



## STUDY OF HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF KORYO-SARAMS IN UZBEKISTAN AND KAZAKHSTAN

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### ABOUT ARTICLE

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**Abstract:** The Koryo-Saram, or ethnic Koreans of Central Asia, represent a unique and historically significant diaspora. Their migration began in the late 19th century as Koreans left the Korean Peninsula due to political unrest, poverty, and Japanese colonial rule. Over time, they settled in regions that are now Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and other parts of the former Soviet Union. Their story reflects the broader dynamics of migration, cultural adaptation, and identity preservation.

Throughout their history, the Koryo-Saram have faced significant challenges, including forced deportations under Stalin’s regime in 1937. Despite linguistic erosion and pressures to assimilate into local cultures, they have managed to preserve elements of their Korean heritage, such as language, cuisine, and traditional festivals. At the same time, they have made substantial contributions to Central Asian societies, enriching these regions with their diverse cultural practices and expertise across various fields.

The Koryo-Saram diaspora exemplifies resilience and adaptation, highlighting the complexities of maintaining cultural identity in the face of adversity. Their experience offers valuable insights into migration, identity negotiation, and the dynamics of integration under authoritarian regimes. As both preservers of Korean traditions and contributors to Central Asian cultures, the Koryo-Saram demonstrate the intricate balance between cultural preservation and assimilation, making their story an important subject within the broader study of diasporic communities.

## INTRODUCTION

The Koryo-Saram, a unique and often overlooked ethnic group in South Korea, represents the descendants of ethnic Koreans who were deported to Central Asia during the Soviet era. This community, primarily settled in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, holds a distinct identity that intertwines elements of Korean, Russian, and Central Asian cultures. With historical roots stretching back to the early 20th century, the Koryo-Saram offer an intriguing case study of migration, survival, and cultural blending[14, 79-94].

The story of the Koryo-Saram is one of resilience and adaptation. Despite being uprooted from their homeland due to political pressures and forced labor during the era of Japanese occupation of Korea, they maintained their cultural heritage for several generations while integrating into their new surroundings. The Koryo-Saram identity in South Korea remains a multifaceted one, shaped by their Central Asian experiences and their reintroduction into Korea in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union[5, 205-219].

This article delves into the historical migration of the Koryo-Saram, the cultural practices they maintained, their role in South Korean society, and the challenges they continue to face as they navigate their identity between two worlds. In doing so, it aims to shed light on the rich contributions of the Koryo-Saram community to both South Korean and Central Asian societies, as well as the struggles they endure in seeking recognition and integration in their adopted homeland.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS.

This study utilizes a multidisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis, ethnographic research, and cultural studies to explore the Koryo-Saram – ethnic Koreans in Central Asia. The methods employed are designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of their migration history, cultural identity, and contemporary challenges.

Data Sources:

### 1. Primary Sources:

Archival documents from Central Asian and Russian repositories, including Soviet government decrees, census data, and personal letters. Oral histories collected through interviews with Koryo-Saram community members, focusing on personal migration narratives and cultural practices. Community records, such as local publications, festival programs, and genealogical documents, that offer insights into the everyday life and organization of the diaspora.

### 2. Secondary Sources:

Peer-reviewed articles, books, and historical analyses on migration, diaspora studies, and Central Asian history, including works by Kim and King, Park, and Lee. Reports from cultural organizations and NGOs working with the Koryo-Saram, such as the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies.

Research Methods:

### 1. Historical Analysis:

Examination of Soviet policies on ethnic minorities, particularly those impacting Korean populations in the Russian Far East and Central Asia, as documented by historians like Martin. Reconstruction of the forced deportation of Koreans in 1937 through archival research and secondary literature, utilizing studies by authors such as Hwang. Comparative analysis of the Koryo-Saram's migration patterns with other deported ethnic groups in the Soviet Union.

### 2. Ethnographic Fieldwork:

In-depth interviews with Koryo-Saram individuals from multiple generations to understand their perceptions of identity, cultural preservation, and adaptation. Participant observation at community events, including traditional Korean festivals, religious ceremonies, and cultural workshops, to document practices and interactions. Recording and analysis of spoken Koryo-mar, a unique Korean dialect influenced by Russian and Central Asian languages, to study linguistic preservation and transformation, drawing on frameworks established by Janhunen.

