

Book Review

Han, E.-J., Han, M. W., & Lee, J. (Eds.). (2020).
*Korean Diaspora Across the World:
Homeland in History, Memory, Imagination, Media, and Reality.*
Lexington Books.

Stephanie L. Young

Department of
Communication and
Media, University of
Southern Indiana, USA

Corresponding to
Stephanie L. Young

Department of
Communication and
Media, University of
Southern Indiana, 8600
University Boulevard,
Evansville, Indiana, 47714,
USA

Email: slyoung@usi.edu

Received

16 June 2022

Accepted

19 July 2022

Where are you from? A seemingly simple question asking the individual to mark their identity geographically. For some, one's birthplace defines oneself. Home is where you are from. For others, the question is a complicated one. For those of the Korean diasporic community, over 7.3 million ethnic Koreans that reside outside of the Korean Peninsula (South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021), the meanings of home and homeland are multifaceted and complex, enabled and constrained by individual, familial, historical, cultural, socioeconomic, and geopolitical factors. Eun-Jeong Han, Min Wha Han, and JongHwa Lee's edited volume, *Korean Diaspora across the World: Homeland in History, Memory, Imagination, Media, and History* explores the "diverse voices of Korean diaspora across the world, tracing the meaning and the performance of 'homeland' for them" (Han et al., 2020, p. vii). While much research has looked at the largest Korean diaspora, located within the United States, little attention has been given to the diverse diasporic experiences of Koreans in countries such as Japan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Chile, and Guatemala. Han, Han, and Lee provide a rich collection of essays, ranging from personal narrative to media analysis, that address the communicative practices of constructing, remembering, and representing "homeland." The common theme across chapters is the concept of "homeland." From cultural dislocation and the fragmentation of memory, home/homeland is simultaneously emplaced and displaced not just geographically, but also spatially and temporally. Homeland is simultaneously a real and imagined place for the Korean diaspora.

The book consists of two parts and thirteen chapters. In part one, authors focus on their personal experiences in making sense of their

cultural identities within the framework of Korean diaspora. Central to each chapter are the voices and stories of the diasporic communities, providing rich qualitative research that addresses issues of belonging, yearning, and searching for who we are within the in-between transnational spaces—from Russia to Japan to North Korea to the United States. In the introductory chapter, “Looking at Koreans’ Global Migration Path through the Lenses of Family History,” Eun-Jeong Han examines global migration patterns through three generations of her family history and how memory impacts the idea of homeland. Specifically, she looks at how her family’s stories of migration (to Japan, Saudi Arabia, United States, and Australia) exist within larger patterned systems of population flow due to economic changes. This first chapter sets up the goals of the overall collection through introductory literature on Korean diaspora and a personal voice that invites the reader to consider how larger historical events impact individual and family histories.

In Chapter 2, “Korean Diaspora in Sakhalin—Your Homeland Does Not Need You but We Do,” Irina Balitskaya and Jae Hyung Park explore the lives of multiple generations of Sakhalin Koreans through an ethnographic examination of ethnic identity and cultural adaptation within the repatriation process. Sakhalin, the largest Russian island located north of the Japanese archipelago, is home to approximately 25,000 Koreans. Interviewing 16 Sakhalin Koreans, Balitskaya and Park look at how different generations make sense of their identities. For that first generation, those born in Korea who were forced by the Japanese Empire to work as miners and fishermen (*jing-yong* 징용 or forced compulsory labor), returning to South Korea had a “split sense of homeland” (p. 29) connected to nostalgia. Many second and third generation Sakhalin Koreans identified with both their Korean and Russian identities, some opting to stay in Sakhalin rather than migrate to South Korea. Balitskaya and Park’s research challenges scholars to reconsider the complexities

of repatriation, immigration, hybrid identities, and what it means to be a Sakhalin Korean.

In Chapter 3, “Negotiating the ‘Homeland’: An Analysis of Narrative Identities among First-Generation Koreans in Japan,” Min Wha Han shares oral histories of first generation *Zainichi* Koreans, Koreans forced to immigrate to Japan during the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945) who remained in Japan afterwards. As Han notes, sharing these stories help us to “unpack the traces of colonialism and postcolonial conditions among *Zainichi* Koreans as well as sources of Korean ethnic/postcolonial subjectivity” (p. 40). Indeed, *Zainichi* Koreans exist in an in-between space of national boundaries, one in which memories of an undivided Korean homeland intertwined with living in Japan, shape their diasporic identities.

