Invisible Diaspora Among Koryo-saram Third Culture Kids (TCKs)

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Abstract

This paper explores the shifting paradigm of security in the era of globalization, emphasizing the limitations of traditional state-centric models in addressing the needs of marginalized diaspora communities. Focusing on Korean Third Culture Kids (TCKs), particularly the Koryo-saram in post-Soviet regions, it examines how double marginalization, unstable cultural identity, and a lack of institutional support shape their human, cultural, and community security experiences. By analyzing existing studies and policy frameworks, the study highlights the insufficient recognition and protection of these groups within Korea's diaspora policy. The paper argues for an expanded understanding of security that encompasses identity, cultural cohesion, and community belonging for diaspora youth, presenting recommendations for more inclusive policy measures to strengthen the security and integration of TCKs as vital contributors to Korea's global network.

Keywords: Third Culture Kids (TCKs); Koryo-saram Diaspora; Human Security; Cultural Security; Identity; Government Policy; Transnational Migration; Institutional Support; Social Belonging; Conflict Analysis and Resolution

Introduction

Traditionally, the concept of security has focused on national security, the protection of a state from external military threats. However, in today's security scope, the concept of security expands to encompass cultural sustainability, belonging, and identity. Diaspora communities are groups that experience complex forms of marginalization and require a conceptual shift in security. In particular, Third Culture Kids (TCKs), who grow up between different cultures for various reasons such as labor migration, missionary work, adoption, and study abroad, experience "double marginalization," in which they are marginalized in both Korea and their place of residence despite having a Korean identity and growing up in their residential country.

Whereas most TCK research focuses on Americans and missionary children, many people have had a formative intercultural experience in more diverse environments.[1] This research aims to focus on recognizing TCK communities that are blind spots in policies and studies, and to identify the types of human insecurity the community and its members are experiencing. Notable examples include the children of Koreans in Russia (Koryo-saram). This group experiences various forms of instability and crises of community belonging, including economic instability, cultural marginalization, unequal educational opportunities, and identity-based discrimination.

This study aims to investigate the cultural and community insecurity marginalized Korean TCKs experience, focusing on the Koryo-saram diaspora. Through the analysis of studies, it will identify the diaspora group that remains socially 'invisible' and demand the expansion of the view of Korea's diaspora to include a further aspect of security.

In today's globalized world of transnational migration, the interaction of diverse cultures across borders has led to an increase and diversification of hybrid identities. Third Culture Kids (TCKs), a distinctive hybrid identity, are children who spend a significant portion of their formative years in a culture different from both their parents' culture (1st culture) and the culture in which they were born and/or raised (2nd culture).[2] While TCKs have higher cultural adaptability and broader global perspectives, they often face challenges related to insecurities about identity, belonging, and community acceptance.

Among the Korean TCKs, a particularly underexamined group is the Koryo-saram. Koryo-saram are ethnic Koreans residing in post-Soviet states. This community has a history of forced migration under Stalin's regime and fragmented nations due to the collapse of the USSR and layered marginalization. Despite an increasing number of overseas Koreans and expanding global diasporic ties, Korean TCKs, such as the Koryo-saram, remain largely absent from policy frameworks, scholarly attention, and social acceptance.

As a Korean-nationality TCK raised partially abroad, I have personally experienced the lack of institutional support and public recognition that such individuals face. This study begins with the belief that the challenges these individuals face—particularly in identity and community security—must be recognized as security issues. Moving beyond traditional state-centric definitions of security, this paper draws on

the concepts of human, cultural, and community security to argue for a more inclusive framework of diaspora engagement.

Accordingly, this study asks: How do Koryo-saram Third Culture Kids (TCKs) experience cultural and community insecurity within both their host societies (2nd culture) and South Korea (1st culture), and how can Korea's diaspora policy address these vulnerabilities as critical security concerns?

Diaspora

The term "diaspora" refers to communities and settlements formed by members of an ethnic group scattered across various regions of the world and encompasses international migration, asylum seekers, refugees, migrant workers, ethnic communities, cultural differences, and identity.[3]

Korean Diaspora

The Korean diaspora began in earnest in 1863 with the agricultural immigration of Koreans to the Primorsky Krai Region. Subsequently, it expanded in various forms, including agricultural immigration, labor immigration, asylum, and business and investment immigration. Below are the main diaspora types selected by the Korean Diaspora Knowledge Information Resource, which this study will primarily focus on.

