

‘Korean language education is my calling’ Baek Kyung-sook, principal of Arsenyev Hangeul school

28 years in foreign land of Russia: ‘planting seeds of Korean language and culture’
Experiment with state-owned kindergarten; only collaborative model in Russia

“Teaching Korean language and culture itself brings me immense happiness and gratitude. I believe it is a calling from God.”

Baek Kyung-sook (66), principal of the Arsenyev Hangeul school, who has taught Korean for 28 years in Vladivostok and other regions of Primorsky Krai, Russia, calmly expressed her sense of duty and pride as an educator throughout an interview with Yonhap News.

Baek, who attended the 2025 Hangeul School Teacher Invitational Training hosted by the Overseas Koreans Agency, which opened at Songdo Convensia in Incheon on July 14, calmly discussed her sense of duty and pride as an educator who has taught Korean for the past 28 years in various regions of Primorsky Krai, from the process of establishing the Hangeul school to her efforts to spread Korean culture, as well as her dreams for the future.

The Arsenyev Hangeul school was born under challenging circumstances from the beginning. The Consulate General of the Republic of Korea in Vladivostok supported the school's establishment, and the Arsenyev Koryo-saram National Cultural Autonomy Association appointed Baek as the principal. Baek, as a Russian citizen, a former teacher at a local Russian school and married to a local person, was the perfect candidate to lead the school.

One of the school's most unique achievements is its collaboration with state-run kindergartens. Currently, approximately 100 children in four classes at the local state-run kindergarten are learning Korean. It is the only Korean-language specialist kindergarten in all of Russia.

“During the Lunar New Year celebration, we hosted programs where children experienced wearing ‘hanbok,’ bowing to each other, and playing traditional Korean games. The response was overwhelmingly positive. The kindergarten director asked me to formally teach Korean to the children,” she said.

An interesting feature is that youth classes of the



Baek Kyung-sook, principal of the Arsenyev Hangeul school in Russia

Hangeul school participate in this kindergarten class as “practicing teachers.”

“As I taught kindergarteners with a sense of responsibility, my Korean language skills improved rapidly and my confidence grew,” Baek explained.

COVID-19 brings turning point, expansion to online classes

COVID-19 presented both a crisis and an opportunity. Principal Baek boldly transitioned the Hangeul school to operating online. While there were many concerns, the results were remarkable.

“People who previously had difficulty commuting due to living in remote areas are now able to take Koryo compatriot youth and adult classes online. This has become an opportunity to overcome regional limitations.”

Currently, kindergarten classes continue to be held in person, while youth and adult classes are conducted online. In addition to regular classes, an integrated cultural class is held once a month, allowing all generations to learn about Korean culture and history together. Baek emphasized, “This activity plays a significant role in fostering mutual understanding and a sense of community.”

The Korean Culture Experience Camp, held every summer, is a valuable event open to youth and adult Koreans who have studied Korean for more than two years. Support and cooperation are provided by the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea in Vladivostok, the Korean Education Center,



Principal Baek Kyung-sook explains the New Year's bow to students dressed in "hanbok" at the Arsenyev Hangeul school during the Lunar New Year holiday.

the Korea Tourism Organization Vladivostok Branch and the Korean Association of Primorsky Krai in order to provide a hands-on experience of diverse Korean cultural content.

Baek expressed words of gratitude, saying: "During our March 2019 Korean Culture Experience program, our students were even able to enjoy admission to Lotte World thanks to the Korea Tourism Organization. The children loved it."

'Korea's son-in-law, Russia's daughter-in-law'; role as a private diplomat

When then President Moon Jae-in and then Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon visited Vladivostok, Russia, in 2017 to attend the Eastern Economic Forum, Baek acted as a representative for overseas Koreans and presented activities at a forum for overseas compatriots. She garnered attention as a representative of the Korean community, dubbed "Korea's son-in-law, Russia's daughter-in-law."

She is enough of a focus of attention that her 2007 acquisition of Russian citizenship earned prominent coverage in the local media, and has effectively served as a "civilian diplomat" promoting Korea within Russia.

"Even the Consulate General's image of Koreans improved thanks to the newspaper articles," she said.

Baek's active work was also widely covered in local newspapers and television in the Primorsky Krai region.

"The greatest reward is that the previously divided Koryo-saram associations of Arsenyev city have united through the Hangeul school," she emphasized.

Last November, a state-run kindergarten opened featuring a Korean cultural museum tailored to the needs of young children, thanks to donations of museum furniture from a Korean businessman in Primorsky Krai and collections from the consulate, educational institutes, Korean residents and Korean acquaintances.

'It has been greatly rewarding to unite divided Koryoin associations'

Baek shared her expertise with 234 Korean language teachers from 46 countries during the training program after the Arsenyev Hangeul school was

selected as a model for excellence.

"I've walked this path with the goal of planting the seeds of Korea," Baek said. "There were tears at times, but when the children write and speak Korean, I feel like all my hard work is worth it. Running a Korean language school is not just about education; it's also about communicating with relevant organizations in the region, building trust and actively engaging in exchanges."

At the age of 32, she suffered a cerebral infarction and was on the verge of death, unable to do anything. After recovering a year later, she said she is living a second life.

"I majored in early childhood education, social education and Korean language education, and I'm also a certified social psychological counselor," she said. "I'm pouring all my knowledge and experience gained from studying various fields into running the Hangeul school. My belief is to share what I have and what I can do with those in need and do my best."

Baek expressed gratitude for the Overseas Koreans Agency's selection of Park No-hak, who spearheaded the repatriation of Koreans from Sakhalin, as the July Overseas Korean of the Month.

"The monthly project honoring overseas Koreans who have contributed to the development of their homeland will lend great strength to the 7 million overseas Koreans," she added.

Concluding the interview, Baek cautiously expressed her hopes.

"I wish our Hangeul school could have a classroom of its own, even if it was just a small space. My lifelong dream is to create a 'Korea-Russia Friendship and Cultural Center,' where Korean and Russian children can learn Korean together in a safe environment and experience Korean culture together." 🇰🇷🇷🇺