In Chapter 4, “Families Beyond Borders: Discourse of Homeland, Diaspora, and (Up)rooted-Identity,” JongHwa Lee focuses on Korean American separated families and the efforts of Korean Americans to find and reunite with loved ones in North Korea. Central to these efforts is the National Coalition of the Divided Families whose goal is to develop global networks to illuminate “the problem of separated families as a global/moral humanitarian issue” (p. 67). Sharing these personal stories honors the voices of Korean Americans in hopes of reunifying with their divided families and resists dominant Korean War narratives of the US as military savior.

In Chapter 5, “Homeland in the Kitchen: The Intersection of Food and Diasporic Identity,” Jaehyeon Jeong discusses how food becomes a site for “acculturation and transculturation” (p. 75) that communicates a diasporic identity tied to one’s homeland. Interviewing members of a Korean activist group residing in the US, Jeong looks at how individuals create “hybrid culinary practices” in which “food plays a critical role in this process of diasporic identity” (p. 78). Members share how Korean food becomes a way to not only maintain their ethnic cultural roots, but also create

communal spaces to cook and eat together, often eliciting stories and memories of home.

In Chapter 6, “Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Discursive Burden of Establishing Individual and Family Identity,” Sara Docan-Morgan looks at the challenges that transnational Korean adoptees face and the problematic history of transnational Korean adoptions. Specifically, Docan-Morgan’s work extends family communication scholarship by addressing the discursive burdens that Korean adoptees confront in navigating the contradictions of their identities, their relationships with their adoptive parents, and their desire to find their birth families.

In Chapter 7, “The 1.5 and 2nd Generations in Chile: Am I a Korean?” Wonjung Min provides insight into the little known Korean diaspora in Chile, made up of a little over 2,600 individuals. Min gives a brief history of Korean migration to Chile and interviews one-and-a-half and second-generation Korean Chileans to better understand how these generations communicatively construct their identities and resist stereotypes Chileans have of *chinitos* (Asians).

In part two, chapters center on public discourse and media including online communities, ethnic media networks, and social media, observing how these spaces play a crucial role in creating and maintaining Korean identities transnationally. Rather than qualitative interviews and oral histories, part two takes a methodological shift in which scholars engage in textual and discourse analysis of archival and mediated texts. Many of the chapters focus on how new communication technologies play a role in connecting diasporic populations back to Korea, the homeland. In Chapter 8, “Identity Formation of the Korean Diaspora, *Koryo-Saram*, in Contemporary Kazakhstan: An Analysis Based upon Articles of *Koryo-Ilbo*,” Jinhye Lee focuses on the *Koryo-Saram* (고려사람), Koreans who immigrated to Russia and then were deported to Central Asia in 1937 by the Soviet government (p. 132). Specifically, Lee analyzes the *Koryo-Saram*

newspaper *Lenin Gichi*, examining emerging discourses about identity, community, and multi-ethnic integration within Kazakhstan.

In Chapter 9, “‘Trash to the Trash Cans, Koreans to the Korean Peninsula’: Diehard Racism and the Rise of Hate Speech against Korean Residents in Japan,” Soo-Hye Han discusses the rise of anti-Korean sentiments in Japan and how “the internet has been instrumental in spreading racism against Koreans in the twenty-first century” (p. 154). Han begins by establishing the vital historical context of prejudices against *Zainichi* Koreans and colonial and postcolonial racial hierarchies within Japan. She then explores how online groups employ nationalistic discourses that perpetuate historical revisionism and promote racial purity and xenophobic rhetorics. Additionally, the chapter looks at the impact of hate speech and how some Korean and Japanese organizations advocate for hate-speech laws.

In Chapter 10, “‘I Am Korean American’: Constructing Diasporic Identifications on a Korean American Facebook Group and Pinterest Board,” David C. Oh looks at how “Korean Americans have more symbolic resources to bind together an imagined community across media culture” (p. 174). That is, with the rise of the internet and digital technologies, digital spaces have cultivated “digital diasporas” in which Koreans throughout the world can have access to ethnic media or “media created in the host culture for a diasporic audience, [which] is hybrid as it is locally situated but also transnationally infused” (p. 177; see also Oh, 2016). Specifically, Oh analyzes social media posts on one Korean American themed Pinterest board and one Korean American Facebook group, finding that these sites emphasize Korean Americans’ experiences in the US, avoid controversies or discussion about intra-ethnic differences, and “situate the homeland as relevant insofar as it matters toward belonging home in the US” (p. 175).

