

## Northeast Asia

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Hyun Gwi Park, *The Displacement of Borders among Russian Koreans in Northeast Asia*

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When British travel writer Isabella Bird Bishop (1831–1904) visited Korea in the mid-1890s, she found an impoverished nation with slums and beggars everywhere. She blamed Korea's upper class, the *yangban*, and the corrupt government for the misery they inflicted on the Korean commoner. She later visited a Korean community in Russian Manchuria where ordinary Koreans lived in apparent comfort and prosperity. Their hard work, skills, and thrift, and their position of being beyond the reach of their government and parasitic *yangban* tormenters, allowed them to prosper in ways that their cousins in Korea could not.

Thousands of Koreans migrated to the Russian Far East (RFE) as economic refugees in the decades preceding the Japanese seizure of Korea in 1910. Their numbers were swelled by Korean political refugees who fled Japan's oppressive rule between 1910 and the end of World War II in August 1945. While there remains a large Korean community in Russia, until recently few scholars have attempted to study these Russian Koreans. Hyun Gwi Park fills this gap with this book. Rather than writing a standard history of the Russian Korean experience, Park uses an extensive historical and ethnographic approach to study the contemporary social life of Korean Russians in this complex border region of the RFE.

Park covers the three major periods of Russian Korean history: the Tsarist period of the late 1800s and early 1900s and the early Soviet period, the period between 1936 and the early 1950s when Stalin ordered the forced migration of all Russian Koreans to Central Asia, and the contemporary period, which began in the mid-1950s and continues on today where some Russian Koreans have migrated back to the RFE.

Park argues that the Far Eastern frontier experiences an ongoing state of tension between geographic aspirations to bring development to this region and its insular views about neighboring countries of East Asia. Park argues that the history and contemporary social structure of Russian Koreans epitomizes these acute problems and intrinsic characteristics of the RFE:

My aim is to shed light from an anthropological perspective on how the lives of Russian Koreans are entwined with other local residents in this borderland area of Northeast Asia. Thus, it is important to describe their ongoing contemporary relationship with the RFE as a “dwelling place” rather than as the geopolitical object of state projects to transform the human environment. (40)

Park adopts “a situational and relational approach” to the scattered communities of these Russian Koreans, “focusing on how they maintain their way of life through kinship-centered sociality, which places great emphasis on being *sredi svoikh* (‘among our own people’)” (24). She adds that “this is not a static condition that requires fixed geographical boundaries; rather, it relates to contextualized behaviors and customs rooted in core family relationships, such as those between parents, children and siblings” (24).

Chapter 1 presents the reader with a historical view of the growth of the Korean community in the RFE from the tsarist and early Soviet era up through the migration to Central Asia. The author presents a broad historical outline of the emergence of a loosely defined Korean community rather than a unitary closely knit together group.

Chapter 2 analyzes the repatriation of some Russian Koreans from Central Asia with an emphasis on the 1990s and very early 2000s. Park bases her work on the premise that the “migration of Koreans from Central Asia to the RFE cannot be understood as a unitary phenomenon, but rather as something that involves many different factors” (82).

Chapter 3 examines the transition that Russian Koreans made from more traditional and cultural rice cultivation in Central Asia to more profitable vegetable cultivation. Russian Koreans gained a reputation of being “hard workers” who could make rice grow in the sands of the deserts of Central Asia. However, the consolidation of both successful and less successful collective farms worked to the disadvantage of Russian Koreans who often ran successful farms. These new larger farms, unfortunately, stuck the Koreans with the debts of those unsuccessful farms. The result was that many Russian Koreans turned to migratory vegetable cultivation.

Chapter 4 examines the post-Soviet economy of the 1990s and early 2000s. During this period of considerable economic turbulence, many people returned to the land for sustenance, mostly to their *ogorod* (backyard kitchen garden). Park notes that “this is a well-known pattern and Russian Koreans were no exception, although their cultivation activity appears to have been more successful than many: some Koreans have even managed to develop their cultivation into commercial ventures beyond mere subsistence farming” (139).

Chapter 5 focuses on a two-story building near the center of the city of Ussurlisk known as “Korean House.” The collapse of the Soviet Union led to more outside contacts and freedom of discussion. This building serves as a place where Koreans can come together, “providing Koreans with the opportunity to reconnect with what was presumed by many Russians to be” their historical homeland, South Korea (179). The House has given Russian Koreans a forum to openly discuss political, economic, and social subjects and to reinvigorate their Korean heritage.

Park’s monograph is an ambitious work that covers many topics. One will learn a great deal about the Russian Korean experience and their unique lives amid the rise and eventual fall of the Soviet experience. It is a groundbreaking book that will open other doors to this community of Russian Koreans. However, there are some problems with this work. There is no apparent unifying theme that can bring many isolated strands and diverse chapters together. In some respects, Park is overly ambitious. There is also a need for more historical context. What, for example, happened to Russian Korean society when the entire population was forced to migrate to Central Asia in the 1930s?

One rather irritating feature of Park’s writing is the use of strange vocabulary when simpler, more common wording would have made the text easier to read. Here is one example: “Koreans in Central Asia never viewed themselves as inferior autochthonous people . . .” (106). The word “autochthonous” refers to “original inhabitants” or indigenous peoples. This kind of writing combined with unnecessary jargon-laced prose make reading this book a difficult chore. That is a pity because Park has a lot of fascinating material to impart.

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