THESIS APPROVAL FORM

NAZARBAYEV UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

SYMBOLIC ETHNIC IDENTITY OF YOUNG LOCAL KOREANS IN KAZAKHSTAN

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in

Eurasian Studies

at

NAZARBAYEV UNIVERSITY -

SCHOOL OF SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

2025

Abstract

This research focuses on the ethnic identity of the younger generation of Koryo Saram, a local Korean community, in Kazakhstan. The goal was to better understand how young Koreans define their ethnicity and maintain their connection to it in the context of weakening diasporic ties, increasing rates of interethnic marriage, the popularization of South Korean culture, and growing nationalizing policies in the state. In addition, to address the question of how applicable the concept of diaspora is to younger generations of Koryo Saram, this research explores participants' perceptions of homeland and their sense of belonging. For data analysis, this study relied on Gans' (1979) concept of symbolic ethnicity and Cohen's (2004) and Koh and Baek's (2020) elements of ethnic identity. Based on individual interviews and written responses from eight young Koreans, 18–25 years old, predominantly from Kostanay (with one participant from Karaganda), it can be argued that younger generations of local Koreans maintain a symbolic ethnic identity. They define their ethnicity both in primordialist terms (as inherited with blood) and through personal engagement with history and culture (symbols like Korean food, rites of passage, and celebrations). Ethnic identity is highly individualistic and is maintained predominantly within family-based networks, as many participants reported feeling disconnected from other co-ethnics at both local (hometown) and national (Kazakhstan) levels. The majority perceive Kazakhstan, rather than South Korea, as the true homeland, which aligns with previous studies. These findings in general offer new insights into how young local Koreans in Kazakhstan navigate their ethnic identity and highlight the potential limitations of applying the concept of diaspora to their case.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Today, the Korean community, or *Koryo Saram,* in Kazakhstan numbers approximately 120,000 people, who make up about 0.6% of the country's total population. *Koryo Saram*, meaning “people of Korea,” is a self-designation used by descendants of the first Korean settlers in the Russian Far East who now reside across the post-Soviet space (Kim 2003, 23). They became one of the first ethnic groups to personally experience the Great Terror, when Stalin subjected them to a mass deportation to Central Asia, primarily to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Despite the inhumane conditions of transportation, poor living conditions and famine faced in the early years of forced relocation, Korean deportees showed resilience, accepting their exile and determined to adapt to these new environments, which they gradually came to see as their new homelands (Akiner 2005, 47). In the decades that followed, *Koryo Saram* communities engaged primarily in agricultural labor, organizing collective farms and contributing to local economies. While some aspects of cultural life were preserved, such as Korean cuisine, rites of passage, and communal institutions, many other significant elements, including the Korean dialect *Koryo Mar*, folklore, historical memory, and some customs, were altered or lost under the prolonged exposure to Russian and Soviet cultures (Saveliev 2010, 489).

Nowadays, already the fourth generation of Koreans represent the *Koryo Saram* in Kazakhstan. Compared to their predecessors, younger generations experienced rural to urban migration, switch to Russian language as primary language of both intraethnic and interethnic communication, increase in interethnic marriages, weakening of diasporic ties and influence of official organizations, as well as growing interest in transnational practices in South Korea (Kuzhakhmetova 2023). Additionally, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Kazakhstan gaining its independence in 1991, local Koreans find themselves in a complex context where the

state promotes a dual narrative. On the one hand, the official discourse presents principles of civic unity and 'friendship of the people.' On the other hand, there are nationalizing policies that prioritize the language, culture, and interests of the titular Kazakh ethnicity. In this way, Koreans have to negotiate their ethnic and national identities and navigate through questions of belonging and cultural continuity.

In my thesis I aim to explore these dynamics, focusing on three main research questions: 1) How do young Koreans in Kazakhstan perceive and define their ethnic identity? 2) In the context of weakening diasporic ties, cultural assimilation and globalization, how is their ethnic identity maintained and expressed in everyday life? 3) What is their perceived homeland and how is this perception shaped? I focus specifically on the younger generation of local Koreans (18-24/26 years old) because I was interested in how individuals born and raised in post-Soviet post-independent Kazakhstan understand and express their ethnic identity, what challenges they can encounter and what future they see for their ethnic group. To answer these questions I draw on qualitative data collection methods in my research. I conducted semi-structured individual interviews with eight participants from Kostanay and Karaganda (in either offline or written format). I also analyzed personal Instagram profiles of young local Koreans (predominantly from Almaty), as well as posts from official organizations, such as the Association of Koreans in Kazakhstan (AKK) and the Youth Movement of Koreans (MDK).

Based on the analysis of my results, I argue that young Koreans in Kazakhstan define their ethnic identity through a combination of primordialist ideas (family descent) and personal engagement with cultural elements like Korean food, traditions and historical knowledge. While these aspects vary in significance for each participant, they collectively shape their understanding of 'being Korean' as both inherited and socially constructed. Besides, in the

absence of strong group ties, young Koreans maintain and express their ethnicity through symbolic and individualised practices. Rather than rooted in community life or even connection to imagined Korean collectivity, their identity is embodied in symbols - such as Korean food, family traditions, rites of passage and celebrations, and for some even surnames - reflecting a shift from diasporic identity to a more personal form of ethnic belonging. Lastly, echoing earlier research on *Koryo Saram*, the majority of my respondents see Kazakhstan as their primary homeland - either due to birth, upbringing, or emotional ties to family. Their sense of belonging is shaped less by language fluency (many do not speak Kazakh) and more by long-term settlement, personal history, and everyday participation in multicultural settings.

I believe my findings offer valuable insights into the understudied everyday experiences of young local Koreans in Kazakhstan despite multiple limitations like small sample size, regional focus, urban backgrounds of participants, and the fact that most are not engaged in any Korean-themed clubs or organizations. Previous research on *Koryo Saram* in Kazakhstan has explored language ideologies (Ahn 2019), diasporic ties and transnational practices (Kuzhakhmetova 2022), food practices (Absadikova 2023), k-pop consumption and interaction with South Korean products/culture (Koh and Baek 2020), and other aspects of Korean identity of third and fourth generations. In turn, I am interested in the way all these aspects are interconnected and which of them persist and make young individuals perceive themselves as Koreans. Besides, in contrast to frameworks that equate symbolic ethnicity with assimilation or ethnic fading, my study illustrates how symbolic expressions of ethnicity can coexist with strong self-identification as Korean. Lastly, my findings challenge the classic diaspora narratives because I show how relocated ethnic groups can understand homeland not through distant nostalgia or ancestral ties, but through everyday experiences rooted in local context. In this way,

my research contributes to the growing body of literature on post-diasporic and civic-based belonging.

Historical context

Koryo Saram's long journey began in the 1860s with the initial migration of Koreans from the northern Korean Peninsula to Primorye. The earliest official records indicate that their arrival in the Russian Far East dates back to either 1863 or 1864, when 12 to 14 families were permitted to settle near the Novgorodsky military post, later known as Pociete (Park 2018, 52; Glebov 2020, 5). These early migrants were impoverished peasants and their families with limited, if any at all, means of subsistence, searching for land to settle and farm. Their migration was largely provoked by crop failures, consequent famine, and exploitation by Korean landowners, bureaucrats, and moneylenders in their homeland (Ryeon and Petrov 2001, 65–66; Diener 2009, 472). In time the Korean population grew, leading to the establishment of whole ethnic enclaves in Vladivostok, Amur, and Khabarovsk, along with the development of Korean-language schools and other social institutions (Diener 2009, 472). A second wave of migration (political emigration) followed between 1905 and 1922 driven by the Russo-Japanese War and the Japanese occupation of Korea.

By the 1930s the Korean Community of Soviet Far East managed to not only preserve their distinct culture but further develop socio-cultural institutions, especially in education, publishing, and the arts. In her article Yang (2020) mentioned that by this time, 12.5% of all schools in the Far Eastern Republic were Korean schools; the publication of Korean-language books increased, and six magazines and seven newspapers were published regularly (342). Moreover, in 1931 Soviet Korean *kolkhozes* - specializing in rice cultivation, silkworm farming, and fisheries - constituted around ¾ of all Primorye farms (Pak and Bugai 2001, 225 quoted in

Yang 2020, 342). Performative arts like dance, music, and theatrical performances, particularly Korean classical dramas and socialist plays, were especially popular and served as means of expression of Korean ethnic identity. The Far Eastern Regional Korean Theater, founded on September 9, 1932, in Vladivostok, was a key cultural institution (Yang 2020, 342). In this way, Soviet Korean culture flourished and reached its golden age just before the deportation of 1937 (Yang 2020, 343).

