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Conceptualizing Hanminjok-Damunhwa Through Cultural Meanings of the Oral Life Histories of Ethnic Korean Return Migrants*

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Abstract

The ongoing global health crisis has exposed the resilience of exclusive ethnic nationalism. Reflecting on this, this paper explores a new concept, hanminjok-damunhwa, which was suggested by an oral history project designed to critically explore the dominant discourse on the Korean national identity in South Korea by collecting oral life histories of ethnic Korean return migrants from public memory perspectives. It may seem oxymoronic to combine the words hanminjok (Korean ethnic nation) and damunhwa (multiculture), but these terms can be understood in many ways. In the sense of the publicness of memory, the oral history project aims to provide diverse and alternative memories of the Korean ethnicity/nation against a dogmatic and exclusive public memory in which ordinary South Koreans interact, deliberate, and share; this public memory of the Korean nation serves as a template to which a public finds itself, constitutes itself, and deliberates its own existence. In an endeavor to conceptualize hanminjok-damunhwa, this paper examines the changes in the hanminjok discourse as public memories regarding the entanglement between diaspora and transnationalism and the cultural meanings in the oral life histories of Korean seniors who participated in 12 oral life history workshops from October 2012 to August 2014.

■ **Keywords** : diaspora, transnationalism, multiculturalism, public memory, oral life history, ethnic Koreans

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Introduction

As the outbreak of COVID-19 unfolds on a global scale, major global cities and many nation-states are not only on lockdown but also closing their borders in order to stop the spread of the virus. Newspapers are reporting about emptied city streets and closed stores that used to be filled with people, universities and schools offering online classes, and skies being cleared due to factory closures. While these are novel phenomena, the global pandemic of COVID-19 has also revealed the resilience of nationalism, or ethnic nationalism in the case of South Korea, and the state as its tribune. The prime example is the controversial debate on referring to SARS-CoV-2 as the “Chinese virus” or “Wuhan virus” and demands that governments completely ban all Chinese and, later, all foreigners from entering a country.

South Korea is no exception. Although the South Korean government did not ban the entry of all Chinese people, conservative political parties and groups in South Korea demanded such a ban. Analyzing the editorials of conservative and progressive daily newspapers, Kim (2020) explores how COVID-19 has been politicized and has led to xenophobia and anti-China sentiments. In addition, numerous debates and complaints were made as central and local governments implemented policies and measures related to COVID-19 that either excluded or differentiated non-Korean nationals, like migrant workers and female marriage migrants, who are permanent residents or Korean nationals. These events raise doubt as to whether South Korean society is underway to becoming a multicultural society. In addition, they also suggest a need to redress the meaning of the Korean nation, commonly translated as *hanminjok*, and move from being a homogenous ethnic nation to a multicultural and multiethnic nation.

The word *minjok*, translated as a nation or ethnic nation, has a long history of controversy and debate (Shin, 2006). The debates have involved historians and social scientists arguing about the translation of the word and the question about whether it is primordial or modern. Post-nationalist

historians like Em (1999) argue that the Korean nation was created only after Korea was pulled into the modern world system of nations and the emergence of ethnic nationalist historiography in the early twentieth century. According to Em, the origin of the confusion and controversy came from the fact that the word itself originates from a neologism, *minzoku*, created by Meiji Japan when translating the French *nationale* as *minzoku*, coming to mean “ethnic nation” (Em, 1999, p. 337). At one point, a group of anthropologists attempted to discuss the issue by introducing a new word, *jongjok*, for ethnicity (Kim, 2005). In South Korea, *minjok* often meant nation as in *minjokjuui* (nationalism). However, recently, interdisciplinary scholars have translated *minjok* as ethnicity and use *gukmin* for nation and *gukmin-gukga* for nation-state.

Against this backdrop, this paper explores a new concept, *hanminjok-damunhwa*, suggested by an oral history project that was designed to critically explore the dominant discourse on the Korean national identity in South Korea by collecting oral life histories of “ethnic Korean return migrants” from public memory perspectives. Here, public memory refers to both of the dimensions of public memory suggested by Kendall Phillips: the “memory of publics” and the “publicness of memory” (Phillips, 2004, as cited in Hamilton & Shopes, 2008, p. xiv). In other words, while the oral history project aims to provide diverse and alternative life stories of ethnic Korean return migrants, this paper attempts to focus on the broader cultural meanings of oral life histories collected during the project. It does so in order to redress the cultural meaning of the term *hanminjok* against a dogmatic and exclusive public memory of *hanminjok* with which ordinary South Koreans interact, deliberate, and share. This public memory of *hanminjok* serves as “a horizon within which a public finds itself, constitutes itself, and deliberates its own existence” (Hamilton & Shopes, 2008, p. xiv). Simply put, the public memories of *hanminjok* are part of a cultural discourse on national identity and multiculturalism, similar to symbols, images, and representations, that are disseminated through media and institutions in South Korean society to induce Koreans to imagine that they are sharing a similar ethnic

nationhood. The focus here is on the collective remembering of diverse and contested Korean ethnic national identities in relation to the oral histories of ethnic Korean return migrants.