The Koryo-saram diaspora residing in Russia and Central Asia gathered through several periods: agricultural immigration, exile, forced relocation in 1937, and re-migration after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Today, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, approximately 120,000 Koryo-saram reside in Russia and approximately 310,000 in Central Asia.[4]

Korean Chinese settled in the northern Hwaryong Region of the Tumen River in 1886, encouraged by the region's reclamation and the establishment of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in 1952. Traditionally, Korean Chinese mainly settled in the three northeastern provinces of China. However, with China's reform and opening up and the establishment of diplomatic relations between South Korea and China, the Korean Chinese population in the region has been dispersed to other cities and some have returned to Korea. As of 2021, approximately 1.6 million Korean Chinese live in the three northeastern provinces, and approximately 2.1 million live in China as a whole.

In North America, immigration began in 1882 after the signing of the Korea-US Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation, and included

merchants, students, and political refugees. Immigration to Hawaii in 1903, international marriages after the Korean War, war orphans, adoptions, and liberalized immigration after the 1965 revision of the US Immigration Act all contributed to the complex immigration patterns in the region. Currently, approximately 2.6 million Koreans are living in the United States, and 240,000 in Canada.

Koryo-saram will be the primary marginalized group, and the Korean Chinese and Korean American communities will be functioning as a comparison of having a larger, stable community, especially in North America.

Third Culture Kids

The concept of Third Culture Kids (TCKs) was first introduced by social scientists Ruth H. Useem and John U. Useem in the 1950s, based on the experiences of Americans residing in India with various jobs. [5]They referred to the first culture as the culture of the parents' homeland or country of origin, the second culture as the culture of the host country, and the lifestyle of overseas foreign communities as an intermediate culture or intercultural culture, thereby coining the term "third culture." Children raised in this intermediate culture were defined as Third Culture Kids, or TCKs. The category of TCKs includes children of overseas Korean immigrant families, children of international student families, refugees, and all children who live in contact with two or more cultures.

In his book Third Culture Kids: Growing up among worlds, David C. Pollack, the most famous scholar discussing TCKs, describes the characteristics of children growing up in a third culture and the strengths and difficulties they face as they grow up. Third Culture Kids tend to have a better understanding of globalization and adapt more easily to new environments than other children. They possess intercultural skills, use bilingual or multilingual skills, and have observational and social skills acquired through adapting to new cultures. However, they tend to experience difficulties establishing their identity due to their cross-cultural lifestyle. Studies on TCKs suggest that while they possess practical skills as global citizens, they may also struggle to form a national identity.

The difficulties they experience in establishing their identity and forming a national identity as they grow up are directly linked to the concepts of cultural security, community security, and identity security under the concept of human security, and more broadly, they also affect

national security in terms of population and culture, as well as economic security.

Korean Third Culture Kids

Korean Third Culture Kids are people whose first culture is Korean and their second culture is their residence culture. Korean TCKs are people of Korean ethnicity and/or nationality who spent most of their formative years abroad. In a broader category, Korean TCKs are included in the broader category of 'overseas Koreans.' Among Korean TCKs, there are diverse groups, including those of Korean descent, children of Korean international students with single nationality, adoptees, and children of migrant workers, but discussions on the unique instability and identity crises they face remain insufficient.

Acknowledgment of the concept of security is important because, first, it facilitates asking the most basic question in social science of "what is this an instance"; second, it promotes rational policy analysis by facilitating comparison of one type of security policy with another; and third, it facilitates scholarly communication by establishing common ground between those with disparate views.[6] For more academic-level discussions and policy responses for marginalized TCK communities, it is also important to identify and address their security challenges.

Culture and Community Security

Cultural security is a dimension of human security that has received little attention, yet it is important. Cultural security consists of the security of personal and collective identity negotiations that are characteristic of our mobile postmodern world and includes freedom of thought, conscience, language, speech, lifestyle, ethnicity, gender, association, assembly, and cultural and political participation[7]. With the expansion of globalization, and the dual process of globalization and localization - glocalization, increasing forced and voluntary migration accompany cultural insecurities for the immigrants, refugees, displaced people, and their offspring—TCKs. Cultural insecurity relates to the denial of one's own cultural identity, obstacles to speaking one's language, and the process of recreating one's culture. Discrimination experienced under certain cultural circumstances—such as being treated as an alien in one's own country due to ethnicity, living in a second culture without citizenship rights, being driven out of one's homeland, facing ethnic profiling as counterterrorism measures, or experiencing displacement and genocide—

also constitutes cultural insecurity. Cultural security can be interpreted at both the individual level, emphasizing the importance of securing one's cultural identity, and at the national level, emphasizing power through culture. Also, cultural security functions as a significant tool for the spread and acquisition of culture through soft power.

