republics, but the South Korean Ministry of Labour also supported this exclusion for possible disruptions in the country's labour market. In fact, the law was criticized by many, who believed that its target was only the ethnic Koreans in the wealthy western countries. Only after 2004 Joseonjok and *Goryeo saram* came to be included in the law, and since then the number of ethnic return migrants from these groups rapidly increased. In 2007, with the new "Visitor Employment Scheme", the entry visas and employment for Joseonjok and *Goryeo saram* in South Korea became much easier.

Joseonjok Ethnic Return Migration

Behind the large number of Joseonjok ethnic return migration to South Korea through the 1990s and 2000s were both ethnic and economic factors. Initially, there were strong ethnic aspirations among Joseonjok to visit their long lost brethren in South Korea, from which they had been disconnected for several decades. Especially for those Joseonjok whose ancestors had migrated to Manchuria from southern provinces of the Korean peninsula during the colonial period, meeting their relatives in South Korea was a long cherished dream. The same was true for their South Korean relatives. South Koreans were also fascinated when they learned that their co-ethnics in China have managed to preserve their Korean culture, language and traditions for such a long time. Medias both in South Korea and Joseonjok community in China emphasized strong primordial bonds between the "same" Koreans. A writer in Seoul welcomed a group of Korean Chinese writers who visited Seoul in 1992, and wrote in emotion:

This [South Korea] is your land. This is your homeland in which you should have been living as its owners together with us [South Koreans] ... You might have been termed as strangers here, but you still are owners of this land (Rim *et al* 1992:3)

Such was the atmosphere of the strong ethnic bond in the early 1990s, and increasing number of Joseonjok arrived in South Korea both to meet their relatives and also to find employment.

Those Korean Chinese who visited South Korea in the early 1990s often brought Chinese herbal medicines with them and they sold it on streets in big cities, and South Koreans bought them out of sympathy. When these Joseonjok returned to their hometowns in China with the money they earned in South Korea, more Joseonjok were encouraged to visit their ancestral homeland to earn money. Thus rose the phenomenon called “Korea fever” in all *Joseonjok* communities in China, and the number of Joseonjok visitors in South Korea rapidly increased through the 1990s and onwards. They came as trainees, tourists, students, migrant workers, and spouses of South Koreans. Once in South Korea, they tried to find work regardless of their visa status as wages in South Korea was much higher than in China. The table below shows how fast the number of Joseonjok in South Korea grew in the last two decades. After the 2000s their number grew even faster, and particularly after the revision of the “Overseas Koreans Act” in 2004 and also the introduction of the “Visitor Employment Scheme” in 2007, which made their entry to South Korea and employment much easier (Song 2014).

Table 1: Number of Joseonjok Migrants in South Korea (1990-2015)

Year	Total
1990	25,215
1991	36,147
2000	60,176
2005	167,589
2010	409,079
2013	497,989
2015	647,717

Source: South Korean Immigration Bureau Statistics

http://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtlPageDetail.do?idx_cd=2821

This ethnic return migration of Joseonjok to South Korea has been facilitated by the macro-economic and socio-political conditions of China and South Korea. The relative economic backwardness in peripheral northeast China, where Joseonjok are concentrated, pushed them to seek employment opportunities in South Korea, where wages were substantially higher than in China. Meanwhile, South Korea has been facing severe labour shortage problems especially in small and medium-sized manufacturing industry, construction, low-paid service sectors, and primary industry sectors. This demand for cheap labour in South Korea pulled the *Joseonjok* and *Goryeo saram* migrants as well as other non-Korean migrant labourers.