The forced relocation of approximately 200,000 ethnic Koreans was sanctioned by Resolution No. 1428-326cc of the Soviet Peoples' Central Committee of the Communist Party, signed by Molotov and Stalin on August 21, 1937. Amid rising international tensions (USSR, Japan and Korea) and rumours of espionage, authorities questioned local Koreans' loyalty to the state. While Akiner (2005, 36) describes deportations as an unexpected and sudden event, for Kim (2003, 25) and Dzhiyenalyev and Shaken (2022, 25) it is rather "a planned and carefully controlled large-scale action," "a logical continuation of earlier Czarist and Soviet policy" towards ethnic minorities. Regarding the Korean diaspora, the objective was not only to "strengthen the border of socialism" and mitigate the risk of "porous" borders and Japanese infiltration, but also to facilitate economical and agricultural development of Central Asia through these "special settlers" (Park 2018, 73; Akiner 2005, 43). However, the harsh conditions of transport and resettlement could suggest either a lack of preparation or neglect by Soviet authorities. Families, including the elderly and children, were transported in cattle carriers on a month-long journey, and many did not survive. First years were especially challenging because deportees were forced to endure extreme weather, food shortages, and poor living conditions in remote, barren areas with inadequate shelter (tents, dugouts) (Akiner 2005, 45). The local populations of Central Asia helped significantly to the deported groups, including Koreans. At

that time, they would share food, resources, and shelter, which ensured survival and adaptation of deportees in the region.

In total, around 100,000 Koreans were deported to the Kazakh SSR and later made considerable contributions to agricultural development of this region. They would join *kolkhozes*, establish their own ones, as well as engage in *kobonjil* - a self-sustaining, for-profit agricultural practice that became an exclusive Korean niche during the Soviet era (Kuzhakhmetova 2023, 7). Park (2018) provides a detailed analysis of this economic phenomenon in Chapter 3 of *The Displacement of Borders among Russian Koreans in Northeast Asia* (for a more in-depth discussion, see Park 2018). Additionally, thousands of Korean *kolkhozniki* were awarded the medal "For Honorable Labor during the Great Fatherland War" (Diener 2009, 473). Many sources also highlight the dedication of *Koryo Saram* in various sectors, including industry, government (e.g., ministerial positions), and education (e.g., a significant number of university graduates). Key Korean cultural institutions, such as the Korean Theater, the *Senbong* newspaper, a Korean pedagogical institute and college, and Korean-language book collections, were relocated to Kazakhstan. However, several scholars argue that over time, essential markers of Korean identity - such as language, history, folklore, and certain cultural traditions - were still replaced by Russian cultural elements due to prolonged and close contact (Saveliev 2010, 489; Ten 2017; Li 2012).

The restrictions imposed on Koreans under the “special settler” status were gradually lifted by the mid-1950s, restoring their freedom of movement within the Soviet Union (Akiner 2005, 36–37). Decades later, in 1989, the Soviet government officially condemned the forced deportations of the Stalinist period as “unlawful and criminal,” leading to discussions of repatriation to the Russian Far East (Diener 2009, 474). Nonetheless, the majority of Koreans

chose to remain in Central Asia, preferring internal migration from rural to urban regions. Central Asian countries became new homelands for deportees' descendants. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 brought new opportunities for the economic and social mobility of local Koreans. Many found employment as translators and interpreters for South Korean businesses, others entered retail, trade, construction fields or opened small to mid-sized enterprises of their own (Diener 2009, 477). Korean organizations became more active as cultural centers emerged to promote both the revival of Korean heritage and integration into the newly independent Kazakhstani state (Akiner 2005, 53).

As of 2021, Koreans in Kazakhstan constitute approximately 0.6% of the total population (118,450 individuals).[1] Today, there are 16 Associations of Koreans all over Kazakhstan, the Korean Theater in Almaty, a dance collective, and the *Koryo Ilbo* newspaper. Koreans have gained recognition in diverse fields, including politics, business, industry, national sports, academia and others. Besides, interethnic marriage, particularly with local Russians and Kazakhs, has become more common among Koreans, starting from the third generation (Kuzhakhmetova 2023, 34). In the 'Edible History of Kazakhstan' podcast, speaker Larissa Pak addressed this tendency: "*Koreans are trying their best to blend in. If we look at the third and fourth generations, no one is marrying their own anymore*."[2] Also, Koreans' shared physical features with the dominant population may have facilitated their integration. While earlier generations faced discrimination due to their appearance, some physical similarities potentially reduced the perceived distance with locals. Language has probably played a role too. In both the

[1] This data is taken from the 2021 Population Census conducted by the Office of National Statistics. https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/WS6BauzhanENG.pdf

[2] This is a podcast, originally called Съедобная История Казахстана, is about the food practices of Kazakhstan people, the sacred meaning behind dishes and the way food forms people's identity. The original quote in Russian: "я вижу что корейцы максимально стараются что называется blend in, то есть вписаться в окружающую среду, то есть если мы щас посмотрим уже на третье четвертое поколения, все уже, не женятся на своих."

Kazakh SSR and independent Kazakhstan, the linguistic environment was predominantly Russified. Successive generations of Koreans became fluent in Russian, allowing them to integrate and communicate more easily. However, as Kazakhstan increasingly promotes the Kazakh language, the AKK emphasizes the necessity of Kazakh proficiency for Koreans as Kazakhstani citizens in its Concept of Development.

Another podcast's speaker, Natalya Tyan, described adaptation as a defining national characteristic of Koreans, saying *"Korean [migrants] in all countries have a similar policy of survival, just like mimicry*."[3] Indeed, Koreans have historically adapted to the host countries' conditions, rarely expressing open dissatisfaction or protest. For instance, Ten (2017) noted that while Koreans initially voiced disagreement with planned deportation, emphasizing its contradiction to Leninist principles; once it was enforced, they largely refrained from blaming Stalin directly, but rather his subordinates and local authorities (39). Similarly, Pakhomov (2012) described the Russian Korean diaspora in the 2000s as "a non-provocative and socially non-deviant form of ethnic culture," suggesting that as state power in Russia expanded, Koreans hoped to avoid drawing unnecessary attention or hostility (72). I suggest that this strategy of risk management - compliance with the state for survival - may be rooted in the initial accusations of disloyalty to the Soviet state that led to their traumatic deportation. This tendency, in my opinion, is reflected in how the AKK defines its mission i.e. prioritizing national interests beyond purely diaspora concerns, such as promoting unity, peace, and stability (Association website).

It is important to note that although Kazakhstan is often described as a multinational state due to its diverse ethnic composition, the principle of ethnic equality and pluralism remains largely rhetorical and symbolic. Following independence, the Kazakhstani state has pursued

[3] "это национальная особенность - адаптация [...] корейцы во всех странах везде примерно такую политику выживания ведут, просто типа мимикрировать"

nationalizing policies focused on the revival of a ‘weak’ and ‘young’ Kazakh nation, rather than building an inclusive civic Kazakhstani identity and blurring a distinction between ‘Kazakh’ and ‘other’ citizens in “semi-official, academic, journalistic and popular references” (Dave 2007, 131, 135). These policies must be understood in light of the historical marginalization of Kazakhs during the Soviet era, when they were a demographic minority within their own republic, experiencing Russification and cultural erosion. The post-Soviet nation-building project has since been aimed at restoring Kazakh language, culture, and political centrality.

At the same time, the state maintains the rhetoric of ‘unity in diversity’ and promotes the image of a harmonious multiethnic society. Yet, as Kuznecovienė (2023) points out, Kazakhstan’s public space “was and still is heavily russified, lacking significant signs of a multiethnic society” (345–346). Laruelle (2021) adds that ethnic minorities can be treated differently depending on their perceived geopolitical ties and potential for political or religious mobilization. In this complex environment, local Koreans have to navigate a contradictory landscape when on the one hand, they are celebrated as part of Kazakhstan’s ethnic diversity and are encouraged to revive aspects of their lost Koryo Saram culture. On the other hand, they are simultaneously constructed as a diaspora, implying a supposed homeland elsewhere (in South Korea) and are often expected to serve as cultural mediators between that perceived homeland and their actual “only one rodina [motherland],” Kazakhstan (Dave 2007, 132; Kuzhakhmetova 2022, 83).

