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The Korean Minority in Central Asia: National Revival and Problem of Identity

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The largest Korean communities in the world live in China, USA, Japan, Canada, CIS. Conditions of their formation and existence have been different:

- free-will migration and forcible deportation,
- mono- and polyethnic environments,
- similarity and difference in cultures,
- democratic and totalitarian political regimes, etc.

So, we can say that Korean communities have both common and peculiar features. The *degree* of development of the *peculiar* features may become basis for birth of *new ethnic formations* – Japanese Koreans, American Koreans, etc.

One of such new ethnic group are Soviet Koreans (they name themselves Koryo Saram). Most of them live in Central Asia. They differ from such Korean communities like Koreans in Korea or China and Japan. With certain reservations we can say that in these countries the process of adaptation proceeded in *mono-ethnic*(homogeneous) environment. Korean culture is kindred to Chinese and Japanese ones. Besides, historically complicated relations between these countries (the spirit of rivalry, long annexation of territories, etc.) have left an imprint on peculiarities of Korean communities in these countries.

About 450,000 Koreans live in CIS. 70% of them live in Central Asia. First Koreans have appeared in Central Asia many hundred years ago. On the wall

painting of Afrasiab we see Korean ambassadors to Samarkand in 7th century. We also know about the trip of Korean monk Hech Ho to Central Asia in 8th century.

After mass migration of Koreans to Russian Far East in the second half of the XIX century some of them moved to Central Asia. According to Russian Empires first general census of the population (1897) Koreans lived not only in Far East but on the territory of Central Asia too. *Pervaya perepis naseleniya Rossiyskoy imperii 1897 g.* SPb., 19041905. T. 81, 85, 86, 89. Next migration of Koreans to Central Asia was connected with Russian-Japanese War. Some Koreans were deported from Far East to Central Asia in 1904. The numbers of Koreans became grater and greater. For example, in 1921 Department of minorities of the People Commissariat of Nationalities (Narcomnats) of the Turkestan Soviet Republic organized special Korean section. In 1926 some Koreans moved to Central Asia on local governments invitation to pass Korean technology of rice cultivation. Kan G. V. *Predistoriya koreytsev v Kazakhstane.* *Izvestiya Koreevedeniya Kazakhstana.* Almaty, 1996. Vypusk N 1. S. 11.

The biggest mass migration of Koreans to Central Asia was in 1937 when all Koreans (about 180 000 people) was deported by Stalins order from Far East. Songmoo Kho. *Koreans in Soviet Central Asia.* Helsinki. 1987. P. 25-30; Belye pyatna v istorii Kazakhstana. Alma-Ata, 1991; Kim B. *Vetry nashikh sudeb.* Tashkent, 1991; Khan S.M., Khan V.S. *Stalinizm: k voprosy o prichinakh politiki deportatsiy.* *News on Korean Studies in Kazakstan and Central Asia.* Almaty-Helsinki, 1993. N 4;

In the former USSR Koreans achieved big results in different fields of social life. There were Heroes of Soviet Union, Heroes of labour, Olympic champions, prize-winner of World championships and Cups, ministers, members of Academy of Sciences, rectors of colleges, famous scholars and writers, singers and artists, designers and engineers, directors of big plants and collective farms among them. But these were personal achievements of concrete persons. In Soviet Union Koreans could not discuss national problems

of Korean minority and founded Korean ethnic organizations. It became possible only after perestroyka.

After beginning of perestroyka one can growth of national consciousness of Soviet Koreans. Many Korean organizations appear at this time. One of the central questions was national revival. There are many programs of national revival but it is not easy to find clear theoretical understanding of the *essence* of national revival in these programs. As for reviving Korean customs and traditions, – German Kim writes, – here we have more questions than answers. Kim G. Topical Problems of Koreans Diaspora in Kazakstan. In: Newsletter of Korean Studies in Kazakstan. Almaty, 1996. Vol. 1. P. 85. This is not accidental. The problem is that there is no clear theoretical understanding of the *national essence* of Soviet Koreans. However, without definition of their *national identity* it is very difficult to define the ways, forms and content of the *national revival*.

Thus, there are two important methodological questions: 1). Who are Soviet Koreans in Central Asia as ethnic reality? and 2). What can we understand under national revival of these Koreans?

Who are Soviet Koreans in Central Asia as ethnic reality?

On the various Korean conferences, presentations, official meetings and unofficial sit-round gathering we can very often to hear the following: All of us are Koreans!

If we take into account enthusiasm with which people say this phrase, of course it is not a matter of simple statement of the fact of their genetic roots. It is a matter of that everybody who has Korean blood must aspirate to some *national unity*. What is the question?