Although it is difficult to fully explain in brief, South Korea constructed a powerful and widespread public memory of ethnic national homogeneity, a myth that South Korea is a “one-blooded nation” comprising one homogeneous ethnic group, while going through a rapid economic and social development (Lee, 2018; Shin, 2006). Many scholars have noted that a shared assumption of a 5,000-year-old Korean ethnic ancestry and a hereditary rule of membership is deeply rooted in the South Korean psyche and memory as well as in its political institutions (Watson, 2012). As such, the above-mentioned research project aims to counter the dominant assumption by opening up questions about why some memories are known and others are forgotten and to show different public memories of hanminjok that are shaped by complicated power struggles. These struggles range from internal discussions about who gets to say what about a given community or experience to instruments of the state authorizing certain versions of a story and silencing other ones (Hamilton & Shopes, 2008, p. xv). This research also seeks to move away from what Nina Glick Schiller (2010, p. 109) called a “methodological nationalist approach” that assumes that the “migrant/native divide is the fundamental challenge to social cohesion and the stability and welfare of the states in which migrants settle” (p. 109). In other words, the conceptualization of hanminjok-damunhwa is intended to start the discussion on the more inclusive meaning of the Korean nation in a global world, instead of the more commonly understood ethnic nation, as well as who belongs to it.

The research team felt that the best way to do this is to collect the oral life histories of “ethnic Korean return migrants” who, despite being remembered as sharing a common ethnicity, have diverse national identities and belongings. The research team sought to collate the collected oral life stories into public memories and, in a broader sense, part of public history to show that the Korean ethnicity is far from homoge-

neous and, in fact, is multicultural, and to suggest a more inclusive and multicultural understanding of the Korean nation. From September 2012 to August 2014, a total of twelve 2-day workshops titled “*Hanminjok-damunhwa Samui Yeoksa Iyagi: Nanumgwa Mannam*” were conducted. A rough translation of the workshop title is “Life Historical Stories of Koreans and Multicultures: Sharing and Encountering.”

It may seem somewhat oxymoronic to combine the words “hanminjok (Korean ethnic nation)” and “damunhwa (multiculture),” as the former is strongly tied with the myth of homogeneity; however, it can also be translated or understood in many ways. One interpretation would be that the Korean “ethnicity” is multicultural even before the introduction of marriage migrant women and their Korean husbands and children made the Korean nation multicultural. Another interpretation is that hanminjok-damunhwa may refer to various categories of people within the Korean ethnicity who have experienced border-crossing migration or displacement and thus have diverse cultures and life histories.

Ordinarily, “ethnic Koreans,” also popularly called “overseas Koreans, refers to people of Korean ancestry living outside South Korea, commonly called the Korean diaspora. According to Tsuda (2019, pp. 3–4), the Korean diaspora, consisting of 7.185 million people, is not the largest in terms of the total population compared to the diasporas of other Asian countries, notably the Chinese (around 50 million), but a very high proportion of people of Korean descent live abroad (9.5% of the total population of North and South Korea, which was estimated to be around 77 million in 2018). Most importantly, the Korean diaspora has a significant impact on South Korea not only because of emigration, but also because a significant number of such individuals have returned. The assumption that these people are returning to the homeland despite being born or having lived most of their lives outside of South Korea reinforces the public memory of a homogeneous Korean nation. These returning migrants are welcomed in the media as part of one nation and one people. However, in reality, they are differentiated according to their countries of origin by the government, which issues different visas ac-

According to the corresponding cultures they embody to the public (Park, 2019). In fact, the dominant public memory of the homogenous Korean ethnic nation suppresses the varied memories and identities of a diverse group of ethnic Koreans who belong to different nations but are pressured to assimilate into the dominant memory of the national identity of South Korea. According to Song (2019), ethnic Koreans who are not from wealthy and developed countries have been culturally discriminated against and socially alienated by South Korean society. As a result, economically and culturally marginalized ethnic Koreans reflect upon the meanings of belongingness between the ancestral land and national homeland and go through what Tsuda (2003) called “re-nationalization,” which is when ethnic Koreans strengthen their diasporic or natal homelands’ national identities, such as *Joseonjok* (being more “Chinese”) and *Goryeoin* (being more “Russian”) (Song, 2019). On the other hand, some studies of ethnic Koreans (both “returnees” and diasporic) highlight transnationalities of ethnic Koreans in that their lives, past and present, cross national borders and territorialized social fields in everyday practices or at least mobilize their transnational networks (Joo, 2007; Moon & Park, 2016; Park, 2019).

In an endeavor to conceptualize hanminjok-damunhwa and to start the discussion for a more inclusive and multi-ethnic meaning of the Korean nation, this paper will examine the changes in the hanminjok discourse as public memories and the broader cultural meanings of the oral life histories of Korean older adults who participated in a total of 12 oral life history workshops from October 2012 to August 2014 and concentrate on the entanglement between diaspora and transnationalism in the context of state-led assimilationist Korean multiculturalism. In other words, the focus of this paper is the process of the articulation and collection of memories of hanminjok that create a social experience; its cultural meanings will counter the essentialization and rise of ethnic nationalism in South Korea.