Goryeo saram Ethnic Return Migration

Ethnic Koreans in the newly independent post-Soviet republics faced unusually tough times due to the economic and political turmoil that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s Soviet Koreans in Central Asia became anxious as they witnessed the rise of local nationalisms and the exodus of Russians, Germans, and Poles, who were returning to their ethnic homelands. *Goryeo saram* also wished to leave if they had a country to return,

but they did not have one and migration to South Korea did not happen until the late 1990s. First of all, the distance between Central Asian republics and South Korea is considerable and until later the South Korean government did not have any plan to allow them to migrate to the country except some exceptional cases (*cf.* Seol & Skrentny 2009). In the early 1990s, therefore, many *Goryeo saram* left Central Asia and migrated to large cities in Russia, and particularly to the Russian Far East. In fact, the latter was their “homeland”, where their ancestors used to live before the forced relocation to Central Asia in 1937. They thought that the Russian Far East could promise them a better future once countries like Japan and South Korea start to invest in the region. In any regards, it is closer to their long-disconnected ethnic homeland, the Korea. South Korean government launched a few plans to develop agriculture and fisheries industries in the region in regard to the food security of the country. These further encouraged *Goryeo saram* to migrate to the Russian Far East in the 1990s even though most of these plans were abandoned later.

By the late 1990s small number of *Goryeo saram* entered to South Korea. They were from Central Asia, the Russian Far East. There were also ethnic Koreans from Sakhalin as well.⁵ They initially arrived as tourists, trainees or students, and many of them stayed in South Korea as undocumented migrant workers. Once they secure legal visa status, then they would bring their family and relatives. There were also substantial number of *Goryeo saram* women who came as spouses of South Korean men, and in 2016 there were over 2,000 Uzbek Korean brides living in South Korea. As most of *Goryeo saram* do not speak Korean well, unlike their co-ethnics from China, they normally would work as lower level manual workers and take temporary “*areubaitu*” work (miscellaneous unskilled work of handy man). Some of those *Goryeo saram*, who work at construction sites or factories, are put under the supervision of *Joseonjok* foreman.

Hierarchy Among Co-Ethnics

Goryeo saram migrant workers are less known to general public of South Korea and the latter tend to be surprised when they hear that they are “Koreans” from Russia or Uzbekistan. As *Goryeo saram* do not speak Korean, and are not well versed in Korean customs, they tend to go through harsher life of diasporic returnees. *Goryeo saram* are also not known much to Joseonjok from China even though many of their ancestors had come from the same region of North Hamgyeong Province in Korea in the late 19th century. These ethnic Koreans of the former Soviet Union and China did not have any contacts between them until they encountered each other in South Korea after their ethnic return migration. 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. In addition, Joseonjok returnees are much larger (over 600,000) than *Goryeo saram* (whose number is 40,000 plus) and the former are better organized than the latter. This gives more political power to Joseonjok in South Korea in comparison with their co-ethnics from the former Soviet Union.

Thus, there emerges hierarchical relationship among the three Korean co-ethnic groups: South Koreans, Joseonjok, and *Goryeo saram*. Particularly for *Goryeo saram*, such a hierarchical relationship among co-ethnics is a source of frustration and resentment. My *Goryeo saram* informants frequently expressed their discontentment and anger toward their South Korean bosses, who disregard *Goryeo saram* as if they were inferiors or “unqualified Koreans.” In particular, *Goryeo saram* detest the way how South Koreans disregard them by addressing them in non-honorific language. They are also very upset whenever their South Korean co-ethnics “insensibly” question why *Goryeo saram*, as “Koreans”, do not speak

Korean. Slova, who is in his late-30s and from Tashkent, has been working as an unskilled handyman in various industrial areas near Seoul for the last 7 years, testifies:

Sometimes [South] Koreans ask me why I don't speak Korean even though I'm a "Korean". Such a question always makes me extremely frustrated. I simply don't know what to reply to such questions. I just tell them that I'm different from them [South Koreans]. At work, South Koreans generally use *banmal* (non-honorific language) to me when they order me to do something. That's outrageous and I'm very angry at that. Therefore, I sometimes pretend as if I don't understand them.

Through such incidents *Goryeo saram* realize that there is a hierarchical relationship among co-ethnics in South Korea and they are below South Koreans and Joseonjok. In particular, *Goryeo saram* workers tend to be disapproving about their co-ethnics from China. Volyodja, a handyman in his 40s is from the Russian Far East (Khabarovsk) and he depicts *Joseonjok* workers whom he met at construction sites:

Joseonjok? They only pursue money. At work place those guys don't work hard. They make us do all the hard work while they themselves only pretend to work. But, it is they who get paid more than us!