Theoretical framework

Rethinking diaspora

Both in media and academic discussions, ethnic Koreans outside of North and South Korea are commonly described as part of the Korean diaspora. In a broader sense, diaspora can

be defined as “that segment of a people living outside the homeland” (Connor, n.d., quoted in Safran 1991, 83). More specifically, Brubaker (2005) suggests there are three main features that distinguish diaspora from other communities i.e. dispersion in space, homeland orientation, and boundary-maintenance (5). Firstly, dispersion in space is often associated with an involuntary and traumatic scattering of the population from its place of origin. In the case of Koryo Saram, for instance, the 1937 deportation from the Russian Far East to Central Asia fits this criterion. Secondly, homeland orientation implies symbolic or practical attachment to a real or imagined ancestral land. Although some scholars stress the hope of return as a central element, Safran (1991) argues that this is more of a myth i.e. a psychological defense mechanism to provide hope for a better future in the face of present challenges in the host country (94). Thirdly, boundary maintenance refers to “preservation of a distinctive identity vis-a-vis a host society (or societies)” and depends on assimilation policies, cultural transmission, and group agency (Brubaker 2005, 6–7).

To illustrate how diasporic experiences can actually vary, Cohen (2022) proposes a typology of diasporas based on historical and structural conditions (e.g., victim diasporas, labour diasporas, imperial diasporas, etc.). He also outlines nine features of diasporic identity, including dispersal, expansion, retention, idealization of ‘old country’ and return to homeland, distinctiveness, apprehension of the host country, creativity, and solidarity. Importantly, he suggests that these elements function like strands of a “diasporic robe,” meaning they are relevant but not equally present in every case (Cohen 2022, 3). Furthermore, Tölölyan (1991) emphasizes that the transnational nature of diaspora makes it a useful analytical tool for challenging the proclaimed homogeneity of nation-states. This ties into the concept of deterritorialization i.e. a process in which migration detaches populations from “their

conventional territorial reference points" and produces identities that are no longer defined by physical borders (Koh and Baek 2020, 6). In other words, while they are unbounded by a particular territory, diaspora members continue to sustain cross-border social and economic connection. This is how they develop transnational or hybrid identity.

However, there are some authors who challenge this classical understanding of diaspora. In relation to dispersion, for example, as the term diaspora is increasingly applied to diverse cases of it, Brubaker (2005) warns that concept's overuse risks stripping it of analytical value: "the universalization of diaspora, paradoxically, means [its] disappearance" (3). With regard to homeland orientation, Demmer (2005, 18) notes that this idealized vision of homeland may not correspond with the realities experienced by those who actually reside there. Similarly, Anthias (1998) argues that homeland orientation may be ideologically imposed rather than something organically and universally experienced by all diasporic individuals. This connects to her broader critique of diaspora as a homogenous entity, when in reality it "is constituted as much in difference and division, as it is in commonality and solidarity" (564). Members of a diaspora do not necessarily share common goals and concerns, nor do they all have the same relationship to the 'homeland' or the same level of diasporic consciousness and interest in boundary maintenance (Anthias 1998). This challenges Tölölyan's (1991) and Cohen's (2022) conceptualizations of diaspora as distinct from others, but internally homogeneous in their romanticization of home country, group solidarity and transnational bonds.

Another important critique is that diaspora is sometimes equated to an ethnic group. Tsagarousianou (2004) insists that not all dispersed ethnic populations should automatically be considered diasporas. One of the key distinctive features is the group's "readiness and willingness to engage [...] with the building of a transnational imagination and connections"

(Tsagarousianou 2004, 59). Meanwhile Anthias (1998) points out how equating diaspora to ethnic group simplifies the experience and positionality of diasporic individuals. She stresses that diaspora is not only about ethnicity and there needs to be a more nuanced understanding of diaspora with consideration of class, gender, generation of individuals and the local context they reside in. Lastly, the tendency to treat diaspora as a tangible group with clear boundaries is also problematized. Brubaker (2005) insists that it should instead be approached as a category of practice i.e. "an idiom, a stance, a claim" that not all members of a presumed diaspora necessarily adopt, support, or even recognize (12). This perception of diaspora allows for recognition of inner variation and diversity, although still to some extent implies the notion of some ideal type 'true' diaspora that not everyone accepts. Overall, these critiques I found particularly useful when re-examining the application of the concept of diaspora to young Koreans in Kazakhstan.

In this way, the concept of diaspora, particularly in its classical formulation, can be problematic, when applying to the case of Koryo Saram in Kazakhstan. For example, in terms of dispersion in space, it is often assumed that the Soviet Koreans' shared experience of Stalin-era repression, particularly the deportation to Central Asia, defines their diasporic status. Their collective recollection of this traumatic displacement contributed to the formation of a distinctive culture and identity within this diaspora (Kim 2009; Lee 2011, quoted in Koh and Baek 2020, 2). However, does the historical fact of deportation itself define local Koreans as a diaspora? Or is it the extent to which the deportation remains significant/relevant in the lived experience and memory of their descendants (retention element in Cohen's (2022) framework)? I suggest it is a relevant question considering how fragmented the transmission of these memories seems to be, as discussed by Kuzhakhmetova (2022) and Park (2017).

Regarding the homeland orientation, it is true that early generations of deportees expressed the desire to return to 'the place of their birth,' leading to 1950s and 1990s repatriation campaigns to the Russian Far East (Park 2017, 86-87). Nevertheless, the majority of Koreans stayed in countries of relocation and preferred migration within state borders from rural to urban areas (Akiner 2005, 47; Diener 2009; Ten 2017, 42). While economic or social constraints may have influenced these decisions, shifts in perceptions of homeland likely played a role as well. The majority of Kuzhakhmetova's (2022) research participants from younger generations of local Koreans perceive Kazakhstan as their homeland. Meanwhile, South Korea's status as an "ancestral homeland" seems ideological to serve the political agendas of both Kazakhstan and South Korea. Ahn (2019) argues that political entities are restructuring the "homeland" reference points to homogenize Koreans' experiences for the sake of a more desirable narrative i.e. South Korea as a sole legitimate keeper of Korean culture and homeland to overseas Koreans (233).

Regarding the transnational ties of local Koreans, it is not straightforward either. On one hand, economic and professional connections with South Korea do exist. As Dave (2007, 132) notes, in the post-independence period, local Koreans benefited from material support provided by South Korean business sponsors. More recently, Yem and Kim (2023) describe how ethnic entrepreneurs from the Business Club of the Association of Koreans in Kazakhstan maintain professional ties and negotiate with South Korean counterparts (55). Transnational practices also manifest in the desire of some local Koreans to study or work in South Korea, often motivated by pragmatic goals (Ahn 2019; Kuzhakhmetova 2022). Besides, there is OKFriends Homecoming Teens & Youth Camp organized by Overseas Korean Affairs Agency to encourage young Koreans visit their historical motherland and "develop participants' identity and pride as Koreans."

Yet, this is not a universal practice for Koreans in Kazakhstan and not all of them seem to have equal access to these resources and opportunities. Furthermore, some local Koreans themselves no longer embrace the label and according to Kuzhakhmetova (2022) prefer the term "Kazakhstani Koreans" over "a diaspora" (67). The Chairwoman of the Association of Koreans in the Kostanay region has herself stated that the term "diaspora" is becoming outdated and there is a growing preference for describing Koreans as an "ethnic community" (этническая община) in the official discourse. This made me wonder about the relevance of the diaspora concept as a primary analytical tool in the case of the younger generation of local Koreans. Thus, rather than rejecting the concept altogether, I decided to shift the primary focus from collective diasporic identity to individual-level experiences, engaging more closely with the framework of symbolic ethnicity.