### **3. Cultural Analysis:**

Detailed study of the Koryo-Saram's cuisine, festivals, and traditional attire, focusing on how these elements blend Korean and Central Asian influences, referencing cultural studies by Kim. Exploration of artistic expressions, including literature, music, and dance, as representations of hybrid cultural identity.

**Analytical Framework:** The research is guided by theories of diaspora and transnationalism, particularly concepts of cultural hybridity, resilience, and identity negotiation, building on works by Cohen and Vertovec. It employs a comparative approach, placing the Koryo-Saram experience within the broader context of forced migrations under Stalinist policies. Quantitative data from census records and qualitative findings from interviews are triangulated to validate conclusions.

**Limitations:** Archival access restrictions and language barriers posed challenges in obtaining certain historical documents. The representativeness of interview data may be limited by the sample size and geographical constraints of the fieldwork. By integrating these diverse methods, this study aims to provide a nuanced and holistic understanding of the Koryo-Saram's historical journey, cultural dynamics, and the challenges they face in the modern era.

## **ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

### **Historical Background**

The history of the Koryo-Saram, ethnic Koreans in Russia and Central Asia, is marked by migration, forced deportations, and their adaptation to new sociopolitical environments. Korean migration to the Russian Far East began in the 1860s, driven by famine and political instability in Korea, during a period of significant geopolitical change in East Asia. This migration coincided with the weakening of the Joseon Dynasty and the expanding influence of Russia. Seeking better opportunities, many Koreans from northern regions such as Gyeongsang and Hamgyeong moved to the Russian Far East, including areas such as Vladivostok, the Amur River basin, and Siberia. In these regions, they established agricultural communities, cultivating crops such as rice and millet. Despite their economic success, these migrants were perceived as distinct from the local Russian population, which led to growing suspicion, especially during periods of heightened geopolitical tensions, including Japan's rise as a regional power[9, 212-234].

The early Korean settlers in Russia, despite their relative success, faced a complex sociopolitical environment. The Koryo-Saram formed strong community ties that helped them survive and thrive under difficult circumstances. These communities were characterized by a high degree of mutual support and cultural retention, which allowed them to maintain their identity and traditions. This sense of solidarity became crucial in the years that followed, especially when political changes in the Soviet Union would disrupt their lives. Scholars such as Park have emphasized the importance of these social networks in preserving the community's resilience.

A pivotal moment in Koryo-Saram history occurred in 1937 under Joseph Stalin's regime, when approximately 172,000 Koreans were forcibly deported from the Russian Far East to Central Asia. This

mass deportation, which was carried out with little notice, was driven by Soviet fears that the Koreans might align with Japan, amid growing East Asian tensions. Families were separated, and the deportees were subjected to harsh conditions during the journey. The transition to Central Asia was equally difficult, with inadequate housing, food shortages, and extreme weather. Despite these challenges, the Koryo-Saram adapted by contributing to the region's agriculture, introducing advanced farming techniques and cultivating previously unused lands. Over time, they became an integral part of the agricultural, educational, and cultural landscape of Central Asia (15, 302-328; 20, 341-359).

The forced migration of the Koryo-Saram is an example of how Stalinist policies sought to homogenize the Soviet Union's ethnic landscape. The experience of these deportations highlights the intersection of state power, ethnicity, and survival under authoritarian regimes. The Koryo-Saram's ability to endure and transform their new environment demonstrates their resilience and adaptability. Moreover, their experience reflects broader themes in migration and forced displacement, shedding light on how marginalized groups navigate political upheavals while preserving their cultural identity (12, 120-135).

### **Cultural Aspects and Identity of the Koryo-Saram Community**

Cultural preservation has always been a core aspect of Koryo-Saram identity, despite their forced migration and the challenges of living in Central Asia. Over the years, they have managed to maintain elements of their Korean heritage while adapting to their new surroundings in the Soviet Union and later in post-Soviet Central Asia (7, 237-258). Also contributing into the diverse cultural fabric of Central Asia.