Public Memories of Hanminjok

Basically, the articulation of memories is an act of remembering and always involves some form of representation. The use of the term “public” in relation to memories implies that this remembering process is social. According to the Popular Memory Group, public representation of memories, which includes the various media, institutions, and even a particular law are used as an aid in the constant process of making sense of personal experiences such as ethnic and national identities (Thomson, 2011, p. 87). This section examines the changes in public memories of hanminjok, centering on the myth of a homogenous ethnic nation and multiculturalism, especially the role of the state. Subsequently, hanminjok should be understood not as the Korean ethnic nation but as the Korean ethnicity, which is multicultural, and the Korean nation of *han-gukmin* should be understood as a multicultural and multiethnic nation.

On August 23, 1999, three Korean Chinese filed a constitutional complaint to the South Korean Constitutional Court arguing that the Act on the Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans (hereafter, Overseas Korean Act) discriminated against Korean Chinese (Lim et al., 2019). Widely interpreted as the South Korean government’s drive to redefine and reconstruct the Korean ethnic national identity in the context of an increasingly globalized world, the Overseas Korean Act was legislated on August 12 and came into effect on December 3, 1999, to facilitate overseas Koreans’ entry into and departure from South Korea and to stabilize their legal status in South Korea. In practice, qualified overseas Koreans with foreign nationalities were given special treatment, such as the status of permanent resident, and included as socio-cultural members of the South Korean ethnic nation, hanminjok.

However, the act stipulated that overseas Koreans are “persons who having held the nationality of the Republic of Korea or as their lineal descendants have acquired the nationality of a foreign country.” Such a definition excluded almost half of the 7 million overseas Koreans at

the time since these people were either those who had left the Korean peninsula before 1948 when the Republic of Korea was established or their descendants living in China or former USSR countries. Among this population, the largest group is Korean Chinese, numbering 2 million. Such an exclusion went against the public memory of South Koreans who strongly believed that they are a homogenous ethnic nation sharing a common ancestry and sense of belonging no matter where they were.

Lu and Shin (2013, p. 170) write that the first and foremost reason for the exclusion was the fact that Korean Chinese, or Joseonjok, constituted the largest number of “overseas Koreans,” posing a demographic and social challenge. The most important reason is that Joseonjok do not fit well in South Korea’s vision of globalization, which sought to reform South Korea’s political and economic systems in order to face the challenges of the rapidly changing global economy, not to mention the fact that they lived in a communist state (Lu & Shin, 2013). Biao (2013) argues that this differentiation of ethnic returnees by various policies and discourses is found across the region of Asia, reflecting states’ multiple and contradictory objectives. In seeking economic growth, national security, identity allegiance, and political legitimacy, Asian states differentiated their co-ethnic returnees, who could be grouped into three categories: victims such as refugees, desirable immigrants such as those who are highly skilled and investors, and ambiguous cases, such as unskilled individuals and older adults from low-income countries (Biao, 2013, p. 11).

On November 29, 2001, the Constitutional Court of South Korea ruled the problematic provisions of the Overseas Korean Act to be non-conforming to the Constitution (in other words, the public memory of hanminjok as a homogenous ethnic nation), and the legislators were required to revise the Act in accordance with the Constitution. As a result, the Overseas Korean Act was revised to include formerly excluded ethnic Koreans in the legal definition of overseas Koreans. Nevertheless, the Korean national identity and sense of belonging, which determines who belongs to “us” and “them” remains to be confronted when it comes

to the relationships between North and South Korea and when it seeks to homogenize the Korean nation while attempting to stratify migrants into a racial and national gradation.

Although this belief is changing slowly, many South Koreans still adhere to the idea that their nation is a homogenous ethnic nation divided into North and South Korea after the Korean War. Consequently, one of the major tasks of the nation-building for both North and South Korea was to unite their population (Grinker, 2000). In the public memory of South Koreans (and probably North Koreans as well), it was this national desire to unite that caused the outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950. The war lasted three years and ended in a ceasefire on July 27, 1953. Devastated by the war, both North and South Korea went separate ways to build their own nations while maintaining ideological and military confrontations.

A half-century later, the public memory of the nation changed to the point where North Korea is considered a completely different nation-state by most young people. According to a survey in 2018, around 40% of South Koreans in their 20s thought that North Koreans belong to the Korean nation (Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, 2019, p. 202). They also scored the lowest on the question of whether unification is necessary. Most South Koreans would remember the chant of “*Daehanminguk*” (the Korean name for the Republic of Korea) yelled out by exuberant crowds cheering for the South Korean national soccer team during the 2002 World Cup Games as a pivotal point when South Korea became a proper nation in the contemporary world on its own, severing ties with its imagined brethren to the North.

On the other hand, globalization and increasing flows of people and popular culture changed South Koreans’ public memory of the Korean nation as a homogenous ethnic nation and slowly moved toward an image of a multicultural nation with ethnic minorities.

