

# Reconstructing Transnational Identities of Ethnic Korean Seniors

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## Introduction

This paper attempts to reconstruct the oral life stories of ethnic Korean seniors with ages above 70 from various regions like northeastern part of China, Sakhalin, and North Korea and South Koreans who were displaced and marginalized using an experimental methodology of oral history called 'collaborative oral life story.' A total of twelve 2-day workshops titled "Hanminjok Damunha Samui Yeoksa Iyagi: Nanumgwa Mannam" were organized from September 2014 to August 2014 with a generous funding from Korean National Research Foundation. A rough translation is "Life Historical Stories of Multicultural Koreans: Sharing and Encountering". "Hanminjok (Korean Nation) Damunha (multi-culture)" can also be translated or understood as overseas Koreans or Korean diaspora because the purpose of the workshop is to bring together various 'categories' of Korean seniors who have experienced border-crossing migration or displacement and listen to their oral life stories. The research team wanted to highlight the cultural, political, social, and historical diversities within the Korean people. But these two terminologies have very different meanings to different people. Simply, they are loaded words. As it will become clear later on in this paper, it would be best to understand "Hanminjok Damunha" as transnational Koreans.

The aim of the collaborative oral life story/history is to move away from state narratives or official ideological cold war histories and go beyond the dichotomy of abroad (them) and homeland (us). Collaborative oral life stories of transnational Koreans will bring forth multi-vocality and multi-positionality of (ethnic) Koreans who crossed multiple borders by force or voluntarily and critically re-examine the current understanding of multiculturalism in South Korea by affirming the diversity and transnationality of Korean ethnicity and nation. To do so, this paper will critically examine the new categories of Koreans used in South Korean society as politics of naming and identify two concepts that

may be useful in reconstructing transnational identities of ethnic Koreans that are multi-vocal and multi-positional. They are transnationality of diaspora and diaspora as performances.

A total of 70 seniors' oral life stories were collected over the period of two years from September 2012 to August 2014. However, due to the vast amount of data, this paper will not delve directly into the entire data itself but sketch some oral life stories to engage in theorizing and re-conceptualizing of transnational Koreans.

### New Categories of Korean

Often times, Korean national identity is confrontational when it concerns inter-Korean relations (the North and South) and, other times, it is overwhelming due to its tendency to homogenize the Korean nation while attempting to stratify the migrants into a racial and national gradation. As of 2014, there are now more than 1.5 million foreigners living in South Korea (almost 3% of the total population). In response, the South Korean government and the academia rushed to construct discourses on the South Korean version of multiculturalism. Consequently, only a small percentage of multicultural population, namely international marriage migrant women and their children, is defined as multicultural families. However, the South Korean version of multiculturalism ignores the fact that the majority of the foreign population is migrants of Korean ethnicity like Korean Chinese, North Koreans, Central Asian ethnic Koreans, and Sakhalin ethnic Koreans.

Despite the popular rhetoric like "the blood is thicker than water" and "all people of Korean descent are one homogeneous ethnic nation", ethnic Korean migrants from different parts of the world experience ethnic marginalization and in some instances rejection from their ethnic homeland as culturally foreign minorities. As Tsuda (2003) notes, even in the absence of racial differences with the host populace, ethnic return migrants become new types of ethnic minority because of the cultural differences they have acquired while living abroad for generations. This is reflected in various categories of Koreans used and differential

treatments given by South Koreans to different Korean ethnic migrants: Joseongjok or Jaejung dongpo (Korean Chinese), Goryeoin (ethnic Koreans from the CIS), yeonggugwihwan dongpo (permanently returned overseas Koreans from Sakhalin Island and Russia), saeteomin or talbukja (North Korean migrants) haeoe ibyangin (overseas adaptees), Jaedok dongpo (Korean Germans), Jaeil dongpo (Koreans in Japan), and Jaemi dongpo (Korean-Americans). Obviously, this is not an exhaustive list as new categories are created as Korean people move to different parts of the world and return to South Korea such as Korean Brazilian and Koreans who lived in African countries for an extensive period. In addition, these categories are becoming problematic due to its inherent premise on one place static and fixed residence denoted by Korean prefix 'jae'. How can a Korean American living in South Korea for more than a decade be called Jaemi dongpo (Overseas Koreans living in the US)? Same can be true for Korean Chinese living in South Korea for more than 10 years.