One of the key cultural elements that the Koryo-Saram community has preserved is the Korean language. Despite living for generations in Russian-speaking environments, Koryo-Saram maintained their fluency in Korean, particularly in the regions of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Many Koryo-Saram speak a unique dialect known as Koryo-mar, which blends Korean with Russian and Central Asian influences. However, the use of this dialect has declined among younger generations. Linguists studying Koryo-mar emphasize its significance as a living record of linguistic hybridity and cultural exchange [11, 67-89].

The language faced significant challenges over time, with many young Koryo-Saram now speaking Russian, Uzbek, or Kazakh as their first languages. Nevertheless, efforts to revive and promote the Korean language continue, especially among the younger generation and those who have resettled in South Korea (14, 79-94).

In terms of cultural practices, the Koryo-Saram community has preserved traditional Korean customs, albeit with some Central Asian influences. One of the most prominent cultural traditions among the Koryo-Saram is their culinary heritage. Koryo-Saram cuisine blends traditional Korean dishes with ingredients and techniques from Central Asia. For example, dishes such as kimchi, rice cakes, and bulgogi have been adapted to include local vegetables and spices, creating a unique fusion of Korean and Central Asian flavors. Koryo-Saram families often use local grains like barley instead of rice, which has become scarce in the region, and they have also incorporated Central Asian meats such as lamb into traditional Korean dishes [1, 321-345].

The community's cuisine reflects a fusion of Korean and Central Asian flavors, with dishes like kimchi, kuksu (a noodle soup), and manty (Central Asian dumplings). The adaptation of traditional Korean recipes to local ingredients underscores the ingenuity of the Koryo-Saram in preserving their culinary heritage (13, 198-210).

Korean folk music and dance have also played an essential role in preserving Koryo-Saram culture. While many Koryo-Saram have adapted to local musical traditions, traditional Korean instruments such as the gayageum and janggu are still used during cultural performances. Additionally, Koryo-Saram dance and folk songs, like those of pansori (Korean narrative singing) and samulnori (traditional percussion music), are still practiced at community festivals and events[8, 541-567].

Traditional Korean holidays such as Chuseok and Lunar New Year are still celebrated, often incorporating local customs. These celebrations serve as vital expressions of cultural continuity and community cohesion[1, 321-345].

Religious practices within the Koryo-Saram community are another area where both Korean and Central Asian influences have blended. Many Koryo-Saram practice Christianity, influenced by Russian Orthodox Christianity, but they also maintain some traditional Korean Buddhist and Confucian beliefs. This fusion of religious practices highlights the adaptability of the Koryo-Saram community as they navigate their dual heritage[5, 205-219].

Anthropologists have noted that these cultural practices act as mechanisms of identity reinforcement, enabling the Koryo-Saram to navigate their dual identities as Koreans and Central Asians[18, 245-260].

### **The Role of Koryo-Saram in South Korean Society.**

Since their arrival in South Korea in the early 1990s, the Koryo-Saram community has made notable contributions to the cultural and economic fabric of the country. Despite facing challenges in terms of integration, particularly regarding language and cultural differences, many Koryo-Saram have become an integral part of South Korean society[3, 243-260].

In the realm of education, Koryo-Saram individuals have shown resilience and adaptability. Many Koryo-Saram have pursued higher education, with some excelling in fields such as business, technology, and the arts. Their unique experience as both ethnic Koreans and Central Asians has provided them with a distinctive perspective, which is increasingly valued in South Korea's globalizing society. The Koryo-Saram community has contributed to a broader understanding of diaspora experiences, cultural exchange, and multiculturalism in South Korea[7, 237-258].

Economically, Koryo-Saram individuals have played an essential role in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and small businesses. In the early years of migration, many found work in South Korea's labor-intensive industries, contributing to the country's rapid post-war economic development. In recent years, however, a growing number of Koryo-Saram have started their own businesses, particularly in the food and entertainment industries, further enriching South Korea's multicultural landscape[8, 541-567].