As of 2019, there were more than 2.3 million foreigners living in South Korea (Kim, 2019). In response, the South Korean government and academia rushed to construct discourses on the South Korean version

of multiculturalism. Consequently, at the governmental policy level, only a small percentage of the multicultural population, namely marriage migrant women and their children, can be defined as “multicultural families,” which has a negative connotation that leads to stigmatization and discrimination (Lee, 2018). However, the South Korean version of multiculturalism ignores the fact that the majority of foreigners are migrants of Korean ethnicity including Korean Chinese, North Koreans, Central Asian ethnic Koreans, and Sakhalin ethnic Koreans (Moon & Park, 2016). As a result, ethnic Korean return migrants from different parts of the world also experience marginalization and, in some instances, rejection from their ancestral homeland as cultural foreigners (Tsuda & Song, 2019).

Oral Life Histories of Hanminjok-damunhwa and the New Categories of Koreans

What is unique about the oral life history project is that it used an experimental method called “collaborative oral life history” (Moon & Park, 2016; Joe, 2020). First of all, oral life history or oral history, in general, is recognized as the democratization of history giving “voice to the unheard” (Hamilton & Shopes, 2008, p. viii). In this project, the research team wanted to approach the histories, memories, and life histories of people while moving away from state narratives or official ideological cold war histories and go beyond the dichotomy of abroad (them) and homeland (us).

What is different about collaborative oral life history is that unlike an ordinary oral life history, where a researcher interviews one narrator who talks about one’s life, a collaborative oral life history is more like a focus group interview, where a small group of narrators come together and share their life stories with each other and the researchers. Initially, the project began with eight narrators. Soon, however, it proved to be too tiring and too long for the narrators, who are in their 70s or above, to manage the project over a 2-day workshop; it was too big to create a comfortable atmosphere. As a result, most of the workshops invited

six narrators to share their life histories. Such a method of collecting oral life histories followed existing community-based participatory research such as narrative exchanges, story circles, or memory workshops (MacDonald, Couldry, & Dickens, 2015; Riaño-Alcalá, 2008).

In the planning stage of the research project, a few members of the research team who already had some experience interviewing ethnic Koreans, especially Korean Chinese and North Korean migrants, expressed a concern related to the interviewer and interviewee relationships where the interviewees expected to get paid for the interviews since the interviews were funded by the government and do not deviate from the dominant discourse or narrative (in line with the dominant discourse of the homogenous Korean nation). To move away from the impression of an interview and to implicitly suggest that the sharing of individual and diverse life histories are encouraged, the research team decided to bring in a group of narrators with diverse backgrounds and identities.

As the discussion of all 12 workshops (with a total of 70 narrators) is not the focus of this paper, a brief description of the first workshop is as follows. On October 19, 2012, the first workshop with eight participants aged above 70 was organized at Hanyang University campus in Ansan. The purpose of the workshop was to bring together various “categories” of Korean seniors who had experienced border-crossing migration or displacement and to listen to their oral life histories. The oral life histories of individual seniors were told to each other over four sessions, each lasting about two hours, during the 2-day workshop.

By definition, oral life history is a method of research of recording the speech of people with something interesting to say about their lives and then analyzing their memories of the past. Conducting an interview is a practical means of obtaining information about the past. However, in the process of eliciting and analyzing the material, one is confronted by the oral history interview as an event of communication that demands that we find ways of comprehending not just what is said, but also how it is said, why it is said, and what it means.

Through this process, oral historians began to understand that oral

sources derive from subjectivity; in other words, they are not static recollections of the past but are memories reworked in the context of the respondent's own experience and politics. Therefore, the focus of an oral history is to think hard about how and why those memory stories are produced—about the cultural environments of memory (when things happened) and of remembering (as they are recalled) (Abrams, 2010).

Talking about events is much more than data for the derivation of history. It is also a cultural production in its own right, a mode of communicating, a surfacing of meaningfulness that binds past and present together. Oral life histories tell us not just what happened but what people thought happened and how they have internalized and interpreted what happened. As Daniel James put it, “life stories are cultural constructs that draw on a public discourse structured by class and gender conventions. They also make use of a wide spectrum of possible roles, self-representations, and available narrative” (James, 2000, as cited in Abrams, 2010, p. 8).

In the first workshop, the participants consisted of four people who were initially categorized as South Koreans with experiences of displacement and four people who had migrated to South Korea from Sakhalin Island, Russia, and were commonly referred to as *yeonggugwihwan dong-po* (permanently returned ethnic Koreans). Being conscious of gender dynamics, the organizers invited an equal ratio of men and women with similar economic statuses. On a surface level, this was an encounter between “native” South Koreans (majority) and ethnic Koreans from Sakhalin Island (minority). These two groups were uneasy as it was the first time for the South Korean group to meet the ethnic Koreans from Sakhalin Island.

Some had heard of the people living in Ansan in an apartment complex named “*Gohyangmaeul* (Hometown)” not far from the campus. Some had never heard of the history and the people who had migrated by force or voluntarily to Sakhalin Island in the late 1930s and the early 1940s during Japanese colonial rule or their descendants, who now make up a subgroup of Goryeoin (ethnic Koreans in Russia, specifically, ethnic

Koreans on Sakhalin Island). Initially, the workshop was explained as the sharing of different and unexpected life histories of Koreans who had experienced hardship in the late Joseon period, Japanese colonialism, liberation, division, separation of family, the Korean War, the Cold War, post-colonialism, and the post-Cold War.

