

Cultivating Koryo-in identity through Hangeul

The Koryo-in migration history spans 160 years and is closely related to the anti-Japanese independence movement. The name Koryo-in originated in the early days of migration and is still used today. In the 1860s, when poor farmers in the Joseon Dynasty were struggling to make ends meet due to crop failures, they left their hometowns and began migrating to the neighboring Russian Maritime Province (Primorsky Krai), calling themselves Koryo-in.

During the Japanese colonial period, Koreans migrated to the area in large numbers to escape Japanese exploitation, and hundreds of thousands of Koryo-in lived in the Maritime Province in the 1920s. However, the Koryo people, whose sovereignty was robbed by Japan, became stateless people without a homeland and suffered much oppression.

In 1928, poet Jo Myeong-hee published a famous anti-Japanese resistance poem titled “Trampled Koryo” in the famous Korean language newspaper Seonbong, which was published by Koryo people in Vladivostok. As a result, the term “Koryo-in” became widely known, independence awareness was greatly heightened, and Primorsky Krai became an outpost for the anti-Japanese independence movement.

In 1937, the Soviet Union’s forced migration policy under Stalin was a great suffering for the Koryo people. Stalin forcibly relocated 170,000 of them from the Maritime Province to Central Asia, fearing they would cooperate with Japan, which was hostile to the Soviet Union at the time. Koryo people were deported without any compensation, reduced to an enemy ethnic group and banned from holding public office. Stalin prohibited Koryo people from using Hangeul and forced them to use Russian.

However, Koryo people, with their unwavering will and sincerity, established the Koryo Association, preserved Hangeul, “hanbok” and traditions, and maintained their Korean identity. Above all, Koryo people have a strong sense of pride in being descendants of anti-Japanese independence fighters, and Gen. Hong Beom-do, an independence fighter who came to the end of his life in Kazakhstan, was the spiritual pillar of Koryo people.

Hangeul played a key role in maintaining the identity of Koryo



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people for the past 160 years. Despite difficult conditions, such as censorship by the Soviet Communist Party, Koryo people continued to publish Hangeul newspapers, such as the Haejo Shinmun (1908), Seonbong (1923) and Lenin Gichi (1938). In 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved, and 15 countries, including Russia and Central Asian countries, became independent. Koryo people living in Kazakhstan changed the name of the Lenin Gichi newspaper to Koryo Ilbo in 1991 and reemphasized their identity as Koryo people after 120 years of immigration.

The Hangeul newspaper provided a space for literary works to be published, and many Koryo writers were able to debut through these

papers. After Stalin’s death, the Soviet government’s discrimination and censorship against the Koryo people were eased, and Koryo writers’ literary collections were published, allowing Koryo literature to develop more creatively. Currently, the third and fourth generations of Koryo people are entering the mainstream, experiencing a complex identity and confusion of values. The fourth generation born after the collapse of the former Soviet Union has a strong individualistic tendency and different values from the third generation, who experienced Soviet communism. In addition, there are differences in national identity. These include Korea as a historical homeland, the socialist Soviet Union where they lived as a minority, a sense of belonging to the country they currently live in, and ideological conflicts due to the conflict between South and North Korea.

Recently, the Koryo people have been showing great interest in their native language and are increasingly immigrating to Korea. Hangeul will continue to play an important role in helping Koryo-saram overcome the confusion of values in a multicultural society and maintain their Korean identity.

First, the Korean government needs to expand the number of visits to their home country for Koryo people, actively support Hangeul education and cultivate more Koryo literature. In addition, the treatment of the 110,000 Koryo people residing in Korea needs to be improved so that they can reside stably without discrimination. 🇰🇷