In Chapter 11, “Online Community for Information, Support, and Transnational Activities: A Case of

MissyUSA among Female Korean Im/migrants in the United States,” EunKyung Lee studies the online ethnic community *MissyUSA* and how the website provides a space for “information, social support, and transnational activities” (p. 194). Along with textual analysis of posts on two web boards, Lee interviewed ten community users to understand how members use the online site. With over 400,000 members, *MissyUSA* can be characterized as a network of Korean women or *A-Jum-Mas* (아줌마: married middle-aged women or aunts) who share their experiences to help new Korean immigrant women adapt to their lives in the United States. The group provides emotional support, practical advice, and resources, and shares Korean news to stay connected to the homeland. The community has even cultivated transnational activism, generating donations for the *Sewol* ferry tragedy. Lee’s work offers a case study for the importance of online communities and how the diaspora is cultivated. While on the surface *MissyUSA* appears to be another lifestyle website (e.g., relationships, health and beauty, entertainment, food), it provides valuable cultural knowledge and connection, developing not only feminine networks, but also transnational relationships that re-envision the boundaries of citizenship and global activism.

In Chapter 12, “Context Matters: The Effect of Homeland Media Use on the Generation of Social Capital among Korean Communities in the US,” Sohyun Choi and Claire Shinhe Lee develop a theoretical model of Korean migrant media use and how the contexts of media use impact production of social capital. Specifically, they look at how the language of media content (Korean or English) and the purpose of media use (recreational or informational) impact Korean migrants’ attitudes, behaviors, and interactions within Korean-speaking communities (bonding) and with English-speaking communities (bridging).

In Chapter 13, “*Coreana Vlogs*: Diasporic Media and the Politics of Asian Representation in Latin

America,” Benjamin M. Han addresses the lack of research on Korean diaspora in Latin America and examines “a popular YouTube channel known as *Coreana Vlogs* that documents the activities of a twenty-six-year-old Korean named Cristian Kim in Mexico” (p. 233). Han argues that Cristian Kim’s YouTube videos create a new kind of diasporic subjectivity, one in which Cristian shares his everyday experiences as an “ordinary” Spanish speaking Korean with working-class roots living in Mexico. His videos exemplify a cosmopolitan, global citizen—one who immigrated to Guatemala, was educated in Korea and the United States, dates a Mexican woman, and visits his parents in Korea. *Coreana Vlogs* creates greater visibility of Asian men (although, at times, reinforcing Orientalist tropes), provides an awareness of the growing Asian-Latin American population, and cultivates transnational linkages between Latin America and Asia.

As a Korean American, daughter of a Korean mother who immigrated to the United States in 1973 to marry an American serviceman, learning about the numerous histories and the personal stories of immigrants, expatriates, adoptees, and transnationals made me feel connected to this vast network of Korean diaspora. The readings in part one allowed me to reflect on the sacrifices that many make in hopes of a better life. Authors acknowledge how their personal experiences shape their research, and their stories speak to the struggles, adaptation, and ingenuity of diasporic persons. The readings in part two helped me consider the ways in which technology and media play in my own life, not only staying in touch with family members in South Korea (with KakaoTalk), but also being informed about Korean news and politics (KBS World app) and entertained by a variety of films and K-dramas on streaming platforms (e.g., Netflix, Rakuten Viki).

In conclusion, *Korean Diaspora across the World* provides a powerful collection of essays about migration and survival, of memory and place, and of longing for and coming home. The edited

volume is an excellent academic resource for scholars interested in history, media, diaspora studies, communication studies, and Korean studies. Something beneficial would be to have a Korean version of this book, potentially providing Korean readers an opportunity to learn more about the diaspora. *Korean Diaspora across the World* calls us to reconsider how we construct our identities by exploring diverse diasporic experiences and challenging simplistic definitions of who we are and where we are from. From forced labor due to Japanese colonial occupation, to the deportation of Koreans in the Soviet Union to Kazakhstan, to the impact of the Korean War (1950-1953) in dividing the peninsula and families seeking out job opportunities in Chile, the Korean diaspora possess an array of histories and stories shaped by complex causes. What people of the Korean diaspora do share is the connection, may it be real, imagined, or remembered, back to the homeland.

REFERENCES

- Han, E.-J., Han, M. W., & Lee, J. (Eds.). (2020). *Korean diaspora across the world: Homeland in history, memory, imagination, media, and reality*. Lexington Books.
- Oh, D. C. (2016). Reconsidering ethnic media research: An argument for a diasporic identity framework. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 24(5), 264–275.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870.2016.1232259>
- South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2021). Total status of overseas Koreans (as of December 2020).
https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/wpge/m_21507/contents.do