But as the workshop progressed and each individual participant spoke for an hour or so, the Sakhalin group was also surprised to find out about the diverse life histories of the South Koreans, as they were filled with internal migration, displacement, war refugee, and so on, mobilities within a national boundary and inter-regional boundaries. The research team was also surprised to find out that a South Korean woman was born in Jeju Island and had lived in Japan briefly before migrating to the mainland while another woman was originally born in northern Korea but fled to southern Korea when the Korean War broke out. Separated from her family, she lived in South Korea for the rest of her life with a label of “*wollamin*” (people who migrated to the south). A South Korean man was born in a small islet called Bamseom (Chestnut Island) in Seoul but was displaced when the islet was destroyed by the South Korean government in 1968 in order to develop Yeouido Island, which is now the financial district and the home of the National Assembly Building. Another man was born in South Jeolla Province but moved to Seoul and Gangwon Province in search of work. As such, the Sakhalin group was also surprised to hear the four very diverse life histories of South Koreans, which were filled with stories of migrations, displacement, poverty, war, and so on, which were quite unexpected even to the research team.

Accordingly, all 12 workshops brought together various categories of hanminjok-damunhwa. The various categories or names that were used and differential treatments given by South Korean society to different ethnic Korean return migrants are as follows (Park, 2019): Joseonjok (Korean Chinese); Goryeoin (ethnic Koreans from the former Soviet states); Sakhalin ethnic Koreans, *Saeteomin* (North Korean migrants); overseas Korean adoptees, *jaedok dongpo* (Korean Germans); *jaeil dong-*

po (Koreans in Japan); and *jaemi dongpo* (Korean Americans). Obviously, this is not an exhaustive list, as new categories are created as Koreans move to different parts of the world and return to South Korea, such as Korean Brazilian (Joo, 2007) and Koreans who lived in African countries for an extensive period. Park (2019) also suggests a new category for Korean Americans residing in South Korea, *jaehanmigukhanin*, because *jaemi dongpo* (meaning ethnic Koreans residing in the USA) no longer qualifies these Korean Americans residing in South Korea.

In addition to the categories of ethnic Korean returnees who have returned from different parts of the world and experienced ethnic marginalization, there are also other categories of Koreans resulting in the categorized group being non-national or marginalized. These are *bbalgaengi* (red communists); *janggisu* (long-term political or war prisoner); *silhyangmin* (displaced due to development); *wollamin* (people who migrated to the south before the end of the Korean War); *yugajok* (bereaved families of state violence); *wolbukin gajok* (people whose family members migrated to North); *wonpok pihaeja* (victims of atomic bombs dropped in Japan); *padok* (people who worked in Germany in mining and nursing and returned); and so on. In the public memory of the Korean nation, which is centered on the myth of a homogeneous ethnic nation and anti-communism, these categories also result in marginalization and sometimes discrimination. In South Korea, the first category is a broad political and ideological category used to marginalize and even punish a wide range of people who are considered pro-North Korea (communists, left, trade unionists, socialists, and their close family members) based on guilt by association and sometimes bereaved families of state violence.

In an attempt to collect the oral life histories of the widest range of hanminjok-damunhwa, the oral life history workshops invited many categories of Koreans, not only ethnic Koreans but also South Koreans: Sakhalin ethnic Koreans, Korean Chinese, *Saeteomin*, *Goryeoin*, *silhyangmin*, *jaeil dongpo*, *jaemi dongpo*, *padok*, and *jaedok dongpo* (Korean German), *wonpok pihaeja*, *bbalgaengi*, *yugajok*, *janggigu*, *wollamin*, and *guknae ijumin* (internal migrants) (See Table 1).

Table 1.
List of Participants by the Category of Korea

Year Born	Sex	Category	Year Born	Sex	Category
First Workshop (October 9-10, 2012)			Seventh Workshop (October 18-19, 2013)		
1924	F	Jeju Islander	1940	M	Padok
1928	F	Wollamin	1943	F	Padok
1938	M	Guknae Ijumin	1939	M	Joseonjok
1936	M	Silhyangmin	1942	F	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean
1942	M	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean	1930	F	Guknae Ijumin
1940	F	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean			
1941	M	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean			
1938	F	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean			
Second Workshop (November 9-10, 2012)			Eighth Workshop (November 8-9, 2013)		
1930	M	South Korean	1929	M	Janggisu
1940	F	Guknae Ijumin	1933	M	Joseonjok
1941	M	Joseonjok	1939	F	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean
1930	F	Joseonjok	1939	F	Guknae Ijumin
1938	M	Saeteomin	1946	F	Saeteomin (Japan)
1941	F	Saeteomin			
Third Workshop (November 23-24, 2012)			Ninth Workshop (November 29-30, 2013)		
1935	M	Joseonjok	1939 (1941)	M	Padok
1941	F	Joseonjok	1923	M	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean
1922	F	Seoul Tobegi	1948	F	Jaedok dongpo
1946	M	Gancheop	1926	F	Guknae Ijumin (Study Abroad to US)
1934	M	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean	1942	F	Saeteomin (Japan)
1933	F	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean			
Fourth Workshop (April 12-13, 2013)			Tenth Workshop (August 23-24, 2014)		
1947	M	Yugajok	1938	F	Joseonjok
1946	F	Yugajok	1942	M	Guknae Ijumin
1938	M	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean	1938	F	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean
1939	F	Saeteomin (China)	1941	M	Jaemi Dongpo
1954	M	Goryeoin	1943	F	Jaeil Dongpo
1939	F	Joseonjok	1947	M	Saeteomin
Fifth Workshop			Eleventh Workshop		