In the face of such unjust phenomenon, *Goryeo saram* tend to distinguish themselves from their co-ethnics of South Korea and China. Most of them point out that South Koreans are generally "rude" and they not only frequently use non-honorific language to *Goryeo saram* regardless of their age, they also use many swearing words frequently at work. Another *Goryeo saram* male worker from Uzbekistan (in late 40s) testifies how South Korean supervisors and bosses habitually use swearing words to their workers:

South Korean supervisors at construction sites use non-honorific language to us regardless of our ages or background. This bothers me very much. [...] They also frequently say “ssibal” (“fucking”), and that’s really unthinkable in Russian culture. Such swearing words are extremely humiliating and offensive to us.

In such a manner, *Goryeo saram* tend to view that South Koreans and Joseonjok are uncivilized and they do not accept the imposed hierarchical relationship among the Korean co-ethnics of South Koreans, Joseonjok and *Goryeo saram*. Instead of accepting or internalising such hierarchical relationships, *Goryeo saram* returnees tend to question their identity as “Koreans”.

III. POST-ETHNIC RETURN MIGRATION IDENTITY ISSUES: JOSEONJOK AND GORYEO SARAM IN COMPARISON

As the number of *Joseonjok* ethnic return migrants grew, the initially welcoming attitude among South Koreans toward their co-ethnics from China dissipated and there rose more critical opinions about them. At the same time, *Joseonjok* returnees also got more disillusioned by the harsh realities of working as manual labourers in South Korea as well as by the discriminatory treatments from their South Korean co-ethnics. Mostly as workers in so-called “3D” sector, *Joseonjok* are underprivileged, marginalized and discriminated in their ancestral homeland. The situation is even worse for *Goryeo saram* returnees, who do not speak Korean. Like other ethnic return migrants from the Global South, after having experienced the harsh realities of the life in their ethnic homeland, both *Joseonjok* and *Goryeo saram* migrant workers tend to reflect their being “Koreans”.

As stated above, ethnic return migrations raise many intriguing questions and issues and one of the most prominent issues is the post-ethnic return migration identity changes. What determines the identity transformation experiences of Joseonjok and *Goryeo saram* diasporic returnees are four-fold: their involvement in the low-paid and undesirable jobs that South Koreans normally shun; the discriminatory treatment and alienation they face in their ethnic homeland; the hierarchical relationship among diasporic returnees regardless of their sharing same ethnicity; and, finally, the status of their natal homeland in global political economic community. Regardless of the importance of these questions, there have been only a small number of researches that deal with such questions. This section examines the post-ethnic return migration ethnonational identity issues of the *Joseonjok* and *Goryeo saram* diasporic return migrants in South Korea.

Most Joseonjok and *Goryeo saram* diasporic returnees in South Korea are engaged in manual labour and they find themselves underprivileged and their living conditions grim. Many of them tend to feel that their life in their ethnic homeland is relatively degraded in comparison to their pre-migration life. This, in turn, makes Joseonjok nostalgic about the easier life back in China. This is similar for the *Goryeo saram* returnees. The more difficult challenges for these returnees in South Korea, however, are the prejudice and discrimination they experience from their South Korean co-ethnics. They feel particularly frustrated when South Koreans treat them differently from other overseas Koreans who are from wealthy countries such as the US, Western Europe and Japan (Song 2009; Strother 2012).

As mentioned earlier, South Korean public opinion on Joseonjok changed in the early 2000s when their number grew. South Korean employers frequently complained that Joseonjok workers had “weak work ethic” and are “not trustworthy” (U & Han, 2002). Korean Chinese were also criticised for their being overly “Sinicized” not only in their attitude but also in

their ethnonational orientation. Joseonjok, however, strongly disagree with such comments and they claim that it is South Koreans that are too “westernized” especially in their daily language use, which includes too many English words. As a matter of fact, many *Joseonjok* returnees state that for them one of the most difficult thing in South Korea is the numerous foreign words that they do not comprehend (*cf.* Song 2009). Great majority of Joseonjok also believe that they are genuinely more loyal to the cause of national reunification than South Koreans.