Usually this thesis implies not only simple similarity of appearance, language or food but more serious things. These are the same psychological paradigms (paradigms of Korean national consciousness), Korean organizations

unifying Koreans in some controlled integrity, programs and practical steps directed at strengthening of Korean idea and Korean unity.

In practice it becomes apparent that there are international scientific conferences where participants are only Korean scholars, business-associations where all members are only Koreans, etc. In these cases belonging to Korean nation is considered self-sufficient although level of thought and qualification of some members leave much to be desired.

Can we say All of us are Koreans conformably to Soviet Koreans? This question is not accidental as very often statement All of us are Koreans is taken as something going without saying. *Yes* and *no*. On the one hand Koreans in Central Asia and Koreans from peninsula have many common features: customs, food, language, anthropological type, etc. On the other hand they also have many differences in customs, food, language, etc. Even outward appearance is not same. At least it is not difficult to distinguish Koreans from Uzbekistan from Koreans in Korea.

Koreans in Central Asia differ from both North and South Koreans in language, mentality, values, ideals, outlook, behaviour, customs, traditions. Their cultural genetic fund is synthetical. It is synthesis of traditional Korean, Russian, Central-Asian and European cultures. The following features are typical for Soviet Koreans:

1. Essential transformation of cultural genetic fund (transformation of initial ethnic characteristics);
2. A polyethnic environment of this transformation;
3. Adaptation to cultures essentially different from traditional Korean culture and reaching outside the limitations of monoethnic, oriental consciousness;
4. A high level of assimilation and naturalization;
5. Dynamism and intensiveness of the aforementioned processes;
6. Model minority phenomenon.

I have already said that the degree of differences between Koreans from peninsula and Korean minorities is so much that it can be basis for development

of *new ethnic formations*, e.g. Soviet Koreans. Paradoxically, but sometimes Koreans from peninsula are more strange for Koryo Saram than Russians and Uzbeks. For Soviet Koreans very often it is easy to understand psychology and behavior of Russians, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Georgians than of Koreans from Korea. Vasilisa the Beauty and Ivan the Fool from Russian tale, Khodja Nasretudin from Central-Asian folk-lore, main characters from tales of Brothers Grimm, Charle Perro, Andersen are more familiar and near to hearts of Soviet Koreans than Choon Hyang or Hong Gil Dong.

On many conferences related to problems of Korean minorities scholars from different countries asked me: Do you feel that you are Korean?

So, Am I Korean in general? Yes, I am if we take my genetic roots. But I have many essential differences from Korean Koreans. Who am I? We can identify myself in the following way: I am Korean by my genetic roots, I was educated in the Soviet system, my native language is Russian, my outlook is based on the world culture, I have European-Asian thought, I am adopted to various cultural environments and I live in Uzbekistan. Thus, so-called Korean nature has not been dominating factor in my human nature.

Not accidentally I stress attention on the thesis All of us are Koreans. The thing is that when people accept this postulate as *a priori* premise, they come to conclusions and practical steps corresponding to this premise. For example, all Soviet Koreans *must* join to Korean culture, *must* study Korean language, *must* help others Koreans, *must* promote development of Korea, etc. It would be logically and naturally if Soviet Koreans and Koreans from Korea were bearers of same psychology and they had same value orientations. But as there are many differences between them so postulated principle you must is unacceptable in this question. It must be a business of each persons own choice but not the paradigm of collective consciousness.

Attempts to dictate models of behavior and consciousness to Soviet Koreans proceeding from principle you must (if you are Korean you must

support everything what is Korean), early or late would be led to negative reaction.

In the light of this analysis it is interesting that the dynamic of Soviet Koreans relation to Koreans from peninsula changes.

In the initial phases, during the period of perestroika, all Soviet Koreans suddenly felt themselves *Koreans* and wanted to be similar to *real* Koreans. There appeared a fashion for Korean language courses which became very popular among old and young, for etiquette of Koreans from the peninsula. And every thing which they did evoke enthusiasm. In fact it was phenomenon of mechanical imitation.

Complex of ethnical inferiority vividly demonstrated by the Soviet Koreans (they say that we are not real Koreans, we are deformed Koreans), self-humiliation and self-torture began to lead to a situation where both South and North Koreans assumed haughty, didactical, mentoring position with respect to Koryo Saram.

If to take into consideration that Soviet Koreans have achieved considerable results in different spheres of life and by the width of their outlook they are often higher than many Koreans from the peninsula, confined in *mono-ethnic(homogeneous)* culture (Soviet Korean intelligentsia was educated on the traditions of world culture and system of education which was considered one of best in the world), it is natural that at a certain period it couldn't have brought to revision of initial positions. Soviet Koreans are quite often critically discussing among themselves the way of thought, outlook, values and behaviour of Koreans from peninsula. And there is already the idea We are not the same becoming not complex of inferiority, but on the contrary, it becoming a feeling of pride and even superiority, as it allows to count themselves as part of the world culture but not *mono-ethnic* tradition and to reach out the limits of national narrow-mindedness of Koreans from peninsula.