(April 26-27, 2013)			(August 26-27, 2014)		
1933	M	Guknae Ijumin	1933	M	Sakhalin Ethnic Korea
1930	M	Bukpa Gongjakwon	1933	F	Joseonjok
1940	M	Yugajok	1940	M	Guknae Ijumin
1937	F	Joseonjok	1930	F	Wonpok Pihaeja
1934	F	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean	1952	M	Goryeoin
			1945	F	Saeteomin
Sixth Workshop (May 10-11, 2013)			Twelfth Workshop (August 29-30, 2014)		
1946	M	Saeteomin	1939	M	Joseonjok
1956	F	Saeteomin	1933	F	Guknae Ijumin
1940	F	Yugajok	1943	M	Wonpok Pihaeja
1935	F	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean	1930	F	Wallamin
1942	M	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean	1935	M	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean
1932	F	Sakhalin Ethnic Korean	1955	F	Goryeoin

In the third workshop, there was even a former spy for North Korea who became a spy due to their extended family's tie to North Korea, got arrested, was found guilty and imprisoned, and was released. In the fifth workshop, there was a South Korean who told his story of being a *bukpa gongjakwon*, an intelligence agent sent to North Korea before the Korean War. Interestingly, whether they were South Koreans who were born and lived their entire lives in South Korea or were ethnic Koreans born outside of South Korea, they all shared some forms of migration including labor migration, internal migration, war migration, family migration, and so on. Accordingly, the concept of *hanminjok-dam-unhwa* is closely linking to migration, diaspora, and transnationalism, which will be discussed below.

It is important to understand that these are problematic categories but temporarily necessary in order to highlight the different multicultural and transnational life histories that span multiple boundaries and borders. For example, *padok* and *jaedok dongpo* may share similar experiences and memories but their senses of belonging and cultural identities may differ. Therefore, it is also important to understand that these categories are not fixed but fluid and change in different stages of life and contexts.

Cultural Meanings of Hanminjok-damunhwa: Entanglement between Diaspora and Transnationalism

After the first research year, having completed 6 workshops, what became clear to the research team was that nation-state borders that exist today cannot bind the cultural identities and memories of those Koreans who lived in the mid-20th century, whether they are ethnic Koreans or South Koreans. The research team began to question the very definition and cultural meanings of hanminjok. What became clear is that minjok can no longer include the definition of a nation, as the Korean nation in the age of globalization is composed of multi-ethnic nationals and residents, seeking to promote multiculturalism. In addition, the oral life histories of Koreans from various categories have shown that the Korean ethnicity is far from homogeneous. Instead, the Korean ethnicity, along with the Korean nation, has been a contested concept subject to constant challenge and reformulation (Shin, 2006).

The research team also found that the impact of ethnic nationalism centered on South Korea was strengthened due to South Korea's rising cultural and economic powers. As discussed above, it was the state, public media, and civic society that underpin the dialectics between differentiation and coalescence, thereby contributing to the ordering of mobility (Biao, 2013, p. 16). In fact, the research team reflected on whether talking about the diverse oral life histories of individuals from around the world as oral life histories of hanminjok would be essentializing the Korean ethnicity. In order to move beyond the essentialization of ethnic nationalism, it is important to understand that the state is the activating and unifying force, despite being at times contradictory and specifying the historical and social contexts. Accordingly, in this section, the South Korean nation-state centered public memory of Korean diaspora, who are in dichotomous and hierarchal categorizations, contrasts with the idea of hanminjok-damunhwa, which comprises those who are entangled between diaspora and transnationalism.

The public memory of the Korean diaspora describes the first wave

of Koreans, who migrated in the mid-19th century to the surrounding East Asian regions to escape famine in search of work and as forced labor. The second wave of emigration started in the mid-1960s, and it was to the US and Latin America, resulting in the creation of a diverse Korean diaspora around the world (such as can be found in Koreatown in LA and NY) (Yoon, 2003). The dominant images build an assumption that these Korean diasporas, which span over a long history and are scattered in different parts of the world, are lumped together into one homogeneous ethnic community. There is a dichotomy and hierarchy between the ancestral homeland and the places in which ethnic Koreans live in diasporas far and disconnected from the homeland, maintaining a cultural identity as Koreans and a sense of belonging to the ancestral homeland.

Derived from the Greek *diaspeiro*, the word diaspora, roughly meaning globally scattered communities, has become “one of the buzzwords of the age of global migration since the 1990s” (Vertovec, 2009). Historically, the Jewish history of displacement and migration is considered a prime example of this phenomenon, as it embodies the long-standing, conventional meaning of diaspora. Robin Cohen (1997) identifies nine common features of a diaspora: “1) Dispersal from an original homeland, 2) Alternatively, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, 3) A collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history, and achievements, 4) An idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety, and prosperity, even to its creation, 5) The development of a return movement that gain collective approbation, 6) A strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, 7) A troubled relationship with host societies, 8) A sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement, and 9) The possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism” (p. 26).

