

Special seminar Frontiers of Gender Studies in Asia

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In/Visible Images of Korean Women in the Soviet-Korean Newspapers

I have been studying the history and culture of Soviet-Koreans for almost thirty years. I was born in the Soviet Union as a third generation Korean and was raised in the Soviet Union. This essay focuses on visible (and invisible) images of Korean women.

The Korean-language newspaper, *Sonbong* (선봉), which means *Avante Guard*, was established in 1926 in the Soviet Far East. When all Koreans were expelled by the Stalin regime to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 1937, the newspaper was renamed *Lenin kichi* (레닌키치, or *The Way of Lenin*) and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newspaper was renamed again. It is now called *Koryo ilbo* (고려 일보), which means the *Daily Newspaper of Korea*, although the paper is not a daily, but a weekly. Several years ago, I initiated a project to digitize all Korean-language newspapers; the images from this project are an enormous resource and form the basis of this essay.

First of all, women did not suddenly become, in one moment, Soviet-Koreans. They lived for many centuries in the Korean peninsula and when they migrated to the Russian Far East in the last third of the 19th century, they settled down in the maritime region and organized themselves in Korean villages. In those villages, life was like in Korea—the houses, the food, the rules, the society, and the status and the position of women were all like in Korea. The villages on Russian soil were like those in Korea, for a *long* time. They still lived as an old traditional Korean society, including in terms of the role and status of women.

Traditional Korea was a Confucian society, and in such a society a woman has no right, no freedom, no name. When a girl was born, she was somebody's daughter, with no name. When she married, she was somebody's wife. When she bore a child, she was some child's mother. When she became old, she was the grandchild's grandmother. She was expected to sacrifice herself for her husband, her children, for her home.



(Photo caption)

In the upper left photo, the woman looks like she is in an Arab country, but this is early 20th century Korea. The woman shows just a little bit of the face, wearing the traditional dress of Korea. In other pictures like this one, you see not “ordinary” women, but Korean geishas or *kisen*.

The above right is a photo of a painting of Korea town in Vladivostok. The first Korea town was not in America or another country; it was established in Vladivostok, and the name was Sinhanchong (신한촌), or “new Korean village.” In the early 20th century, the elder men are in traditional Korean dress with some men in European or Russian dress. You see also the policeman is watching who is a spy or who is not spy.

Photos of women in the *Sonbong* newspaper were stereotypical images of hungry and very poor people, of a degraded Russia. While this did represent the majority, there were also wealthy people. In Vladivostok central station, for example, one could see very wealthy and well educated young Korean women.

When the Bolshevik Revolution rolled across the country from St. Petersburg, it of course also reached the Far East. Because the majority of the Korean population in the Russian Far East were poor peasants with no land, they believed in Lenin’s ideas about freedom for all people and to stop the war. As such, one can find photos of Korean guerrillas or partisans on the covers of some books. In the Soviet Union, however, there were almost no Soviet books about the Soviet Koreans; in fact, it was forbidden by Stalin to write about them, because he suspected them of being unreliable people. One striking exception to this are the several books about Koreans fighters for the Bolsheviks, *Revolution is the Far East*, which were published in the Soviet Union during 1920-1980.

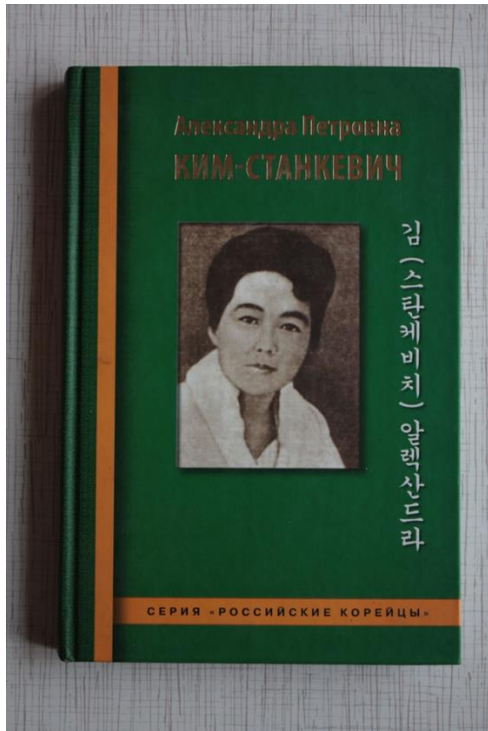


Photo caption: The Book “Alexandra Petrovna Kim-Stankevich” about a leading female Soviet Korean Communist published in the Serial “Koreans of Russia” issued by the All-Russian Union of Koreans.