Symbolic ethnicity and ethnic identity components

Initially introduced as a hypothesis, Gans' (1979) concept of symbolic ethnicity gained widespread acceptance among researchers. Developed in the context of third-generation white immigrants in the United States, it describes a way of maintaining ethnic identity through selective rather than daily engagement. Gans (1979) defines it as "a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior" (9). In other words, symbolic ethnicity manifests through occasional participation in ancestral traditions (during family holidays, rites of passage, and cultural festivals) rather than routine practices. As younger generations move away from ethnic occupational specialization and residential clustering while interacting more with non-ethnic primary groups, ethnicity becomes less central in their daily lives (Gans 1979, 7). Furthermore, ethnic identity becomes increasingly

individualized: people are no longer required to actively participate in ethnic communities or formal organizations but may instead identify with symbolic groups that rarely, if ever, meet (Gans 1979, 8, 12). Identity is thus expressed through symbols like food, surnames, language snippets, family stories, or traditional holidays.

While Gans was vague about the empirical basis of his framework, subsequent studies have explored its applicability in diverse contexts. Rebhun's (2004) analysis of National Jewish Population Survey data showed that although institutional participation declined, symbolic practices like traditional foods, ethnic holiday celebrations, and visits to Israel strengthened over time (361). These symbols served to preserve a sense of Jewishness and group belonging. Importantly, he argues that for individuals, this symbolic engagement is genuine and meaningful, not merely nominal: "from the subjective individual point of view, [...] it is true, authentic and reaffirms the inherent connections of personal and group identity" (Rebhun 2004, 364). Given this, similar patterns may be relevant for young local Koreans, as explored in recent studies by Kuzhakhmetova (2022) and Absadikova (2023), and as I investigate in this research.

There is another more recent study by Carlson's (2020), where she examines genetic ancestry testing as a means of engaging with symbolic ethnic identity in the USA. She argues that test-takers engage in "affiliative self-fashioning," as they actively construct their identities by selecting aspects that reflect their desired or chosen identity, rather than passively accepting the one predetermined by the test (828–829). For instance, Beth, a Black American adopted by white parents, maintained a strong connection to her parents' Czechoslovakian identity despite no biological link indicated in her test results. Anne, on the contrary, relied on her genetic results to reinforce her African American identity, as she finally had "a place in Africa that she could call her ancestors' place of origin" (841). She even participated in a cultural naming ceremony

and planned a trip to Côte d'Ivoire to reaffirm this newly acquired symbolic connection. This shows how symbolic ethnicity enables different forms of engagement: some grounded in biology, others in cultural preference and emotional resonance.

While symbolic ethnicity has strong explanatory potential, scholars have raised several questions. Anagnostou (2009) argues that in the U.S. context, race remains a key structural factor that limits the freedom to choose one's identity. He insists that ethnicity may appear voluntary, but in reality is still rooted in ancestral descent, which limits social categories from which individuals can 'choose' (101–104). In response, Gans (2009) clarifies that symbolic ethnicity is not entirely optional and recognizes that choices are socially embedded and must be culturally shared (124). Similarly, Nagel (1994) states that ethnic identity is "both optional and mandatory." Individuals can choose from a range of options, which, in turn, are restricted by socially and politically recognized categories, each with varying levels of stigma or benefits attached to it (156). Thus, I suggest symbolic ethnicity should be understood through the interaction of social structure, culture, and personal agency.

Another critique targets Gans' limited description of symbolic ethnicity, often reduced to food, holidays, and festival attendance. Sharot (1997) argues Gans fails to clarify what this "reconstructed" identity actually includes and whether it can sustain group cohesion long-term. Expressing identity solely through external symbols may result in superficial attachment, especially in contexts of rapid acculturation. Gans (1979) acknowledges this concern but argues that symbolic ethnicity may persist (at least in the US context) due to several factors: 1) low cost of maintaining it, 2) its use as a form of differentiation, 3) continued social classification of people by race/ethnicity, and 4) its value in forming connections in mobile societies (15–16). However, he does not offer a clear answer on what symbolic ethnicity will consist of in future

generations. While critiques of Gans are valid, I still find his theoretical framework useful for my research as I examine how young local Koreans can sustain their ethnic identity in the context of weak links to co-ethnics or formal community groups.

As an analytical tool, I draw on Cohen's (2004) five components of ethnic identity - biology, religion/education, homeland/origin, culture, and universality. Based on his survey of over 2,000 staff members in Jewish educational institutions across seven countries, he found that biology (i.e., birth and parental heritage) was the most commonly cited component, followed by education and culture (Cohen 2004, 94). Respondents also referred to specific symbolic markers such as the Hebrew language and geographically significant sites like Israel and Auschwitz (98). Notably, Cohen does not include the host society as a component, though he acknowledges its influence on identity formation. I also included insights from Koh and Baek's (2020) study on young ethnic Koreans in Kazakhstan to address this gap. Building on Cohen's framework, they introduced additional components of locality, referring to the socio-cultural context of the host country, and individuality, which captures personal experiences and narratives (12). These additions are particularly useful for analyzing my participants' identities, which are shaped not only by ancestral and cultural heritage but also by their everyday lives in Kazakhstan. These components allow to explore which elements (biological, cultural, or personal) are stronger in expressing and maintaining ethnic identity of young local Koreans.

Methodology

For data collection I relied on qualitative methods, semi-structured individual interviews with open-ended questions and, to a lesser extent, digital ethnography. It would be interesting, similar to Koh and Baek (2020), to organize a focus group discussion to explore together with the participants the way they understand what being a Kazakhstani Korean means today. Still, I

decided to follow the path of some other graduate students before me, Kuzhakhmetova (2022) and Absadikova (2023), and stick to individual interviews.

Recruitment of participants

My intended participant pool includes individuals who identify as Korean and are between 18 and 24/26 years old. Unlike in the UN's definition of youth (15-24 years old) the lower age limit for my study starts at 18 so that all participants can provide consent independent of parental or official guardian approval. Ethnic Korean identity in this study is inclusive of individuals regardless of their official ethnic designation (e.g., those with only one Korean parent or from interethnic marriages). However, I excluded individuals from South Korea, officially the Republic of Korea (ROK), as they constitute a distinct population within the context of my research even if they currently reside in Kazakhstan. Overall, I have recruited eight participants; seven are ethnically Koreans, while one is Korean-Kazakh/Kazakh-Korean. The group consists of four women and four men. Most participants come from Kostanay, one from Karaganda. One participant is originally from Uzbekistan and has lived in Kazakhstan since 2016, while another relocated from Russia at the age of 17.

Initially, I met with the Chairman of the AKK in the Kostanay region to request assistance in finding potential participants. The contacts she provided were not really affiliated with either the Association or the Youth Movement of Koreans of Kazakhstan. This was actually quite a favorable outcome as I primarily sought to engage individuals from the general public. But I certainly remained open to including—and later in fact did include—participants affiliated with these organizations. As the study progressed, I also relied on snowball sampling, where initial participants referred me to their relatives and friends. I tried to recruit participants through the Chairman of the Youth Movement in Almaty too, but received no response from their

members. Many Youth Movement members are teenagers and have not yet reached the age of consent, which could be the cause of it. In Astana, I contacted various student organizations at Nazarbayev University, including the Korean Club, K-Pop Cover Dance Club, and Volunteers Club, which led me to an additional participant. Throughout the data collection process, I explored my familial ties as well; however, most individuals in my relatives' social circles were much older than my intended participant group. At one point, a relative jokingly suggested that I seemed to be searching for a boyfriend. She even remembered a young and handsome son of her neighbor, but did not share any contact information in the end.

Taking into account recruitment challenges, I also acknowledge several limitations of this study. Firstly, my research would benefit from a bigger sample size. I hoped to recruit at least 15 participants, but due to time constraints and a low response rate I managed to recruit only half as much. Although I have likely not reached the point of data saturation, I believe that collected data still offers valuable insights into young people's perception of their ethnicity, its manifestations in daily lives and their sense of belonging and connection with co-ethnics. Secondly, the results of my study are not necessarily representative of the general sentiments of the whole research population. Representation and generalization are rarely achievable in qualitative research due to focus on in-depth exploration of diverse and sometimes highly unique experiences. At the same time, if not statistically generalizable, they are transferable to similar contexts. I believe my findings may be applicable to the identity formation of people with other non-titular ethnicities in the post-Soviet multiethnic context of Central Asian countries.

Data collection

Participants were given the option to take part in offline or online interviews or to provide written responses. Most preferred either in-person meetings (four participants) or the written

format, both of which had its own advantages and drawbacks. The offline format allowed me to ask follow-up questions, observe interviewees' non-verbal clues, and have better control over the flow of conversation. However, I encountered a few difficulties. Respondents were choosing the physical place of meetings, which happened to be quite crowded cafes. There was external noise, which did not disrupt the conversation, but made transcription a nightmare. There was a tendency to go off-topic as well, which prolonged the interviews.