The experiences of alienation and discrimination in their ethnic homeland, however, not only make Joseonjok returnees critical about South Korea and its people, but it also drives them to reflect on their being “Koreans”. Such reflections on ethnonational identity became intense in *Joseonjok* community after the late 1990s. After their generally negative experiences in South Korea, Joseonjok tended to distinguish their ethnic homeland of Korea, where their ancestors originated, and their adopted homeland of China where they were “raised”. In so doing, they prioritize the Chinese “parenting/adopted” homeland over the Korean “ethnic” homeland. A renowned Joseonjok intellectual pointed out that the discriminatory treatments Joseonjok faced in South Korea actually forced them to strengthen their identity as “Chinese” (Heo 2001b: 466). One of my informants, who obtained South Korean citizenship after having worked in the country for four years, said:

Though I now have South Korean citizenship, I still think that I’m a Chinese. The only reason I obtained South Korean citizenship is to work in this country to earn money. This is not because I love this country or I want to live here permanently.

Another Joseonjok worker in his early 60s told me how he felt like a “foreigner” in South Korea, and he feels proud of being a “Chinese”:

South Koreans, with their contemptuous attitude and gaze, teach us that we are “Chinese” rather than “Koreans.” This makes us feel that we’re Chinese. Being Chinese is not a bad thing, however. We have a broader perspective than South Koreans. This is because China is a multi-ethnic country with diverse ethnic groups and cultures. We’re also bilingual, and we are from the Big China.

As this case shows, their being from the “big China” (compared to the “small” South Korea) and also their being bilingual give Joseonjok pride and confidence even when they face discriminatory treatments from their South Korean co-ethnics. This and other cases reveal how the ethnic return migration experiences of Joseonjok in South Korea actually reinforce their “Chinese” identity while weakening their emotional ties with South Koreans in their ethnic homeland. This is similar for *Goryeo saram* ethnic return migrants even though they have somewhat different experience from their co-ethnic from China.

Goryeo saram Identity Question

Goryeo saram returnees are from various parts of the former Soviet Union, but the great majority of them are from Uzbekistan and Russia. Like their co-ethnics from China, *Goryeo saram* migrants tend to work mostly as unskilled, manual workers. Compared to Joseonjok diasporic returnees *Goryeo saram* returnees are much less visible in South Korea. This is because their number is only about 40,000 and also they do not engage with South Koreans much as their Korean is very limited. In addition, their cultural practices, including culinary culture, are very different from those of South Koreans and also from Joseonjok. While Joseonjok tend to have more stable and regular jobs, *Goryeo saram* workers tend to have less stable and irregular works. Among *Goryeo saram* are also many undocumented migrant workers.

Though they always thought themselves as “Koreans” (and Russians call them *Koreitsiy*”, which means Koreans) in the former Soviet Union, *Goryeo saram* were very much “Sovietized” (or “Russified”). This is visible in their language and food culture. Their daily language is Russian and even though they live in Central Asia they normally do not speak the local languages such as Uzbek or Kazakh.⁶ Meanwhile, their culinary culture is a mixture of Korean, Russian, and Central Asian (*cf.* Song 2016). For example, unlike their South Korean and Chinese co-ethnics, *Goryeo saram* eat on a daily basis. Even in the cases when they eat “Korean” cuisines, they are not really “Korean” from the perspective of South Koreans. One example is “Korean carrot” salad (*Koreisky markov* as it is called in Russian). Such a food (refer to the Photo 1 below) is not known to South Koreans, but it is widely spread throughout the former Soviet Union, where it is unmistakably known as a “Korean” food. Another example is seaweed salad which is called *morskaya kapusta salat* in Russian (Photo 2). These culinary examples show how the two Korean diasporic groups of *Joseonjok* and *Goryeo saram*, whose ancestors originally came from the same region of north-eastern province of the Korean Peninsula, have gone through remarkable changes in their cultural practices. Such cultural differences gave them an identity that is distinguished from those of *Joseonjok* and South Koreans.

Photo 1. “Korean carrot” salad with Uzbek-style bread and tea at a *Goryeo saram* restaurant in Seoul.