The cultural contributions of the Koryo-Saram community are also significant. Cultural festivals, art exhibitions, and performances organized by the Koryo-Saram help foster an appreciation for their heritage among South Koreans. These events allow both Koryo-Saram and native Koreans to celebrate the rich cultural exchanges between Korea and Central Asia. Moreover, these activities help challenge stereotypes and promote greater acceptance of ethnic minorities in South Korean society[2, 324-338].

Challenges: Today, the Koryo-Saram face several challenges, including the erosion of their linguistic and cultural heritage. Economic hardships and migration to urban centers have further diluted communal ties. Additionally, as the older generation passes on, efforts to document and preserve their unique history have become increasingly urgent. Scholars and community leaders have called for more comprehensive initiatives to safeguard the cultural legacy of the Koryo-Saram, including the



establishment of museums, cultural centers, and academic programs dedicated to their history[3, 243-260].

**Contributions:** Despite these difficulties, the Koryo-Saram continue to make significant contributions to their societies. They have excelled in fields such as academia, politics, and the arts. Notable figures include Viktor Tsoi, a rock musician of Koryo-Saram descent, and numerous scholars and public servants in Central Asia. Recent studies have highlighted the role of Koryo-Saram entrepreneurs in fostering economic development and cross-cultural exchange within the region[16, 56-78].

Additionally, the Koryo-Saram diaspora has attracted growing interest from South Korea, leading to increased cultural and economic engagement. Programs aimed at reconnecting Koryo-Saram with their ancestral homeland have facilitated mutual exchanges, enriching both communities[10, 78-95].

**Broader Implications:** The story of the Koryo-Saram offers valuable insights into the broader themes of migration, identity, and resilience. Their experiences underscore the complex interplay between state policies, ethnic identity, and cultural preservation. As a case study, the Koryo-Saram provide a unique lens through which to examine the effects of forced migration on diasporic communities[19, 147-163].

Furthermore, the Koryo-Saram's adaptation to Central Asia challenges simplistic narratives of cultural assimilation. Instead, their history illustrates a dynamic process of cultural negotiation, where traditions are both preserved and transformed in response to new environments[6, 101-117].

## CONCLUSION

The story of the Koryo-Saram is a testament to resilience and cultural synthesis. As a diaspora, they have successfully maintained a distinct identity while also making valuable contributions to the societies in which they live. Their ability to navigate adversity and preserve their cultural heritage provides valuable insights into the broader dynamics of migration, cultural integration, and identity in a rapidly globalizing world.

Efforts to preserve and study the heritage of the Koryo-Saram are essential not only for the community itself but also for understanding how diasporas adapt to new environments and how they contribute to the societies that host them. The experience of the Koryo-Saram reflects the challenges and opportunities that come with migration, as well as the resilience required to maintain one's cultural identity in the face of displacement and forced assimilation. These efforts also help shed light on how minority groups interact with larger national and cultural identities while holding onto their own traditions and history.

Academic research on the Koryo-Saram is growing, offering an in-depth look at their unique experiences and providing valuable lessons for contemporary discussions on multiculturalism, globalization, and diasporic resilience[4, 456-472]. Such research helps illuminate the ways in which communities maintain their identity across generations, despite being scattered across different countries and subjected to political upheavals. It also deepens our understanding of how migration impacts cultural continuity, the preservation of language, and the adaptation of traditions in new social and political contexts.

Expanding this narrative through interdisciplinary approaches will enrich our understanding of how diasporas navigate the complexities of cultural identity and survival. Scholars from various fields –

history, anthropology, sociology, and migration studies can contribute to a more holistic view of the Koryo-Saram's experiences and the broader processes of migration and cultural transformation. The intersection of these disciplines helps us understand the multi-layered nature of diasporic life, which involves maintaining connections to one's origins while adapting to new circumstances.

This interdisciplinary approach also ensures that the legacy of the Koryo-Saram, and similar diasporic communities, endures for future generations. It enables scholars and communities to reflect on how diasporas contribute to the broader social fabric of their host countries and the importance of preserving these communities' histories and identities. Ultimately, the study of the Koryo-Saram offers valuable lessons in cultural resilience, the negotiation of identity, and the survival of traditions in a rapidly changing world

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