Written responses, in turn, tended to be brief and somewhat reserved, in spite of my assumption that this format would offer respondents greater flexibility and comfort. Given this, I was concerned about the sufficiency of the collected data but chose to work with both what people shared and what they chose *not* to. Still I managed to cover a range of topics, including everyday activities, hobbies, future aspirations, social circle, and perceptions of homeland. I was starting interviews with these more general questions to see when people would mention ethnicity-related things without me asking about them. Then I would proceed to ask about their more specific experiences as Koreans in Kazakhstan, addressing themes such as culture and traditions, privileges and challenges, sense of connection with other Koreans, as well as opinions on South Korea. All interviews were conducted in Russian, and written responses were collected in the same language. The interviews lasted between 72 and 165 minutes.

Additionally, what began as my plan B became necessary due to the low response rate during my fieldwork in Almaty. I began my digital ethnography by analyzing Instagram accounts of young local Koreans, as well as official organizations associated with them, such as the AKK, the Youth Movement. Later I explored a bit the official accounts of the Korean Theatre and the Namson dance collective. Since my goal was to examine self-expression - how young Koreans choose to express their Koreanness and through what means - I focused on users' bios, photo and

video content, and the text in their posts. I was particularly interested in what aspects of their everyday lives and identities they chose to showcase and how their ethnicity was reflected in this process. Noteworthy, I have relied on this method to a lesser extent and mostly used the data collected while observing official organizations' accounts rather than personal accounts of young Koreans themselves.

To locate local Koreans online, I used the subscriber lists of mentioned organizations. While I aimed to find any young Koreans from Kazakhstan, it was much easier to come across individuals affiliated with these organizations, such as dancers, artists, committee members etc. This allows for valuable additional perspective, as most of my interviewees had no formal ties to such groups. In most cases, I relied on Korean surnames in users' profile names to identify potential participants. Without these surnames, verifying whether individuals met the recruitment criteria - being Korean, being from Kazakhstan, and being of age - was challenging. In this way, I also came across bloggers and content creators who are Koreans. One account, in particular, stood out as insightful and quite entertaining. Mark Tsoy, active on both YouTube and Instagram, incorporates Korean-themed content into his posts, covering topics such as the experiences of local Koreans in Kazakhstan, his personal journey working in South Korea, and Korean-Kazakh relations in a multicultural context.

Data analysis

After I have transcribed interviews and organized collected responses, I got started with data analysis, initially relying on open coding to explore what data has to offer without any predefined categories. Since I did not have access to any professional softwares, I simply used Microsoft Word and Excel for this purpose. As a result, I have created around 140 primary codes. The next stage was thematic coding i.e. grouping developed earlier codes into clusters defined by

broader themes derived from my theoretical frameworks and research question. The following themes began to emerge: isolation from other koreans (codes like no koreans in social circle, do not belong to diaspora), multiculturalism, what makes me Korean (codes like blood, appearance), Kazakhstan as homeland, symbols of Koreanness at home (codes like celebrations, food), new ways of engagement with ethnicity, family - the main guide, etc. One of the difficulties I encountered is filtering information that was relevant for my research question. As I mentioned earlier, during offline interviews the conversation would often go off-topic. Although some of this information could offer an interesting perspective, in most cases it was not related to my topic.

Ethics

I began my fieldwork only after my research was approved by Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee (NU IREC) on May 27, 2024. Additionally, last winter (February 29, 2024) I renewed my CITI training certificate. Throughout my research I have been doing my best to adhere to ethical standards of human subject research. Firstly, I provided comprehensive information about my research to all my participants, clearly outlining their rights. Prior to asking any questions, I would always obtain oral informed consent. I decided not to collect any physical document with the full real name and real signature of participants so that their identity could not be tracked down through it. I also asked for oral consent before audio recording our conversations on my personal phone (due to lack of any professional recording equipment). After transcriptions were completed, all recordings were permanently deleted from my devices. In the case of written format, respondents were required to read the consent form content and confirm their agreement to participate with the message in the chat.

Secondly, to ensure voluntary participation I reminded my participants of their right to skip questions and even withdraw from the study before and during the interviews. Luckily only one participant withdrew at the stage of our correspondence. Respondents who preferred a written format were presented with the same opportunities so all questions were marked as optional. Thirdly, to ensure confidentiality I did not mention any identifying information (except general demographic details) and used pseudonyms in transcripts and the research text. Risks of confidentiality breach and potential physiological distress from interviews were minimal. I asked personal questions, only few of which touched upon negative experiences (ex. bullying, discrimination). Overall, interviewees showed no visible signs of distress. The atmosphere was friendly, with frequent moments of laughter when we discussed some ridiculous stereotypes and anecdotes from our own everyday lives.

Researcher's positionality

When it comes to my position in this research, there was no conflict of interest, as I am not affiliated with any official organization representing the interests or culture of Koreans in Kazakhstan. My position is that of a researcher and a master's student, with no influential power. Although I am Korean myself, I would not necessarily consider myself an "insider" due to my limited knowledge of Korean history and traditions and minimal interaction with other Koreans, including relatives on my father's side. In fact I think that during my fieldwork I spoke with more Koreans than I had in my entire conscious life. At times, I felt like a complete outsider. For example, when participants listed various Korean dishes they cook or eat at home, using names I didn't recognize. Still, I believe my ethnicity helped me build meaningful connections with participants, as we shared certain common experiences, like being raised by at least one Korean parent, being mistaken for a Kazakh on the street, or frequently being asked about dog meat.

However, I acknowledge that my own Korean identity and personal experiences with Korean culture may have shaped my perspective and introduced biases into my interpretations. Nonetheless, I made an effort to set aside my personal experiences and focus on what participants shared with me.

Chapter 2. Symbolic Ethnic Identity

In this chapter I try to answer the first two research questions. Firstly, I discuss how my participants understand their ethnicity through the mixture of primordialist ideas and engagement with culture. Some participants believe their genetic descent to be more important, while for others it is the historical and cultural knowledge, as well as personal engagement with elements of ethnic culture that matters. Secondly, I suggest that in the context of weakening diasporic ties and cultural assimilation, some young Koreans have a symbolic ethnic identity i.e. they maintain and express it through personal engagement with symbols like Korean food, traditional holidays and rites of passage. Notably, this identity is individualistic and participants address the lack of connection with other co-ethnics, which could be specific to the region (Kostanay and Karaganda) where there are less opportunities for it.

What makes a person Korean

Primordialist ideas

The primordialist approach of understanding ethnicity views it not as a matter of personal choice, rather as an ascribed identity into which one is born and to which one automatically feels emotionally bound. This framework takes its roots in Clifford Geertz's (1973) concept of *primordial attachments* that views ethnic identity as rooted in the "givens" of social existence, like blood ties, ancestry, language, and religion. It is important to note that this view, though helped early scholars understand the affective power of ethnic identity, has since been criticized for actually overlooking socially constructed nature of ethnicity. This reminded me of Anderson's (2006) concept of a nation as not a naturally given entity, but rather an imagined political community that is invented and maintained through shared cultural practices, common language, and social

institutions like media or education system. In a similar manner, ethnic groups are not naturally given, but socially constructed. It is shared practices and rituals that help people to imagine themselves as part of these broader groups. Aforementioned Brubaker (2004) also argues that ethnicity should not be treated as a fixed, tangible group membership, but rather understood as a category of practice, something people invoke and perform in specific contexts, and as a perspective on the world, a way individuals can interpret social realities through the lens of ethnic belonging.

Still this dynamic seems to prevail among the general public and it is visible in aforementioned Cohen's (2004) framework too, where biology is the strongest and most common cognitive component with parents serving as a symbolic expression of it. Different ethnic communities, like Jews or third-generation Kazakhstani Lithuanians to name a few have shown this tendency to define their ethnicity in terms "roots" and "blood" (Cohen 2004; Kuznecovienė 2023, 349). In Koh and Baek's (2020) study on young Kazakhstani Koreans respondents similarly emphasized biological descent. In the case of my participant, the question about what makes them Korean caught many of them off guard. After some reflection, the majority initially responded with **blood** and **genes** as defining factors. When clarifying their ethnicity, Roman, Anna, and Vlad said both of their parents were Koreans and described themselves as "*pure/pureblood.*"[4] They perceive ethnicity as something inherited from parents and running in their genes. Still, this phrasing could be just a rehearsed narrative inherited from parents and family members or broader cultural discourse, rather than a strict genealogical knowledge. None of the participants mention how, if at all, they actually trace their genealogy and what

[4] Translation: чистый/чистокровный

information they have about their direct ancestors. This emphasis on "blood" could serve more as a symbolic marker of authenticity than an actually traceable fact.