Of all the leaders of the national liberation movement in the Russian Far East, and among them the guerrilla leaders who struggled against the interference of many countries who went to the far Russian Soviet republics, only one book is dedicated to a woman. Alexandra Petrovna Kim was a Korean political activist during the Bolshevik Revolution and is considered the first Korean Communist. After the revolution, she held a leading position, and rose to take charge of external affairs in the far eastern department of the Bolshevik party. In September 1918, she was captured by counter revolutionaries and Japanese troops and was executed. Now she is recognized in Russia as a hero. The Republic of Korea erected a plaque at her burial site, which is protected by the Russian government. This is quite a new trend, because some ten years ago the South Korean government did not recognize these leaders of the national revolutionary movement, calling them simply “red communists,” but it now recognizes that they struggled for the freedom of Koreans.



(photo caption)

That is a poster of the time of the proclamation of the first Soviet constitution in 1931.

The first Soviet constitution proclaimed the equality of men and women, although this idea was of course asserted beforehand in Lenin's works. After the revolution, the USSR took up the slogan of "the liberation of women of the Soviet Orient." The "Soviet Orient" referred mainly to Central Asia and Kazakhstan. Another popular slogan of the 1930s was, "hail the equality of Soviet women." The concept of the working mother was promoted: a woman who is a mother, but she is working (outside the home). The Soviet concept of equality meant that a woman is a mother, but this mother should work. In turn, her duties to care for her children would be taken on by the government, which established kindergartens and schools and so on. In this way, women would have equal social rights and also social duties.

Lenin's plan to establish Soviet socialist republics, realized by Stalin, involved the realization of the "triple tasks for the victory of socialism." The first task was industrialization, the second was collectivization, and the third was cultural revolution. Before Sovietization, Russia and the Soviet Union was almost totally an agrarian society. The massive campaign to industrialize was realized during 1929 to 1941 during the Great Patriotic War (or the second World War). During the industrialization and collectivization process, the Soviet government invented a massive, or en masse, awards system for workers who achieved good results. The awards included an "order" and medals. The highest was a golden medal; the highest title was a "hero of socialist labor." Among the 20,747 people to receive this title, 206 were Soviet-Koreans. Only one person, a Soviet-Korean named Kim Pen Hwa, was bestowed this title twice. Proportionately to their number in population, Soviet-Koreans received more awards than any other group, primarily because they showed outstanding results in agriculture.

In the Soviet time, there were many famous collective farms in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan called *kolkhoz*. These farms cultivated cotton, rice, sugar, sugar beets, grain, and so on. During industrialization, the role of Soviet women was invisible. Posters of the Soviet time showed no woman, only men. This was upended by the world-famous statue *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* created by Vera Mukhina, a famous female Soviet sculptor, in 1937. The 20.5-meter high sculpture was created for the World's Fair in Paris and then moved to Moscow, where it remains near the exhibition for the achievement of people's autonomy. The monumental statue represents the unity of industry and collectivization, which included women.

Indeed, when we look at posters about collectivization, there are many of women. This is because the role of the women was crucial in agriculture. Yet, if you look at the photos of the heroes of socialist labor, you see only men, no women. Among the 206 Soviet-Korean heroes of socialist labor, only 40 were women. This reflects the endemic inequality across the Soviet Union and in the Central Asian republics like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan: the men were number one, the men were the boss. Although women represented 60 percent of the total working agrarian labor, they represent only 0.067 percent of all Korean heroes of labor. This invisibility is not only of Soviet-Korean women, but all women.