In particular, the oral life histories of ethnic Koreans as the Korean

diaspora tells of the dispersals, or the memories of dispersals, from an original homeland, whether it be in search of work or as forced by the colonial authority; of the collective memory and myth about the homeland; of the development of a return movement that gained collective approbation; and of a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness.

All Joseonjok participants told of their memories or life stories of migration to Manchuria from their hometowns, as most of them were born in China. They also shared how they maintained their ethnic identity apart from the Han Chinese, learning the Korean language and observing Korean customs. Some of them also reported that they were instructed to memorize their families' place of origin (*bongwan*). One female participant (5th workshop) remembered that her father was originally from North Gyeongsang Province and used that information to prove her family registration and "recover" her South Korean nationality. This is a concrete example of how the South Korean nationality is constructed in public memory as something that is eternal and hereditary. However, this public memory is contradicted by many Joseonjok, whose family registrations are missing or the places of origin are located in North Korea or because of the fact that they were initially excluded from the definition of overseas Koreans, as discussed above. Caren Freeman (2011) writes about how Joseonjok women use "paper" or "fake" kinship to circumvent South Korea's differential treatment. This shows that the South Korean nationality is conditional and formulated by the South Korean state.

All of the Sakhalin ethnic Koreans narrated the memories of voluntary and forced migration to Sakhalin Island. For many, this was not a direct migration but a series of migrations in different parts of the Japanese archipelago. Some of these participants also described an internal migration from Sakhalin Island to major Russian cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg for education and work during the USSR era. Similar to the Joseonjok, Sakhalin ethnic Koreans also described how they maintained their Korean ethnic identity, founding ethnic schools to teach the Korean language and culture to the children. They

also told of how they were discriminated against by the Japanese and the Russians. Interestingly, it was the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games that opened their eyes toward South Korea, when they began to plan their return migration.

If the memories and oral life histories of Joseonjok and Sakhalin ethnic Koreans based in China and Sakhalin Island, respectively, show the common features of a diaspora, then their oral life histories of “return migration” and living in South Korea show a very different type of residency. In fact, today, they are seen as new groups of diasporas who have wholly re-appropriated and redefined the term as a new tool in cultural politics. Despite the strong social and political forces of what Biao (2013) called coalescence from the ancestral homeland state to enhance their sovereign power transnationally and strengthen its relations with diasporic people, diasporic people are forging their own identities with flexible and multiple citizenships.

Accordingly, hanminjok-damunhwa can be considered in light of these new diasporic people as the participants shared their transnational life histories of departure, separation, displacement, relocation, and “return” interweaved with transnational strategies of identity and citizenship and clashing with diaspora policies and differential treatments of the homeland. For example, in the cases of yeonggugwihwan dongpo from Sakhalin Island, Moon and Park (2016) write that their migration history is far from simple and is filled with diverse migration routes and directions, covering a wide area of East Asia and Russia. Contrary to the public memory of Sakhalin ethnic Koreans, which tells of a people predominantly from the southeastern part of Korea (Gyeongsang-do), a total of 17 oral life histories of yeonggugwihwan dongpo from Sakhalin Island show that nine were born in Sakhalin Island and have no knowledge of Korea and only three migrated from the southeastern part of Korea while five migrated from different parts of Korea. In addition, these participants did not remain in Sakhalin Island but migrated to the western part of Russia and even North Korea for study, work, or other reasons. All of them had experiences of learning and speaking three languages:

Korean, Japanese, and Russian.

Other interesting oral life histories that do not fit into the public memory of Korean diaspora, with a strong image of the people scattered in a unilateral direction, come from two Saeteomin or North Korean migrants. These participants were from the eighth and ninth workshops. Even though they are categorized as North Korean migrants, they tell the different stories, as they were born in Japan and migrated to North Korea when they were young. A female participant born in 1946 shared her family story—her father migrated to Osaka, Japan, during the colonial period and married a Japanese woman who later left the family when she was 7 years old; she grew up thinking she was Japanese until she enrolled in middle school. When she was 15 years old, she went to North Korea with her family, hoping to enjoy a free education and free health care, which were promised by the propaganda published by North Korea at the time. The research team was surprised to learn that these people were called “*Jjaepo*” and treated differently by North Koreans. The husband of this female participant was born in 1942 in Kyoto, Japan. He also shared his story of going to, living in, and leaving North Korea. After coming to South Korea, the couple managed to keep in contact with their family members in North Korea and reconnected with his friends in Japan, who provided them with financial assistance.

In contrast, another female Saeteomin (fourth workshop) was born in China in 1939 and worked as a nurse in Yanbian before migrating to North Korea. When her husband became critically ill, the couple decided to migrate to North Korea, hoping for free medical care. However, when the situation in North Korea became difficult, she went to China to find work. She went back and forth until she finally decided to leave North Korea for good and come to South Korea. The research team was surprised to hear that she occasionally contacts her family members living in North Korea (a region close to China) and even sends money to them. In this sense, it would be more fitting to call Saeteomin “North Korean migrants” who came to South Korea to find work or a life and who

send remittances to their family members. A few oral life histories of Joseonjok also described a connection with extended family members living in North Korea and the experiences of migration to North Korea. To South Koreans, these acts of migration and communication involving North Korea might be considered “criminal,” violating South Korea’s National Security Act, which forbids any contact with North Koreans. As such, suggesting that Saeteomin should be called “North Korean migrants” may be an attempt to move away from the methodological nationalist approach mentioned above.