The level of their marginalization and social segregation varies according to the country of origin and socio-occupational status of the ethnic returnees. Those from a lesser developed country and who become unskilled workers, say, most of the Korean Chinese returnees, their marginalization and stigmatization as a culturally foreign minority are further exacerbated. Although the level of marginalization is far less compared to the Korean Chinese return migrants, 'Korean American' returnees, commonly dubbed as "*gyopo*" instead of 'dongpo', are ethnically marginalized because of their cultural differences.

In addition to the categories of Koreans who have returned from different parts of the world and experienced ethnic marginalization there are also other categories of Koreans that resulted in making the categorized group as non-national or marginalized. They are bbalgaengi (red communists), silhyangmin (displaced people), wolnamin (people migrated to South), wolbukin gajok (family members of people migrated to North), wianbu halmeoni (comfort women), wonpok pihajeja (victims of atomic bombs dropped in Japan), padok (people who worked in Germany in mining and nursing), etc. In South Korea, the first category is a broad political and ideological category used to marginalize and even punish wide range of people who are considered pro-North Korea,

communists, left, trade unionists, socialists, and their close family members by guilt by association.

As for the collaborative oral life story workshops, there are 17 yeonggugwihwan dongpo, 11 Joseonjok, 10 saeteomin, 3 Goryeoin, 1 silhyangmin, 1 jaeil dongpo, 1 jaemi dongpo, 3 padok and 1 jaedok dongpo, 2 wonpok pihaeja, 2 bbalgaengi, 3 wolnamin, and 12 South Koreans who experienced internal migration. It is important to understand that these are problematic categories but temporarily necessary in order to highlight the different life stories that span multiple boundaries and borders. Therefore, it is also important to understand that these categories are not fixed but fluid and change in different stages of life and contexts.

Borneman (1992) writes naming and categorizing are always contested acts because they are essential sources of power in the construction of local and national senses of belonging. He goes on to say “Nowhere during the Cold War did the two Germanies fight more tenaciously with each other than over the naming of who and what were to be German.” Same thing could be said about two Koreas and their Korean diaspora.

### Transnationality of Korean Diaspora

According to Vertovec (2009: 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 increasing slowly as a research team led by Shin Hyeon-jun discusses circular or return migration of ethnic Koreans from the perspective of transnationalism (Shin Hyeon-jun 2013) and another research project at Hanyang University focuses transnational history. Very recently, the Association for the Studies of Koreans Abroad (ASKA, 2014) organized an international conference with a theme “Directions of Global Korean Society” to discuss various aspects of transnational Koreans and their activities in different parts of the world.

Here, transnationalism is referred to as sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations spanning nation-states. With regard to interactions between national governments or concerning the to-ing and fro-ing of items from one nation-state context to another, Vertovec suggests that we might best retain our description of these practices as 'international'. 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. Therefore, transnationalism describes a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders, certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common—however virtual—arena of activity.

This is not to say that the definition of transnationalism is fixed. In fact, there are many takes on transnationalism grounded upon distinct conceptual premises.

Vertovec (2009: 4) identifies six: transnationalism as social morphology, as types of consciousness, as mode of cultural reproduction, as avenue of capital, as 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 Korean diaspora or Koreans in general, especially in the age of circular or return migration, would be much more useful in not only describing the 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.

Derived from the Greek *diaspeiro*, the word diaspora meaning roughly globally scattered communities has become 'one of the buzzwords of the age of transnational migration since the 1990s (Vertovec 2009). Historically, the overall Jewish history of displacement has embodied the long-standing, conventional meaning of diaspora. However, today, new groups of diaspora who have wholly reappropriated and redefined the term as a new tool in cultural politics. 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.

In this regard, the collaborative oral life histories of Korean seniors who have lived outside South Korea for an extensive period of their lives has demonstrated that they and their identities constitute Korean diaspora with the common features mentioned by Robin Cohen. Nevertheless, to focus on the lives and practices of Korean diaspora which 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 would be more useful. In fact, it could be said that Korean diaspora of old have become today's transnational communities sustained by a range of modes of social organization, mobility and communication.

### Korean Diaspora as Performance

On October 19, 2012, eight seniors aged above 70 were invited to Hanyang University campus in Ansan to attend a 2-day workshop titled "Hanminjok Damunha Samui Yeoksa Iyagi: Nanumgwa Mannam". A rough translation is "Life Historical Stories of Multicultural Koreans: Sharing and Encountering". The purpose of the workshop is to bring together various 'categories' of Korean seniors who have experienced border-crossing migration or displacement and listen to their oral life stories. This is the encountering part.

