

INTRODUCTION

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is a country which spans the two land masses of Asia and Europe and consists of 15 Republics; the country having the largest area in the world. The USSR is contiguous to Korea along the Tumen River in the east and has common borders with Finland and Eastern European countries to the west. Its national composition is also very complex, comprising over 100 nationalities altogether. The geographical concept Soviet Central Asia generally comprises the Kazakh, Uzbek, Turkmen, Kirgiz and Tadzhik Republics.¹ The area of these five Republics is about 3.99 million square kilometres, almost 18 times bigger than that of the Korean peninsula. This area is located to the north of Iran and Afghanistan and to the west of the Sinkiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China. Historically this region has been a crossroads between Eastern and Western cultures since ancient times. The ancient Scythians left relics of their cultural heritage there and it provided a stage for various nations of Iranian origins. At least since the 6th century, peoples of Turkic origin have played an important role in the region. It is commonly accepted among scholars that the so-called steppe culture covered the region extending from the vicinity of the Koguryŏ Kingdom of Korea (37 BC–668 AD) to the coastal region of the Black Sea. At present, the main peoples in the region are Kazakhs, Kirgiz, Uzbeks, Turkmen and Tatars who represent the Turkic group, Tadzhiks of Iranian origin, and Russians.

However, currently there are at least 255,000 people living in this region who, according to the official statistics, consider themselves Koreans² and call themselves *Koryŏ Saram* 'men/people of Korea'.³ These Koreans are the latest arrivals in Central Asia who have no any related nationalities in the area.

Historical Traces of Koreans

Historically traces of Koreans in this region can be dated back to the 8th century. In 751 AD, a general of the Chinese Tang dynasty (618–907), Gao Xianzhi (in Korean *Ko Sŏn-ji*), lost a battle against Islamic forces at Talas, which consequently brought not only this region but also the present Sinkiang area under the influence of Islamic culture. Even if Gao Xianzhi was the descendant of a Korean family from the Koguryŏ dynasty, it cannot be assumed that he was the first Korean who ever set foot in the region, for we can detect a sign of visits to this area by Koreans from a wall painting in Afrasiab, which is the ruin of a palace left by the Sogdians on the outskirts of Samarkand in Uzbekistan. This palace was completely destroyed during the invasion of Chinggis Khan in the 13th century. On the western side wall painting of the No. 1 palace building in the 23rd area of the ruins, the picture of two envoys can be found who, judging by their external

INTRODUCTION

appearance, cannot be Central Asians. Al'baum, having carried out excavations at Afrasiab and studied this wall painting, is inclined to the conclusion that they might be men from the Koguryō dynasty.⁴ If these were envoys of the Koguryō dynasty, they would have been the first Koreans who ever visited Central Asia. In the 8th century Hyecho, a Buddhist monk of the Sinla dynasty of Korea (57 BC—935 AD), travelled through what is now the northern part of present Pakistan on a pilgrimage to India. Of course, the route taken by Hyecho does not really pass through Soviet Central Asia, but in a broader sense he had travelled through Central Asia. Until now, hardly any other concrete evidence of visits by Koreans to this area during the period between the 9th and 19th centuries has been found.

Studies on *Koryō Saram*

Until recent times very little attention was paid to the *Koryō Saram* and their life. Even inside the Soviet Union, they were only briefly subjected to scholarly interest as late as in the 1940s, in spite of their being a relatively large minority, the 28th biggest ethnic group. They have attracted more attention mostly after 1960. The Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR undertook a cultural anthropological study of Koreans in Central Asia in 1946 under the leadership of M. G. Levin and with the participation of N. P. Devets and I. V. Zakharova.⁵ In 1960, R. Sh. Dzharylgasimova, who can be considered one of the pioneers in the study of the *Koryō Saram*, published her first work, and several of her treatises appeared even as late as in the 1970s. Yu. V. Ionova has also described the life of the *Koryō Saram* in a large work which treats the peoples of Kazakhstan.

Among works by western scholars, we can mention those by Walter Kolarz and John J. Stephan. In his book on the peoples of the Soviet Far East, Kolarz tried to give, as early as in 1954, a brief picture of the background of Koreans in Central Asia. This has, therefore, been an almost unique source for the western world. After Kolarz, a rather long wait ensued until the following work, this time, an article by Stephan from the University of Hawaii, appeared. Japanese scholars like Ozaki Hikosaku and Kimura Hidesuke have also shown their interest in Koreans in Central Asia.⁶

A few Koreans had the opportunity to visit Central Asia during the latter half of the 1970s and wrote travelogues which provide the first information in Korean about this kinsfolk living far from the Korean peninsula.⁷ There are also some works of research by Korean scholars, but most of them have almost identical contents with only sketchy explanations, probably due to the fact that materials on the *Koryō Saram* are extremely limited and difficult to obtain. The work written in Korean by the present author, even if it suffers from rather many shortcomings and mistakes, is almost unique as it takes into account many facets of the culture of the *Koryō Saram*.⁸

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Present Work and its Sources of Information

Koreans in Central Asia have remained relatively unknown to the outside world for almost fifty years, which also means that there is not sufficient material available about them. Circumstances do not favour the conducting of fieldwork among them because they live scattered over a wide area of Central Asia among other ethnic groups, and not many of these places are open to foreigners. Even the present author has not been able to visit the area of Korean settlements in Central Asia. Under such conditions the aim of this volume lies in establishing a framework for future study by trying to describe, on the basis of written materials, the background of the transfer of Koreans from the Soviet Far East to Central Asia, their daily life, rice cultivation, language and communication, the Korean theatre and literary activities.

Besides materials written in western languages, the most valuable source has been *Lenin Kichi*, 'The Flag of Lenin', a newspaper in Korean, published in Alma-Ata.⁹ In writing this book correspondence with Korean intelligentsia in Central Asia has been another indescribably important source: the information thus obtained could hardly have been acquired even by visiting Central Asia. There has also been information brought by the *Koryŏ Saram* and scientists from Central Asia, even if it was often rather fragmentary.