Photo 2. Seaweed salad with bread



As discussed above, *Goryeo saram* occupy the lowest stratum of the hierarchical structure of ethnic Koreans. At work they are placed below Joseonjok, and their South Korean bosses do not show much respect to them. Their wages are generally lower than those of Joseonjok. Facing such disrespect and discrimination from their co-ethnics, *Goryeo saram* reaffirm their judgement that South Koreans are “not as civilized as Russians”. Inga, a female *Goryeo saram* in her early 30s and from Tashkent states:

[South] Koreans speak loudly in public places, and they’re generally rude. They don’t respect women as Russians do, and this is an indicator of the level of Korean culture.⁷

While criticizing South Koreans and their culture as “less civilized” than that of Russians, *Goryeo saram* tend to identify themselves with culturally superior Russians.

When asked about their identity, many of them reply that they are more like “Russians” in their heart and culture. Vitaliy from Tashkent states:

We are heavily Russified. If one thinks in a certain language, this means that the person belongs to an ethnic/national group of that language. I do think and dream in Russian, and this means that I’m more of a Russian than a Korean... Though I have the idea that I’m a Korean and Korea is my homeland, that’s only in my head, and my heart and feelings are very much Russian.

Most of my respondents share exactly same feelings with Vitaliy. Regardless of their being “Korean” and being born in Uzbekistan (and not in Russia), most of *Goryeo saram* returnees tend to feel they are Russians. The same Vitaliy explains:

Do I feel I’m an Uzbek? Not really. Though I was born there in 1941 and lived there throughout my life, Uzbekistan is not my fatherland (*rodina*)... These days, anyway, in Uzbekistan my children cannot be successful there as they aren’t Uzbeks. However,

things are different in Russia. Russia is a big country and for that reason there are less discrimination and there are more opportunities.

The description “Russia is a big country” was shared by many of my *Goryeo saram* interviewees. They all seem to share the belief that Russia, as a multi-cultural country, as a country of abundant natural resources, and particularly as a country of “higher” civilization than Korea (and also China), it would be a good country for them to live. This is clear from what Slova from Tashkent (in his 30s) sates:

My face is Korean, but my heart is Russian. I don't feel any commonality with Koreans in South Korea at all. They're total foreigners to me and I am here only to work. My plan is to settle in Yekaterinburg, Russia, once I earn some money here... I'll be successful in Russia. Russia has abundant natural resources. But, Russians do not work hard. We *Goryeo saram*, however, work hard, so we can be successful there.

While Joseonjok ethnic return migrants, after the hard realities of migration experience in South Korea, tend to feel they are more “Chinese” than “Koreans”, *Goryeo saram* from Uzbekistan (or elsewhere in Central Asia) tend to feel that they are “Russians”.

IV. CONCLUSION

As seen above, both Joseonjok and *Goryeo saram* ethnic or diasporic return migrants arrived in South Korea since the 1990s after the diplomatic normalization between the former communist countries and South Korea. The demand for cheap labour in South Korea pulled them to their ethnic homeland while changing economic and political situation in their natal

homelands pushed them. Initially South Korea did not have a particularly friendly migration policy toward its co-ethnics from China and the former Soviet Union, but gradually it gave Korean ethnics from these countries easier entry and employment. This was both for humanitarian concerns as well as for economic benefits.

Nevertheless, these “homecomings” of diasporic groups were not a simple or smooth process. Though the Joseonjok and *Goryeo saram* returnees from China and the former Soviet Union expected warm ethnic welcome in their ancestral homeland, the realities of their ethnic return migrations were not trouble-free. In fact, both of the groups tended to have negative experience in South Korea. Particularly because they are from less developed natal homeland countries to a more developed ethnic homeland, they have gone through various difficulties. In most of cases, they were engaged only in low-paying manual works that local South Koreans tend to avoid, which results economic marginalization. They also have been culturally discriminated and socially alienated by their South Korean co-ethnics. In addition, the people and government of South Korea treat them differently from their co-ethnics who are from wealthy and developed countries, which creates a hierarchy among co-ethnics depending on their geographical origin. Interestingly, however, there also rose a hierarchical relationship between Joseonjok and *Goryeo saram*. This is due to the fact that Joseonjok can speak Korean while *Goryeo saram* mostly do not speak the language, which resulted in different level of jobs and wages between them. Such hierarchy between the two co-ethnics, both of whom are from developing countries, is unusual. In this context, *Goryeo saram* show resentments toward both of their co-ethnics of South Korea and China.