Besides, Roman said "*It's not like I could choose it, I was born this way,*"[5] implying that his ethnicity is a predetermined fact beyond any individual choice. Physical appearance, that is also normally outside of a person's choice, was mentioned by some participants among things that make them Korean. Sasha wrote about appearance in general, while Veronika specifically pointed to her eye shape.[6] Anna even showed dissatisfaction with her narrow eyes[7] and shared that she uses eyelid stickers to make them appear wider. She also mentioned hoping that her future children would inherit their father's features rather than her own, preferably not Korean ones: "*I want my children to take after their father's roots more. I say, just not my eyes - mine are too narrow.*"[8] As with biological descent, appearance represents another determinant (or rather an expression) of ethnicity that participants have no control over, something that is given. Yet, as Anna's case shows, individuals can engage with their physical appearance and modify some undesirable features. Overall, these responses reflect a strong tendency to view ethnicity as inherited and permanent, grounded in blood, ancestry, and even physical features. However, further exploration shows how being Korean is not only a matter of birth for some, it also involves cultural knowledge and engagement.

Cultural knowledge and personal engagement

While ethnicity is often defined by ancestry or official ethnic classification, my findings suggest that it intersects with other dimensions like cultural practices, for example. This brings

[5] "Я ведь не мог это просто выбрать, я таким родился"

[6] "разрез глаз"

[7] "узкие глаза"

[8] "Хочу, чтобы отцовские были корни, больше сыграли. Я говорю, можно только не мои глаза, мои глаза узкие"

us to another key component of identity in Cohen's (2004) framework, alongside biology and education, - culture. It can be defined as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 2010, 1 quoted in Bell 2015, 1). While culture itself is not inherently based on ethnicity, ethnic groups often adopt specific cultural traits as defining features of their group identity. In this way, cultural differences become important markers of ethnic boundaries. However, as Bell (2015, 2) notes, this raises important questions about ethnic identity when there is diversity within the group or when individuals do not accept dominant narratives of their group's history and culture. This is especially relevant in the context of second- and third-generation migrants or ethnic minority populations, where traditional cultural elements are shaped in constant interplay with the dominant culture of the host society (Cohen 2004, 90).

As participants in Kuzhakhmetova's (2022, 65) and Koh and Baek's (2020, 14) studies stated, being ethnically Korean is not enough to qualify as a Korean, one must also engage in traditional practices (e.g., cooking Korean food, celebrating holidays and performing life-cycle rites). In my study, there is one participant who emphasizes cultural engagement and a person's feelings and openly challenges the notion of purely biological ethnic identity. Anel argues that "*you can be born anybody, but feel yourself as someone completely different*."[9] Moreover, she insists that to claim ethnic identity one needs to engage with ethnic group's culture. Anel comes from an interethnic marriage (father is Korean and mother is Kazakh) and believes she can claim both Kazakh and Korean identity because she actively interacts with both these cultures. To explain her point she imagines a hypothetical situation: "*If you, for example, don't engage in any way with that culture, for example, if I am Kazakh, was born half Kazakh, but hypothetically I in no way I don't study in a Kazakh class, I don't know the Kazakh language, like I'm not interested*

[9] "ты можешь родиться кем угодно, но чувствовать себя абсолютно другим"

in Kazakh history, culture, folklore, literature. How can I say that I'm Kazakh?"[10] In other words, she believes biology alone would not be enough to claim ethnic identity, a person needs to be actively involved with language and traditions of the corresponding ethnic group as well.

Similarly, participant Vlad mentions that in addition to being born from Korean parents, it is his adherence to a distinct Korean culture and unique traditions that makes him Korean. During our conversation he seemed especially proud of his knowledge of Korean dishes preparations and correct rituals during traditional events. For example, at funerals and Parental Memorial Days when visiting the gravesites, there is a tradition of bowing to pay final respects and honor the spirits of the ancestors. Among local Koreans there are different ways people bow, some due to fragmented knowledge transmission, others due to health issues. Issue with his knee was actually what made Vlad change his normal technique during one of such visits to gravesite last summer. His mother pointed out that it was actually a proper way of bowing (a deep, full bow) and Vlad remembered how he even jokingly said "*now that's a true Korean!*"[11] about himself. Thus, the biology identity component is significant as it defines the range of ethnic identities available, but the legitimacy of this claim is closely linked to their knowledge of and engagement with the traditions and rituals, adding the identity component of culture (Cohen 2004).

In one of his Instagram reels Mark Tsoy, young local Korean blogger from Almaty, tried to answer a question "What makes you Korean?"[12] Although he mentions from time to time that

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[10] "если например ты никак не engagишся с этой культурой, например если я там казашка, наполовину казашкой родилась, но гипотетически я там никак не учусь в казахском классе, не знаю казахский язык типа я не интересуюсь там казахской историей, культурой, фольклером там, литературой. Как я могу сказать что я казашка?"

[11] "вот кто настоящий кореец!"

[12] https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6T2Q53NuNP/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

he is a pure (чистый) Korean, in this case his response did not include any reference to his biological descent and rather was centred around Korean culture. He said: "*It is our culture, that is we still maintain our traditions, accordingly this is cuisine. Next the second point is [...] we have a lot of holidays that we celebrate, national ones like one year anniversary, it is a big holiday for us, we also celebrate it on a grand scale; then there are some memorial traditions, we go to the cemetery twice a year [...].*"[13] In this way, similar to Anel and Vlad, Mark highlights that culture can be an important marker of Korean ethnic identity. What is noteworthy here is how when responding to the questions of what makes him Korean, he uses we pronouns and not I. He gives some generalized information and does not really specify whether he participates in these celebrations, visits the cemetery twice a year and so on.

Moreover, Vlad and Anel both place importance on **knowledge** of culture and history, both in educating the public and passing it to future generations. Vlad describes local Koreans as having poor knowledge of traditions and food, viewing this as a serious issue: "*traditions are getting lost, confused, and diluted - one person says one thing, another says something else, and there is no single, unified whole.*"[14] As if in response, he has started spending more time with his parents to "*adopt certain traditions for [him]self in order to pass them on to future generations.*"[15] Anel shares this concern and admits: "*I don't know the traditions well, I don't know how to cook, I have nothing to pass on to my children, unless I learn.*"[16] However, for her,

[13] "Это наша культура, то есть мы до сих пор поддерживаем наши традиции, соответственно это кухня. Дальше второй момент это [...] у нас есть очень много праздников, которые мы делаем национальных: годик условно это большой праздник для нас, также справляем с размахом; дальше есть какие-то поминальные традиции, ходим на кладбище два раза в год"

[14] "традиции корейские они теряются, путаются, размываются, кто-то так сказал, кто-то так сказал и единого целого нет."

[15] "традиции какие-то переносить для себя чтобы передавать будущему поколению"

[16] "я же плохо знаю традиции, не знаю как готовить условно, мне нечего передать свои детям, unless я не научусь"

knowledge extends beyond customs. She believes that understanding the history of local Koreans, knowing the experience of deportation and survival, is what makes her Korean. "*I'm glad that, in a way, I am part of this* ***heritage****. I think it's probably the fact that I know all of this and can share it with others, since many people don't know*,"[17] she explained. These responses suggest that knowledge, that of Koryo Saram history and specific traditions, ceremonies and culinary practices, can be another marker of Korean identity. A person does not just inherit Korean identity, they learn it (be it through conversation or observation).