Thesis All of us are Koreans implies opposition of Koreans to non-Koreans. This opposition can lead to ideology and policy of national narcissism

and ethnocentrism. This ideology is directed to reproduce realization of belonging to certain community in consciousness and individual behavior, which programs their consciousness and behavior in accordance with traditions and norms of this community. The world outside of this communities way of thinking and life seems strange to such consciousness.

But in the 20th century, in contrast to previous epochs, the level of interconnection and interdependence in the world has grown so that the tension of co-existence of different cultural programs has begun to have not only local but global planetary importance. Ethnocentrism of different social groups and states is a blind alley in historical perspectives as it is a bondage for *understanding* and *integrity* that are ones of the main problems of 20th century. Step by step ethnocentric consciousness, limited by national, religious and other frameworks, is moving to Citizen of the World consciousness where World seems to be like Home of Human Being and Humanity as an integral community.

Conclusion of the above part of this article is as follow:

we can speak about Soviet Koreans as a new ethnical group. Khan V. S. Paradigma i problemy natsionalnykh dvizheniy: sotsialno-philosophskiy analiz. In: News on Korean Studies in Kazakstan and Central Asia. Almaty-Helsinki, 1993. N 1. P. 10-13; Kim G. Topical Problems of Koreans Diaspora in Kazakstan. In: Newsletter of Korean Studies in Kazakstan. Almaty, 1996. Vol. 1. P. 83.

Coming from this thesis lets try to analyze another question: What can we understand under national revival of Soviet Koreans in Central Asia?

Speaking about national revival of Soviet Koreans, as it has also been stressed by all existing Korean movements and organizations, one usually begins to speak about the revival of national traditions, customs, language, etc. To be sure it is enough to look at the charters of different Korean cultural centres and associations. The process of revival is considered as *a priori* necessary and positive. Besides, in social consciousness it is directly linked to

the revival of spirituality, national mentality and to the essence of the Korean nation.

However, an approach like this simplifies the essence of the problem. Unfortunately, too often the problem of essence and the ways of national revival of Korean minority does not get real scientific analysis and even now is discussed on an ordinary level and often on the ideologized basis.

What is revived and what for?

This point is not discussed in scholarly works and Korean associations as the answer is understood as something which goes without saying. I am sure if one does not get any answer for this question there is some risk to remain in the sphere of conjectures and illusions, and to move ahead by means of attempts and mistakes.

There is a paradigm hovering over the Korean associations: if we are Koreans we *must* revive Korean culture. (Certainly, both parts of this paradigm are not discussed). However, postulated principle of you must revive these traditions only on the level of external attributes but not on the level of the internal content.

It is not accidental that the activity of all Korean cultural centers is really connected with the mechanical reproduction of ethnographic pictures of oriental New Year type celebrations, Ovol Tano, concerts of Korean dances and songs, etc. But dinner tables ready for celebrations and outdoor festivals are not same as the essence of a national revival. The purpose of the existence of cultural centre is particularly, to express the real and main interests and demands of Koreans, to develop forms and ways of their existence, a prognosis of extreme situations, to carry out necessary support, to help economic and spiritual development of ethnos and many other things. Unfortunately, these major concerns remain outside of the framework of those organizations.

It is not only external character but also the forced character (principle you must) of that what Koreans must do that brings doubts as a way to proceed.

The meaning of the words revival, rebirth is re-vival, re-birth. This means that Soviet Koreans must revive something that they lost. What did they lose? They lost culture of Korean migrants who moved from Korea to Russia in the second half of the XIX century and in the beginning of the XX century. What was this culture?

The culture of Korean migrants – ancestors of the present generations of Koryo Saram – was a village culture. It was a reflection and result of historical time, tenor of life and carrying constructions of mode of existence of Koreans on the border of XIX–XX centuries. In a *traditional* society matrixes of culture adequate to it – customs, rituals, beliefs, moral norms – have important functions: conservation of the level and structures of this society, regulation of social life, normative directions and worldview orientations. But the culture doesn't stand in the same place. With the transformation of traditional society to industrial and with the process of global internationalization, this type of culture has been transformed into industrial–urban culture. And the traditional national culture assumes the features of folk-lore.