Such negative experiences in their ethnic homeland, South Korea, make *Joseonjok* and *Goryeo saram* migrants reflect upon the meanings of their being the members of the ethnic

and national community of Korea. This reshapes their ethnic and national identity. Many Joseonjok returnees came to strengthen their being “Chinese” after they return migrated to South Korea. Though their being “Koreans” has been always highlighted while in China, in their ancestral homeland of South Korea now their being “Chinese” is seriously emphasized more. In the face of cultural discrimination, economic marginalization, and social alienation in their ethnic homeland, the Joseonjok returnees came to emphasize the positive aspects of their natal homeland of China and their life there. Indeed, as an ethnic minority, Joseonjok used to enjoy some rights, especially in terms of maintaining their language and culture. In any case, China is a big and emerging power while South Korea is small and stagnating. Thus, they would lean more on “China” for their identity.

Meanwhile, *Goryeo saram* returnees from the former Soviet Union go through different path in their identity changes. First of all, as *Goryeo saram* ethnic return migrants lost their language and tradition, from the beginning they do not feel they are as strongly “Koreans” as their co-ethnics from China do. They are also assigned to a lower economic status than *Joseonjok*. In such a situation, *Goryeo saram* feel bitter about both of their Chinese co-ethnics as well as South Koreans. Many of my informants saw South Koreans and their society culturally “uncivilized” and inferior to Russia, to which they tend to identify themselves. Unlike their co-ethnics from China, those *Goryeo saram* who are from Uzbekistan, when it comes to the question of who they are in South Korea, they do not choose their natal homeland Uzbekistan as the basis of their ethnonational identity. Instead, they say they are more like “Russians”. This is because Uzbekistan does not give the empowering feelings to them as China does for Joseonjok. In any case, their mother tongue is Russian and their culinary culture is also heavily “Russian”. More than that, Russia is a big country with “liberal” values and also with huge natural resources.

The two cases of the Korean diasporic homecomings provide important and interesting facts on how diasporic people build, re-create, and change their ethnonational identities. Both of the Korean Chinese and Soviet Korean ethnic return migrants and their identity changes in their ethnic homeland challenges the contemporary notion of the ethnic nationalism and national identity in South Korea, which were based on primordialist notions of the Korean “blood” and ethnic/racial homogeneity. Among the many benefits of the study of ethnic return migrations is our further understanding of the fluidity and flexibility of ethnic/national identity of diasporic peoples.

NOTES

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² A large number of *Han* Chinese also entered to Manchuria from southwest after 1885 and very quickly they filled many parts of Manchuria. The migrations of *Han* Chinese and Koreans to Manchuria (and of Russians to Siberia) comprised important elements of the global migration in the 19th and early 20th centuries (McKeown, 2004).

³ Those Koreans who settled in Manchuria became “Joseonjok” and those who settled in the Russian Far East became “*Goryeo saram*”.

⁴ Truck farming (or market gardening) is a large scale commercial farming, which was uniquely Soviet Korean business during the Soviet era. They would organize agricultural work group among themselves and grow cash crops such as onion, rice, or watermelon on the land which they rented out from collective farms. They would sell those products in big cities such as Moscow and Leningrad. This “capitalist” agribusiness was not legal in the Soviet Union, but many Soviet Koreans were involved in this.

⁵ Ethnic Koreans from Sakhalin are different from *Goryeo saram*. They were given right to return due to historical reasons.

⁶ This is the reason why they could not keep their professional positions in the nationalizing new republics in Central Asia, and many of them chose to migrate to Russia.

⁷ Such a comment was interesting as most of Korean Chinese normally state that South Koreans are more “knowledgeable and smart” and “streets are cleaner here than in China”, but “their heart is cold”. (Joseonjok woman restaurant-helper in her 50s).

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