Other participants did not mention traditions when answering specifically the question on what makes them Korean, but did discuss them in general during our conversation. Traditions were mentioned mostly in two ways i.e. celebrations/life-cycle rituals and traditional food. Firstly, apart from Alena and Veronika, other respondents shared that together with their parents and relatives they annually celebrate Korean New Year and participate in Hansik, Parental Memorial Day. For example, when choosing a date for our interview, Roman clearly stated that he would be unavailable on a certain day because it is a Parental Memorial Day. Artyom also brought up what he referred to as "*core traditions*" i.e. asyandi (child's first birthday celebration), wedding ceremonies, funerals.[18] Based on his choice of words, these milestone ceremonies seem to be one of the fundamental elements of local Korean culture. Yes, as some scholar argue, there might have been a near-total substitution of crucial identity symbols, such as language and cultural heritage (history, culture, folklore, some customs), with symbols of Russian culture due to prolonged and close exposure to it (Saveliev 2010, 489; Ten 2017; Li 2012). Yes, because of fragmented transmission of scarce knowledge, there is a variation among the ways local Koreans perform these rituals. Still, it is something that ordinary people continue

[17] "рада что как бы I am part of this heritage. Мне кажется что да скорее всего это, то что я это все знаю, что я могу это людям донести, типа многие не знаю,"

[18] "Базовые традиции: годик/свадьба/похороны"

to follow during important live events and thus find meaningful and real. This variation, even within a single family as Vlad's case demonstrates, highlights that local Koreans are not a homogeneous group but rather a diverse community with multiple ways of interpreting and performing tradition.

What they engage with more frequently in their everyday life is Korean food. Some eat Korean food at home everyday, others less often (when visiting grandparents or on celebratory occasions), but all participants seem to share a love for Korean cuisine. When I asked participants about their favorite meal in general, many replied with Korean dishes. Anna and Alena adore kuksi. For Anna this meal is something she could eat for the rest of her life and it is closely associated with her grandmother. During our interview she even said that our conversation made her crave kuksi and she'll ask her grandmother to prepare it for her soon. Anel also shared that her favorite dishes are the ones that her grandmother used to prepare. As her grandmother passed away Anel misses a lot her chimchi and chicken soup with pabi, which no other relative can recreate: "*I'll never try her chimchi again [...] she knew how to make my favorite soup, it's just chicken broth with meat and rice [...] Mom makes it, it's tasty too, but not like grandma's! [..] Auntie made one and zero similarity, it's not the same at all.*"[19]

Similarly, Vlad shared how in his teenagehood he used to spend his summers with his grandmother and they would together prepare tyai and chimchi for the winter: "*My grandmother and I used to make it. When I was with her in the summer, we would boil 20 kilograms of some kind of peas, grind them. There were no automatic ones [grinders] back then, so after that my hand could only be in one position [laughs]. We also made chimchi, you pickle 200 kilograms of*

[19] "я больше не попробую ее кимчи [...] она умела мой любимый суп это вот просто куриный бульон с мясом и с рисом [...] Мама делает его, тоже вкусно, но не так, не как вот у бабушки! [..] тетя приготовила zero similarity, вообще не то"

cabbage, make it, and eat it all winter."[20] In this way, Korean food is not just a food preference, but an intimate and deeply personal connection with the loved ones, as well as a bridge between generations, that allows passing down the knowledge (or in some cases highlights how it might not be fully preserved).

Participants were mentioning a lot of different Korean dishes and it was interesting to hear names I have not heard before, especially when talking to Roman and Vlad. To be honest I even felt like an imposter researching local Korens' experiences and not knowing what *puktyai* or *mugi* is. Anel also shared that she does not know the names of all the traditional dishes or how to cook them herself. In Absadikova's (2023) research on Kazakhstani Koreans food practices one participant raised an issue of the younger generation being unfamiliar with local Korean food names and being more knowledgeable of South Korean cuisine (69). Two other participants shared that they might not know/remember the specific dishes and at what events to serve which, but they believe it is important to follow traditions and thus they will always ask for guidance from their relatives (Absadikova 2023, 65-66). Likewise, my participants rely on the help of grandparents and parents when it comes to food preparation, but it does not negate their appreciation of it.

Stereotypical features of Korean character

Personality traits and behavioral patterns typically associated with Koreans were the least frequently discussed aspects of ethnic identity among young Koreans I interviewed. These traits included hardworking (the most common), civil, modest, neat, punctual, well-educated, disciplined, and sympathetic, lacking an overly inflated sense of self-esteem, as well as having a

[20] "Мы вот с бабушкой делали, я когда с ней летом был, 20 килограмм какого-то гороха сварить, перемолоть, еще автоматических тогда не было, у меня потом рука только в одном положении была [смеется]. Чимчи тоже 200 килограмм капусты засаливаешь, делаешь, и всю зиму ешь."

‘difficult’ personality.[21] Some noted that Koreans do not always have deep knowledge of their own culture and food, while one participant also said Korean men lack romance and affection when it comes to dating. A few participants actually reflected on whether they themselves embodied these traits. For instance, Anna perceives her hardworking nature as an expression of her Korean genes. Vlad admitted to having a "difficult" personality, typically attributed to Koreans. Roman also described himself as punctual. He arrived early for our interview, jokingly contrasting this with Kazakh norms. To bolster his argument about Korean punctuality, he remarked that he had never met an unpunctual Korean and even asked if I had arrived early as well.

Nonetheless, these traits in general did not constitute a strong defining feature of Korean identity. Most participants did not explicitly describe their own personalities as Korean-coded, instead they referenced either some broader narratives or firsthand experience with co-ethnics. Anel, for example, grounded her associations and descriptions in direct interactions with specific family members. Firstly, discipline she connected to her father, who is the embodiment of discipline and stability and a reliable employee in the eyes of his boss. Secondly, when discussing emotionality and empathy, she spoke about her grandmother, who was always ready to help others selflessly. Thirdly, she linked Koreanness to artistic talent by referencing her older cousins and aunt from father’s side. Although Anel acknowledged that some of these traits applied to her as well, she provided much more detailed descriptions when discussing her family members. Similarly, Anna’s perception of Korean men - whom she described as unaffectionate and unromantic - was shaped by her personal interactions with those who had shown interest in her while she was seeking a partner.

[21] “вредный характер”

Based on these findings, I suggest that personality traits are a weak indicator of ethnic identity. Few participants recognize traits associated with Koreans in themselves or explicitly describe them as a manifestation of Korean nature. Some of Koh and Baek's (2020) respondents viewed traits like intelligence and good education as intrinsic to being Korean and shared aspirations to conform. Someone stated: "After all, Koreans are smart and well-educated. I also want to be like that" (18). In contrast, my participants did not express a similar expectation for themselves, nor did they suggest - implicitly or explicitly - that possessing these traits was necessary to claim Korean identity. Besides, the wide range of traits mentioned, with only a few repeated by more than one participant, suggests that a biologically inherent and universal "Korean character" does not exist. In other words, ethnicity per se does not define an individual's character. What some people could understand as a 'Korean' trait is partially shaped by their social environment. More specifically, broader cultural narratives (e.g., the association of Koreans with hard work) on the one end and interpersonal relationships and upbringing on the other (e.g., the case of Anna and Anel) influence young people's ideas of Koreanness.

This reminded me of Koh and Baek's (2020) concept of individuality as an identity component, which emphasises the role of personal stories and unique experiences in shaping ethnic identity. K-pop consumption became a tool for positive reflection on being Korean and self-development among Koh and Baek's (2020) respondents i.e. it helped them to overcome traumatic childhood experience of bullying, embrace one's Koreanness (ex. Korean physical traits), work harder and strive for better education (17-18). In the case of my participants, their meaningful and emotional interactions with family members - like coming to grandmothers' homes for Korean food or cooking alongside them - could foster stronger connection with one' ethnic identity. Moments like when Roman fondly recalled that during his own asyandi, he chose

money and everyone joked he would grow up to be a businessman, can have a strengthening effect on one's sense of *being* Korean. At the same time, negative experiences also shape identity. For instance, Veronika shared how being bullied in school for "*not looking like others*" "*left a lasting impression on [her]*."[22] Based on her responses, she appears more distanced from Korean traditions and practices now and I suggest that this early experience potentially contributed to a weakening of her ethnic identity.

To conclude, some young local Koreans perceive ethnicity as something given i.e. defined by ancestral descent and the blood that runs through their veins. For others, being born into a particular culture is not enough, what matters is actively learning about its specifics and history. Ethnic identity, in this sense, is maintained not through daily engagement as it used to be but through more symbolic practices, such as preparing and eating traditional food, celebrating holidays, or participating in rites of passage. Through these expressions of Koreanness, which with time possibly became quite different from the practices of earlier generations, participants can make sense of what it means for them to be a Korean today. In this light, I suggest an important question should be asked here: should being a Korean or any other ethnicity be understood solely in terms of ancestry and cultural markers like traditional rituals or cuisine? Ethnic identity may also involve other meaningful dimensions, like historical memory (as the case of Anel showed with her awareness of deportation events and recollections of grandparents' stories) or civic participation, religious affiliation, or even political attitudes.