Community security, also one of the elements of human security, has been advanced through security discourses and practices in the international arena and is widely regarded as the domain of a state[8]. Community security can be defined as protection against the breakdown of communities, as a result of loss of traditional relationships and values, and sectarian and ethnic violence[9]. Also, the threats to community security come from factors such as discrimination, exclusion, violence from other groups, and threats from the state. The expansion of the notion of community security provides a more flexible framework for responding to changing contexts and cultures. Although there is an aspect that equates community security with the protection of one's identity, Weaver identifies identity as the ultimate criterion of societal security. He states that societal insecurity arises in situations in which significant groups within a society feel threatened, feel their identity is endangered by immigration, integration, or cultural imperialism, and try to defend themselves[10]. In terms of TCKs, one of the largest challenges and insecurities this community faces is an identity crisis, which leads to the fact that TCKs face societal insecurities. Threats to the preservation of language and customs, the community's identity survival, and value insecurity due to transnational migration is induced in this context.

Koryo-Saram

The Koryo-saram (Koryoin) community is part of the Korean Diaspora, which lives in the former Soviet Union region.[11] Koryo-saram migrated to Primorsky Krai from the Joseon Peninsula in 1863 during the Joseon era and were later forced to relocate to Central Asia under Stalin's oppressive regime[12]. After the Soviet Union collapsed and the other former Soviet Union states gained independence, Koryo-saram were forced to adapt and assimilate into the new political and social systems as minorities in a multi-ethnic society.[13]

According to statistics from the Overseas Koreans Agency in 2023, approximately 430,000 Koreans reside in former Soviet Union countries such as Russia and Uzbekistan. In South Korea, Ansan City (Gyeonggi Province), one of the areas with the highest concentration of Korean

Russians, recently reported a new record: approximately 20,000 Korean Russians reside in Ansan City as of 2023. They have mainly settled near industrial complexes and are continuing to engage in economic activities. However, they and their children face various socioeconomic vulnerabilities, such as language and cultural barriers, housing instability, and a lack of educational opportunities.

Koryo-saram Third Culture Kids

Koryo-saram TCKs refer to youths born and/or raised in Central Asia with Korean ancestry. Along with the other TCK communities, these youths experience identity instability, double marginalization, language barriers, and cultural unfamiliarity in Korea. However, unlike other TCK communities, such as Korean Americans, international students, and MK (missionary kids), who have more community support and a secure third culture community, along with history, they have been relatively excluded from official diaspora programs and social support at both national and social levels. It is known that a significant number of Korean-descendant youth who have recently entered South Korea struggle with cultural adaptation and the Korean language after arrival. As a result, many drop out of school. This is important because it can lead to another insecurity, a loss of social belonging, and long-term instability. In particular, Koreans who entered South Korea after the war in Ukraine are facing even greater difficulties in securing stable residence due to threats to their physical security.

Another significant point that Koryo-saram TCKs show is that although today's young Koryo-saram generation did not experience the collapse of the Soviet Union or the end of socialism during the Soviet era, the values of that era have been passed down through family and education. Traditional principles and patriarchal perceptions remain intact.[14] At the same time, it is striking that the younger generation of Koryo-saram has not been able to adapt appropriately to the different values and culture of the post-Soviet era and the competitive capitalist system, resulting in an anxious youth culture. To address these issues, Kim Young-sool argues that national programs are needed to provide social support for Koryo-saram youth, and that the future of the Koryo-saram community will be determined by the level of attention given to the younger generation and their development.

Policy Review

In 2007, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of South Korea, after being criticized for its inadequate support policies for Koreans, began expanding various support measures through its overseas Korean policy to promote the stable settlement of Koreans in the CIS region and strengthen their ties with their homeland. These measures include providing support for stateless Koreans to obtain citizenship, introducing a visit-employment system for overseas Koreans, establishing an agricultural base for Koreans, and supporting Korean language schools and cultural exchange programs. However, in addition to policy measures, social support is also necessary for the collective security of Koreans.