Actualization of traditions can also be retained with the replacement of foundational matrixes of cultures. For example, when a nation constitutes the ethnic basis of State, when there are compactness and reticence of existence of ethnic group or when intensiveness of contacts with the land of ancestors is continuing. These cases are not typical for Soviet Koreans. The process of assimilation and transformation has gone so far that we can speak about the *new national* culture of Koryo Saram.

Thus, the question of what we mean when we say national revival of Koryo Saram is not hollow.

What is meant by national revival is the actualization of traditional habits, customs, etiquette which were kept by the early Korean settlements who are ancestors of nowday soviet Koreans. Yet, for present generations of Koreans,

living in other social dimension, the *traditional*(village) culture has character of exotic, external folk-lore, and there are too much examples of that. If we want this project of national revival to become true (we are not speaking about singing Korean songs, keeping with some elements of traditional customs, etc.) we must completely replace the mentality and internal orientations of Koryo Saram. Nowever, this is utopian and not necessary.

Again, what is meant by national revival is acquiring of the modern culture (behaviour, speech, aesthetical ideals, etc.) of the Korean peninsula. However, without acquiring of the matrixes of the reproduction of this culture (i.g. not living in the country), this process of adoption would not differ from external and uncultural imitation. An attempt of mechanical projection of alien matrixes of national consciousness on the screen of our existence is absurd. The attempts to imitate, to be like real Koreans doom the Koryo Saram to have the complex of defective Koreans. Nonetheless, they are neither more real nor less real than Koreans from Korea, they simply are *another* Koreans because they are of another *ethnic reality*.

Once more, what is meant by national revival (i.g. *development*) is creation of such conditions where Koryo Saram as a *special ethnic group* could realize themselves more fully and freely, could *naturally* develop and be self-determined without any schemes thrustured from outside.

I have already said that the consciousness of Koryo Saram is the alloy of different cultures reproducing different types of consciousness. All worthwhile cultural achievements of Soviet Koreans were based on the synthesis of different types of consciousness. Not once has history given us examples of merging with the *different*, especially in context of cultural differency, to bring to striking effects, and opening formly unknown worlds of human consciousness and apparition, new perspectives of development.

The historical experience of culture of Korean minority in the USSR, now CIS, somehow anticipated the future experience of Koreans from peninsula who have been developing for a long time strictly in the frames of

mononational(homogeneous) cultural traditions and corresponding to it types of consciousness and behaviour. They began to open themselves for non-Korean culture and absorb it not so long ago. And it concerns only South Korea. The validity of historical existence of the culture of Soviet Koreans is actually in the synthetical nature of the culture and consciousness that is flexible as to perception of other worlds of consciousness. Having been synthesized, this culture has provided and can provide its unique, unprecedented contribution the world culture.

How to explain such persistent aspiration of Soviet Koreans for underlining their belonging to a certain ethnos, to find Korean national consciousness, to keep with their own traditional rites if it even often external?

For to Soviet Koreans this aspiration is much more conditioned by factor of contacts of Koryo Saram with Koreans from historical motherland. Taken into consideration the fact of absence of such contacts for a long time such reaction is understandable. The aspiration for Korean characterization has one more reason. This reason is well-known in sociology and this is a reaction to global internationalization in the of world. This phenomenon is one of external ways not to be washed down in another national environment.

However, another problem arises here – the problem of national survival of Soviet Koreans. New realities appeared in CIS countries brought about new problems. They appeared before many ethnic minorities, including Koreans. Koreans have twice (in Russian Far East and Central Asia) adapted to new conditions. And formation of such ethnic russian-speaking group as Soviet Koreans has become a result of such adaptation. After the formation of the states of CIS, many of which are based on the dominance of national idea, the sphere of the realization of opportunities for russian-speaking people are found to be narrowed. Thus, Koryo Saram collide not only with the problem of national revival as *Koreans*, but with the problem of conservation of their ethnic integrity, i.e. survival as a certain reality – *Soviet* Koreans. The point is that, as to such reality Koryo Saram are conscious of themselves as a Russian-speaking

group. Within the framework of former USSR, they found themselves as an ethnic integrity inspite of the fact that they have been living in different regions – in the Far East, Northern Caucauses, Ukraine, Central Asia, Moscow, etc. New realities in the former USSR can lead to situations when Soviet Koreans as an integrity will lose their former peculiarities and begin to transform into new ethnic formations – Koreans of Uzbekistan, Koreans of Kazakhstan, Koreans of Russia, etc. with corresponding direction of assimilation. However, another multivariant evolution of Koryo Saram may be possible. Another scenario is that if Koryo Saram may not be able to see any prospects for themselves, they may migrate from some countries of Central Asia. Koryo Saram is a product of a polyethnic environment and interaction of different cultures while there is a tendency to form *mono-ethnic*(homogeneous) states in some countries of Central Asia.