According to Vertovec (2009, p. 1), the concept of transnationality or transnationalism as a topic of study expanded greatly, from a mere handful of articles across the social sciences in the late 1980s to nearly 1,300 articles in 2003. In South Korea, research interests in transnationalism are slowly increasing, as a research team led by Hyeon-jun Shin (2013) reported the circular or return migration of ethnic Koreans from the perspective of transnationalism, and another research project at Hanyang University focuses on transnational history (Yoon, 2018).

Here, transnationalism refers to continuous cross-border relationships, multi-directional migration, patterns of exchange and communications, and social formations across several nation-states. With regard to interactions between national governments or concerning the moving of items back and forth from one nation-state context to another, Vertovec (2009) suggests that we might best retain the description of these practices as “inter-national” (p. 3). On the other hand, “when referring to sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors based across national borders—businesses, non-government-organizations, and individuals sharing the same interests—we can differentiate these as ‘transnational’ practices and groups” (Vertovec, 2009, p. 3). Therefore, transnationalism describes a new condition of migration in which certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a worldwide yet common arena of everyday life practices. This is why our research team began to examine ethnic Koreans

and Korean diasporas as groups or networks of transnational people. This is not to say that the definition of transnationalism is fixed. In fact, there are many perspectives on transnationalism grounded upon distinct conceptual premises. Vertovec (2009, p. 4) identifies six such perspectives: transnationalism as a social morphology, as types of consciousness, as a mode of cultural reproduction, as an avenue of capital, as a site of political engagement, and as (re)construction of “place” or locality.

In this sense, this paper suggests that, while the concept of diaspora is still useful, the use of transnationalism to describe the Korean diaspora or Koreans in general, especially in the age of circular or return migration, would also be useful in not only describing cross-border relationships and social formations over multiple nation-states but also avoiding the unequal dichotomy between homeland and place of residence, which fuels the marginalized and differentiated categories of Korean mentioned above.

In this regard, the oral life histories of Korean older adults who have lived outside South Korea for an extended period of their lives have demonstrated that they and their identities constitute the Korean diaspora with the common features mentioned by Robin Cohen (1997): Notable dispersal from an original homeland, collective memory and myth about the homeland, and the development of a return movement that has gained collective approbation. Nevertheless, when focusing on the lives and practices of Korean diaspora that are grounded on dense and highly active networks spanning vast spaces and transforming many kinds of social, cultural, economic and political relationships, the concept of transnationalism also applies. The concept of *hanminjok-damunhwa* is fitting to capture this entanglement between diaspora and transnationalism, which reminds us that the South Korean nation-state plays a powerful role in creating a public memory of imagined homogeneous Korean ethnic nation and, at the same time, differentiates and stratifies different ethnic Koreans.

Conclusion

As if it is a milestone, every year, the South Korean media announces the statistics of “foreigners” and the multicultural population. In February 2020, the media recorded that the number of foreigners residing in South Korea surpassed 2.5 million (Yi, 2020). One newspaper article ranked the countries of origin. Another article projected that the number would reach 3 million in 2021. The intended message is clear. The South Korean society is becoming more multicultural, and this trend cannot be reversed.

Nevertheless, South Korean society has seen an increase of hostility toward migrants and foreigners, especially refugees from the Middle East and Africa. There is also a strong tendency to reject anyone that does not fit into the dominant definition of the Korean ethnic nation or who has cultural differences. One could argue that there is clearly a rise of ethnic nationalism in South Korea.

It is this backdrop against which the oral life history project of hanminjok-damunhwa purports to be critical but also recognizes the emergence of transnational Koreans who maintain social and economic connections in multiple countries and continents. Instead of focusing on the nation-state as the unit of multiculturalism, the conceptualization of hanminjok-damunhwa seeks to present diverse memories, public and individual, and the cultural meanings of the oral life histories of ethnic Koreans who have crossed multiple national and cultural boundaries. After the self-reflection wherein an attempt to collect diverse memories and experiences of the Korean ethnicity may serve to essentialize the Korean ethnicity, this paper seeks to specify the historical and social contexts to reveal the role of the state that aimed to strengthen ethnic nationalism in accordance with its multiple contradictory objectives and, more importantly, the experiences of individuals who belong to multiple territories and cultures entangled in diaspora and transnationality. In other words, the oral life stories of ethnic Korean returnees show that categorical identities like nation and ethnicity are imagined, a modern con-

struct, but not imaginary, as people of the hanminjok-damunhwa are pulled into the dialectics between differentiation and coalescence and between diasporic and transnational. The next step for the conceptualization of hanminjok-damunhwa is to include those of non-Korean ethnicities and to formulate public memories of the Korean nation that are multicultural and multi-ethnic.

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