Currently, there is an insufficient response to issues unique to TCKs, such as identity formation among youth, community integration, and securing educational facilities. The difficulties faced by Korean TCKs should not be viewed merely as objects of support, nor should security be viewed solely from the perspective of the Korean community, but rather from the perspective of the Republic of Korea's collective security. TCKs are an important human resource for the country and are directly linked to cultural security, economic security, and population security. In addition, following the Ukraine-Russia war, there has been an increasing trend of Korean TCKs migrating to South Korea due to threats to their physical security. However, while Korean refugees from Ukraine receive humanitarian and political support as temporary refugees in all countries except South Korea, Koreans who have entered South Korea are not classified as refugees but as immigrants and are not receiving the necessary support. As such, South Korean society needs to foster social discourse and consider how to protect these individuals and communities that are in a blind spot.

Comparative Framework

The Korean-Chinese community is a group with relatively high cultural, linguistic, and geographical connectivity with South Korea due to their shared Confucian values, common Chinese character culture, use of Korean dialects, geographical proximity, and continuous labor migration routes. According to 2023 statistics from the Overseas Koreans Foundation, there are approximately 2.1 million people in this group, and they are a relatively well-known overseas Korean community in South Korean mass media and public discourse.

The Korean-American community has high cultural capital, fluency in English, and international mobility, which allows them to easily access not only national-level diaspora programs and cultural exchange projects, but also support systems within universities and smaller systems. They are often described as having a modern, globalized Korean identity and as relatively solid and cohesive third-culture communities based on their Christian faith.

In contrast, Korean TCKs experience low visibility, a lack of institutional support in the past, and cultural alienation. Due to complex factors such as the instability of second-culture migration after the collapse of the Soviet Union, language barriers, and discrimination as labor migrants in their home countries, they appear to be a relatively marginalized overseas Korean community and TCK community. Although the government has institutional efforts, such as cultural exchange and educational support, Korean TCKs are still socially excluded.

The following analysis applies in this regard: relatively poor geographical accessibility, a lack of shared community values outside the ethnic community, and domestic perspectives.

Chinese Koreans receive social and institutional attention due to their excellent geographical proximity. Based on this geographical proximity, private exchanges such as study abroad, marriage, and labor migration between China and South Korea are active. In addition, in North America, including the United States, study abroad, marriage, and labor migration are active due to close geopolitical relations, similar to those in China.

In these cases, transportation is also convenient. According to statistics from the Republic of Korea Aviation Information Portal System of 2024, out of a total of 42,897 direct flights, 8,479 were to China, and 3,322 were to the United States and Canada, with 875,168 and 484,385 passengers, respectively, and 54,453 tons and 64,717 tons, respectively. On the other hand, among the CIS countries, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia totaled 231 flights, with 34,279 passengers and 3,149 tons of cargo. This statistic applies only to the five countries of Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, with both Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan reporting zero passengers.[15]

When comparing China and North America, it is evident that the geographical and geopolitical accessibility of the Korean diaspora is limited, and the transportation infrastructure is less developed.

China and South Korea share common values, including Confucianism, Hangul culture, East Asian ethnicity and culture, and the Korean language. In addition to learning Korean as a form of education, Chinese Koreans can feel more familiar with Korea through shared values and the common linguistic and cultural sphere of the Hanja, as well as the acceptance of Korean as a dialect. This shared value can also facilitate social acceptance and adaptation more quickly.

Korean Americans are building a strong third culture based on the Christian community. There have been many studies on the cohesiveness of Korean Americans and their relationship with the Christian community, and Korean Americans and the Christian community have established a close relationship of mutual influence, with active Korean-language education, Korean-history education, and Korean cultural experiences centered in churches. According to 2023 statistics from the Pew Research Center, 58% of Korean American Christians perceive religion as very important to their culture. This differs from the 39% of Korean Christians who perceive religion as very important to their culture.[16]

In contrast, Koreans in the former Soviet Union experienced another dissolution of their community after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and there are no common values other than their ethnicity as Koreans. According to Kim Young-sool's 2020 qualitative study, bloodline played the most significant role in the identity of Koreans living in South Korea in a political context.[17] In a cultural context, he stated that the ethnic identity of Koreans is more influenced by language and ethnic attachment than by ethnic hybridity.

In the past, Korean Chinese were once treated as outsiders, subject to assimilation, exclusion, and indifference as a diaspora community. However, recently, with the establishment of diplomatic relations between South Korea and China through political, economic, and cultural exchanges and cooperation, relations have improved. However, in terms of social sentiment, negative images of the Korean Chinese as outsiders, foreigners, and marginal figures are expanding. The domestic perspective on the Korean Chinese demonstrates a duality of solidarity and hatred, friendship and hostility, indicating the need for greater efforts and practices to foster empathy for Korean diaspora communities.[18] However, with the increase in international students, marriages, and Korean-Chinese

families, in addition to Koreans with experience residing in China and the expansion and sharing of culture, the perception of this group is improving faster and in broader ways.