There are, however, very visible, very famous Korean women. For example, Lyubov Lee was a hero of socialist labor. When Nikita Krushchev visited the collective farm where she was working, she happened to stand next to him when a photo was taken. All newspapers, journals, and magazines across the Soviet Union published this photo and she became very famous. Soon all famous Soviet politicians, celebrities, foreign guests, and leaders from African and Asian countries visited Lee to "grasp the essence" of a true socialist agricultural collective farm. Lee later also became a member of the Supreme Soviet Parliament, a very high position, for 8 years, or two terms.

Another woman who became very famous by a photograph was Yekaterina Kim. The iconic image of her wearing an Uzbek *tubeteika* (a traditional Uzbek cap) at the exhibition of the people's economy was published in a very popular magazine and she became famous across the Soviet Union. She died in July 2019 as the last heroine of the Soviet Union. You can find many other photos of visible female workers like this; they are working in the fields, in the farms, raising chickens, and so on.



Photo caption: The iconic image of Yekaterina Kim wearing an Uzbek *tubeteika*

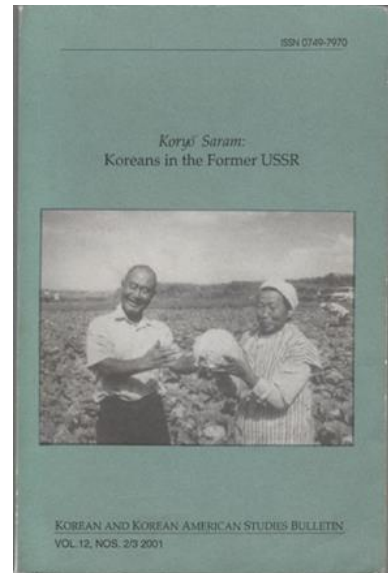
Invisible Soviet-Korean women in agriculture were those doing *kobonji*.¹ *Kobonji* was a very specific semi-legal agricultural practice invented by Soviet-Koreans. A team of workers moved from their place of residence to areas with very good soil, like Ukraine, renting pieces of land and cultivating crops (mainly onions), paying rent with a part of the harvest. *Kobonji* was the beginning of an “ethnic entrepreneurship” in the Soviet Union, a means of people doing business and being entrepreneurs using their ethnic network.² During the 1960s to 1990s, *kobonji* created a good chance for Koreans to earn money, sometimes big money, allowing some to become wealthy, to provide for their children to get a good education, not in the Central Asian republics, but in Moscow or Leningrad. Although it was semi-legal, the Soviet government closed its eyes to the practice, allowing Koreans to do it because they are a very small group. From the 1960 to the 1980s, *kobonji* farmers produced 70 percent of all market onions in the whole of the Soviet Union. There was no need to transport onions 6,000 km from one part of the USSR to another, because the Koreans went in small groups of 15-20 people to produce these onions in localities across the nation. During the peak season, all their families, relatives, even neighbors, friends, and colleagues in the factories came and helped with the work, which is why almost all Koreans know what *kobonji* is. *Kobonji* cannot be mentioned without discussing women, because women did the most difficult work in the *kobonji*.

In addition to *kobonji*, the household work, not only of Korean women, but all women, is also invisible. You will not find photos of women doing household chores in the newspapers. There are some in the photo archive that I and my students have created, but on the whole, this work is non-visible because images of it are not published.

¹ *Kobon* is parcel of land and *ji* is a kind of job.

² See Kim, German. 2009. *Ethnic entrepreneurship of Koreans in the USSR and post-Soviet Central Asia*. Chiba: Institute of Developing Economies.

Photo caption: A Korean mother working in a *kobonji* field in Uzbekistan with her child on her back, 1970



Motherhood and maternity are considered natural duties that were respected, promoted, and awarded in the Soviet Union. The highest, and highly respected, order was that of the Mother Heroine, given to mothers with more than ten children. The second was the Order of Maternal Glory, which was divided in three classes, and then the maternity medals in two classes, golden and silver. Many Korean women living in collectives did not know that they should—or how to—create the necessary documents to apply for such awards, even though the Soviet government supported large families. During the 1940s and 50s, a big share of Korean families in Kazakhstan were living in collective farms or in villages and had over five children. Especially large Korean families had over seven children. The rapid urbanization of Koreans began in the 1960s as people moved from villages and collective farms to towns and the city. The size of Korean families decreased very fast; by the 1970s the average Korean family had just 2-3 children.