Another important feature of this workshop is that the oral life stories of individual seniors will be told to each other in the 4 sessions, each lasting about

2 hours, during the 2-day workshop. This is the sharing part and the key feature of what our research team would call the “collaborative oral life story”. From a researcher’s point of view, such an encountering and sharing is an attempt to reconstruct Korean diaspora in the age of transnational migration and the post-Cold War/socialism through oral life story.

By definition, oral life history/story 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. But in the process of eliciting and analyzing the material, one is confronted by the oral history interview as an event of communication which 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. As a result, 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 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). With such understanding as a background, this paper attempts to focus on the remembering part of oral life stories as performance and, thus, attempt to reconstruct oral life history of Korean diaspora as performance.

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 stories tell us ‘not just what happened but what people thought happened and how they have internalized and interpreted what happened. As Daniel James puts 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” (Abrams 2010: 8).

In the workshop, which is the first of twelve workshops organized between September 2012 and August 2014, the participants consisted of 4 persons who were initially categorized as South Koreans with experiences of displacement and 4 persons who have migrated to South Korea from Sakhalin Island, Russia

and commonly referred to as yeonggugwihwan dongpo (returned ethnic Koreans). Being conscious of gender dynamic, the organizers invited equal ratio of men and women who are in a similar economic status. On a surface level, it is an encounter between “native” South Koreans (majority) and ethnic Koreans from Sakhalin Island (minority). These two groups were at unease as it was the first time for the South Korean group to meet the ethnic Koreans from Sakhalin Island.

Some have heard of the people living in Ansan in an apartment complex named “Gohyangmaeul (Hometown)” not far from the campus. Some have never heard of the history and the people who migrated by force or voluntarily to Sakhalin Island in the late 1930s and the early 1940s during Japanese colonial rule and their descendants who now make up a subgroup of Goryeoin or ethnic Koreans in Russia, specifically, ethnic Koreans in Sakhalin Island. So initially, the workshop was explained as the sharing of different and unexpected life histories of the Korean nation who 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 were also surprise to find out the diverse life histories of South Koreans filled with internal migration, displacement, refugee, etc. The research team was also surprised to find out that a South Korean woman was born in Jeju Island and 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 called ‘wolnamin’ (people who migrated to 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 filled with

stories of migrations, displacement, poverty, war, etc. which were quite unexpected even to the research team.

The second workshop, which took place on November 9 and 10, 2012, further expanded the categories of the participants to include Korean Chinese (Joseonjok) and North Korean migrants while reducing the total number of participants to six from eight. At this time, there were a conservative Korean War veteran, a North Korean man who served as a DMZ guard, an elite force in the North Korean Army, a Korean Chinese who migrated to Manchuria with his father in 1944 at age 3, a South Korean woman who was born in the southern region of South Korea but moved to Seoul after marriage and witnessed a killing of people accused of being communists when she was in the second grade of elementary school, a Korean Chinese woman who migrated to Manchuria at age 3 but requested to use a fake name since some of her family members were living in North Korea, and a North Korean woman whose family got separated in the Korean War when her father came to South and now has a grandson who is living in Australia. Again the life stories of the participants quite did not fit into the expectations and the discourse of the Korean national identity.

In fact, the participants of the first two collaborative oral life history workshops described above are all South Korean nationals. They are all South Koreans on paper. How do we define or reconstruct their identities and citizenship? What is clear so far is that nation-state borders cannot bind their identities and citizenship. Instead their transnational life-stories of departure, separation, displacement, relocation, and 'return' interweaved with transnational strategies of identity and citizenship.

Be that as it may, there are numerous episodes or moments during the deliverance of oral life stories that give an impression that participants are performing Korean diaspora. First of all, all the participants did or tried very hard to speak in South Korean dialect even though many categories of Korean have their own dialects and languages. It is at an individual time or level such as during a break or when one encounters a problem in saying the proper South Korean expression when they spoke the dialect or language they are most comfortable such as Russian or Chinese.

Another performance is the sense of 'hometown' or belonging. Most of the participants affirm that the current residence in South Korea is their hometown or where they belong now. But their oral life stories identify multiple hometowns and belonging in different times. One cannot expect nor force these people to have a single hometown or sense of belonging to a fixed place. This can be interpreted as deterritorialization of hometown. Further studies in the meaning of deterritorialization and uprootedness are planned.

The participants' various views on the state are performed. People from North Korea, China, and post-socialist countries all claimed that the South Korean state has generously provided support for them to settle in South Korea. However, they would occasionally compare the political and economical systems of South Korea and their former country of residence.

Lastly, the paper considers Korean diaspora as performance as the participants themselves internalize the categories of Koreans and differentiate other categories of Koreans in the similar manners as the mainstream South Korean society do.

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