Among Korean Americans, public sentiment in South Korea is generally positive and shaped by admiration for the United States and by the global image associated with Korean American success in fields such as business, the arts, and academia. Korean Americans are often viewed as culturally confident, internationally minded, and well-positioned within transnational networks, which reinforces an image of upward mobility and cosmopolitanism. These perceptions, although sometimes idealized, have contributed to a symbolic closeness that positions Korean Americans as influential figures within the larger Korean diaspora. Their visibility in international media, entertainment, and public life has also strengthened the belief that Korean identity can flourish in global spaces without losing its cultural foundation.

In contrast, Korean diaspora communities living within South Korea, especially those who arrive as labor migrants or from under-resourced backgrounds, often encounter discrimination, economic hardship, and persistent prejudice. While they share ethnic ties with South Koreans, their social and economic status frequently leads to exclusion from mainstream society. Many face structural barriers, including limited job mobility, language challenges, and restricted access to upward educational opportunities. Compared to other TCK groups examined in this study, these communities experience higher levels of economic insecurity and lower levels of social recognition, revealing a stark disconnect between ethnic belonging and lived inclusion. Their experiences highlight the need for more comprehensive policies that address inequality, strengthen community support, and affirm diaspora identities as integral components of Korean society rather than peripheral or temporary presences.

Conclusion

As the concept of security continues to broaden beyond traditional national defense to include cultural, psychological, and community dimensions, South Korea must recognize that the instability experienced by Third Culture Kids (TCKs), including Korean and Koryo-saram TCKs, constitutes a significant human security concern. These young people often grow up as invisible actors within national policy, navigating identity marginalization, language barriers, and socioeconomic vulnerability. Such insecurity not only limits their personal development but also weakens the

cohesion of South Korea's overseas Korean networks and the shared values that sustain the broader Korean community.

The roots of this instability lie in weak community belonging and insufficient institutional support. These challenges carry tangible implications for national interests related to cultural continuity, demographic resilience, and international diversity. Studies show that cultural ties, primarily through language, play a central role in reconnecting diaspora youth and renewing their sense of belonging. Kim's 2024 study on Korean language perceptions among Koryo-saram adolescents demonstrates that linguistic and cultural engagement remains a critical medium for rebuilding identity and strengthening transnational connections.[19] Extending this logic, Wilson's 2025 framework for "Global Koreans" argues that Korean identity should be understood beyond narrow citizenship or territorial boundaries, allowing for the inclusion of diaspora communities who remain unseen within conventional policy structures.

Incheon has already emerged as an important hub for diaspora engagement, supported by expanding multicultural programs and educational initiatives designed to foster belonging for diverse communities. This environment positions Incheon to become a national model for TCK and diaspora integration, particularly if supported by targeted educational programs, community centers, and cultural exchange activities specifically designed for vulnerable groups, such as Koryo-saram TCKs. Investing in such programs would not only address immediate challenges; it would also contribute to long-term national strengths by cultivating globally competent citizens who can act as bridges between Korea and the wider world.

To build sustainable overseas Korean policies and strengthen societal security, South Korea must adopt an expanded security paradigm that treats cultural identity, psychological stability, and community cohesion as essential components of human security. This shift requires moving beyond symbolic recognition to sustained support that enables diaspora youth to transition from marginalized communities into active partners in national development and global solidarity. By embracing a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of security, South Korea can transform diaspora engagement from a peripheral concern into a central pillar of its long-term cultural and national strategy.

While this study contributes to the growing body of work on diaspora security and cultural belonging, further research is needed to strengthen policy-making and program design. Future work should explore how

different TCK subgroups experience identity instability across cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic contexts, and how local communities in Korea respond to emerging diaspora identities. Comparative studies examining TCKs from other cultural backgrounds may also provide insight into universal challenges and strategies for integration.

Longitudinal research would be especially valuable in tracking how Korean and Koryo-saram TCKs adapt over time and how institutional support shapes their long-term social, psychological, and economic outcomes. Additional inquiry into the role of digital platforms, peer networks, and community-based organizations may also reveal new pathways for connection and empowerment among dispersed diaspora youth.

By advancing these research efforts, scholars and policymakers can help ensure that diaspora youth are no longer viewed as peripheral populations but as essential contributors to Korea's future, both at home and abroad.

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