(photo captions)



A unique photo not published in the newspaper is that of a mother who bore eleven children but did not receive the Order of Maternal Glory medal (it is not known why). Kim Dya Bok (seen in the photo above), had ten children. She was bestowed the Order of Mother Heroine, the highest title in the Soviet Union awarded for bearing and raising a large family with over ten children. It is embarrassing that the Korean-language newspaper did not publish articles and photos about the Korean women awarded Soviet maternity medals. I cannot explain why.

Who are the visible Soviet-Korean women? As is true not only of Korean or Soviet women, generally, visible women are actresses or sportswomen – the celebrities. Very famous actresses work in the Korean theater of Kazakhstan, including those who have been awarded the Honorable Actress of the Soviet Union, which is a very high title. Or, the People's Actress of Soviet Union, or of the republics.

(photo captions)



Lee Ham Dek, seen in the photo above, is a People's Actress of the Kazakhstan Republic.

The photo below became famous in the Korean newspapers: Lee Ham Dek (center) is with Tsoy Tatyana (left) and Pak Maya (right), both Honorable Actresses of Kazakhstan. All three played the character of Chunhyang (춘향), the young protagonist of the Classical Korean novel Chunhyangjeon. The novel was adapted for the theater and several productions were put on at the Korean theater in Kazakhstan. The male director of the theater was awarded the People's Artist of the Soviet Union.



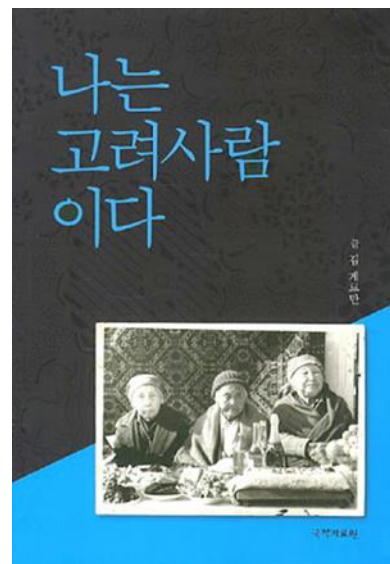
In Soviet Union, sometimes a great person was never mentioned in the ethnic region. This is also true today. A recent search on Google of Soviet Koreans celebrities reveals Victor Tsoy, a rock singer, as number one with over 5 million hits. By comparison, the world-famous writer Anita Tsoy (bottom left photo) has only one million hits and the five-time Olympic medalist Nelly Kim (bottom right) has 1.7 million hits.



Who are the visible Korean women? There are some from collective farms, but even those who earned two orders of Lenin, even the gold medal of heroine, remain invisible. There are also some images of Soviet-Korean schoolteachers, dressmakers, and doctors. As Koreans are very good at accounting, there are photos of bookkeepers, sellers, traders, and so on.

Korean *babushkas*, however, are invisible. *Babushkas* are part of Soviet culture, Soviet life, style of life, and Soviet people's mentality. They are not just grandmothers; the *babushka* is something special to the culture and there is not a single photo published in the *Sonbong* newspaper of a

Soviet-Korean *babushka*. I took this photo for the cover of my book at a 60-year celebration, because I wanted to show that there are also Korean *babushkas*.



Soviet policies have drastically changed the social cultural position of Korean women compared to what it was in the old Korea, or revolutionary Russia, or even compared to the end of the 1990s. Gender studies on Korean women in the USSR in the post-Soviet space are still *tabula rasa*, a blank page. What research there is raises very little interest in the mass media discourse. The history of Korean women and the Soviet Union intersects with many aspects of the general development of women's issues in the USSR, including the status of women in Soviet society, but there are some specific issues related to the visible and invisible layers of Soviet-Korean women in the family and society.

Ideological and stereotypical portraits of Soviet women, including Korean women, are in many respects far from the truth. Therefore, gender research on Soviet-Korean women, not only Soviet, and not only Korean, women, should be based not only on images represented in the newspapers, but also on a broad range of sources, including archives, literature, oral histories, interviews, folklore, and more.