[22] Importantly, this experience of ethnic-based bullying occurred while Veronika was living in Russia, where she resided until the age of 17

Symbolic Ethnicity

Symbols young Korean utilize

Taking into account factors presented in the previous section, I argue that my participants have a symbolic ethnic identity because their sense of being a Korean is primarily built on interaction with symbols of Koreanness, and is no longer bound by in-group participation with other co-ethnics. Symbolic ethnicity refers to this sentimental attachment to the culture of the first immigrant generation or ancestral homeland i.e. an expression of appreciation and even pride in traditions without necessarily practicing them on a daily basis (Gans 1979, 9). Most of my participants follow this pattern and rely on symbols like Korean New Year, Parental Memorial Days, life-cycle rituals (e.g., *asyandi*, weddings, funerals), and Korean food. Notably, their engagement with them varies in both frequency and scope.

For instance, some participants do not celebrate Korean holidays or observe traditional rituals at all (Veronika, Alena). Others engage selectively, celebrating Korean New Year and holding Parental Memorial Days, or following core rites of passage ceremonies such as first-year birthdays, weddings, and funerals (Sasha, Artyom, Anna). A third group states they practice all of the mentioned customs (Roman, Anel, Vlad). A similar variation exists in relation to food: Veronika rarely eats Korean food, while Sasha only eats it at his grandmother's house. The rest of the participants have it at home often or from time to time, while Vlad mentioned he eats it almost every day. I suggest that such different levels of engagement showcase how flexible symbolic ethnicity is and how ethnic identity is no longer tied to strict adherence to customs. Participants who rarely observe traditions or eat Korean food and still identify as Korean demonstrate it. Veronika stands out in this case. Unlike other participants, she did not mention any Korean dishes or traditions. She is married and has a daughter and did not mention whether

they held *asyandi* or followed any customs at the wedding. Nonetheless, she identifies as Korean based on her blood suggesting that for her, the biological component of ethnic identity may outweigh cultural factors. Biology in her case could be a

Beyond holidays and food, I propose that surnames could serve as a symbol of ethnic identity too. Yes, this is similar to the case of genes and appearance because it is something participants have little control over. But it is a marker of their ethnicity and a way to communicate their group belonging to the rest of the world. For example, when conducting my digital ethnography I relied heavily on surnames in account names and bios to see whether a person is Korean. Besides, unlike customs and cuisine, which you need to interact with at least occasionally, surname is a constant symbol, inherited from a parent. However, it becomes more complex when it comes to female Koreans marrying, especially non-Koreans, and Anel voiced this dilemma. She said: "*I have a question right now: should I change my last name, like, to my husband's? If I marry a Kazakh man, it would be a Kazakh last name. Should I change it, or I was thinking of taking my mother's last name so that I could work in politics, for example?*"[23] She fears that her Korean surname will hinder her aspirations to work in governmental structure. Nonetheless, she values her ethnic belonging to Koreans and proudly uses her surname as a marker of it:

> I always say that my last name is Tsoy. My friends or acquaintances always use it to remember me, like people know me on Instagram, and these same students or pupils, like, when we meet at some competition for example. This happens often. They say: "You're Anel Tsoy, right?" and I say, "Yes!" "You're Tsai?" The first name doesn't even matter, it's specifically the last name. I actually find it very pleasant.[24]

[23] "у меня сейчас такой вопрос стоит ли мне менять фамилию типа там на мужа, если у меня будет муж казах, то казахская фамилия, стоит ли менять или я думала мамину фамилию взять для того чтобы я могла работать в политике например"

[24] "я всегда наоборот говорю у меня фамилия Тсай, у меня всегда даже мои друзья или знакомые чтобы запомнить бывает же что в инсте меня знают и эти же студенты

The fact that Anel enjoys being recognized by her surname illustrates how a symbolic element of ethnicity can acquire emotional value not only through some internal feelings, but also through external recognition and remembrance by others. Like genes or physical features, surnames are given rather than chosen. Yet due to their high visibility and the fact that they require little active engagement, unlike holidays or traditional food, they can still play a meaningful role in shaping one's ethnic identity.

Lastly, I would like to address one of Gans' (1979) claims: "For the third generation, the secular ethnic cultures which the immigrants brought with them are now only an ancestral memory, or **an exotic tradition** to be savored once in a while in a museum or at an ethnic festival" (6). More specifically, I disagree with the notion that culture becomes something 'exotic' for later generations. Possibly for Veronika, who among my respondents seems to be least exposed to Korean culture, some traditions may feel distant or unfamiliar. Still, other participants, even if they do not practice rituals regularly or do not fully understand the sacred meanings behind them, do not seem to romanticize or aestheticize Korean culture. Instead, for them it feels familiar, close to home, and naturally embedded in their everyday lives.

For example, Anel shared how excited she was to learn that her boyfriend (also half Kazakh, half Korean) was familiar with Korean food: "*All this kimchi, kuksi, not everyone eats it at home, so when I talk to my boyfriend, I say 'do you eat kuksi?' he's like 'yes' and I'm like [excited] 'damn that's cool" for me it was just like that, I never had any Korean friends, and when you find out that they also eat kuksi at home, I'm like damn, that's so amazing.*"[25] This

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ученики типа мы с ними встречаемся на какой-то олимпиаде например, такое часто происходило. Такие ты же Анель Тсай? Я такая да! Ты же Тсай? Даже имя пофиг, а именно фамилия. Мне было наоборот очень приятно короче вот"

[25] "вот эти все кимчи, кукси, не все это кушают дома, вот когда я тоже с парнем общаюсь говорю 'ты кукси кушаешь?' он такой 'да' я такая [звуки восторга] 'блин прикольно' для меня это было просто такое, у меня же никогда не было друзей корейцев и

comment illustrates that Korean culture may appear exotic or unfamiliar to outsiders, but not to local Koreans themselves. Moreover, when ethnicity is expressed through symbols, it does not necessarily mean it is nominal or superficial. As Rebhun (2004) argues, "from the subjective individual point of view, [...] it is true, authentic and reaffirms the inherent connections of personal and group identity" (364). Even if certain traditions have evolved or lost some of their original meaning, they are no less real in a sense that they are still performed and hold personal significance for younger generations. In this way, ethnic identity, at least for my participants, shifts away from a collective diasporic framework and becomes more an individual, lived experience.

Non-ethnic based social networks

Another aspect of a symbolic ethnicity is that it is highly individualistic i.e. it does not require functioning groups and active participation in them on behalf of individuals (Gans 1979). Kuzhakhmetova (2022) in her research observed an increased distance between local Koreans, partially resulting from intermarriage, lack of common diasporic space, and dispersion of Koreans territorially, religiously, and in terms of professional occupation (83). This made me think about whether having meaningful connections with other Koreans is actually no longer significant for ethnic identity of my participants. My observation demonstrates that ethnic identity does not necessarily require ethnic-based networks and even association with some imagined ethnic community.

The first thing that stands out is that my participants' connection with co-ethnics is primarily family-based. When asked about Koreans in their social circles, most participants mentioned close or extended family members, while only a few interacted with other co-ethnics

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типа когда ты узнаешь что они тоже типа кукси кушают дома, я такая блин как же классно."

outside of familial ties. For instance, Vlad noted that most of his Korean friends reside in Uzbekistan, while the majority of his Korean friends in Kostanay have recently moved to South Korea. Veronika has a close friend and knows her friend's husband, both of whom are Korean. She also follows some local Koreans on Instagram, though she rarely interacts with them. Artyom mentioned having a Korean neighbor, while Anel recalled meeting a few Koreans back at school but deliberately distancing herself from them due to differences in personality: "*I wasn't fond of their character at all. [...] they are always up for something, I don't know, ready to tell the teacher something directly [...] but I liked more calm people, well, those who know how to keep their composure.*"[26] Therefore, the social circles of my participants include Koreans, but are not predominantly made of them.

Notably, their social networks include individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. For instance, Roman described his friend group as multicultural, mentioning Koreans, Kazakhs, Russians, Armenians, and Chechens. Similarly, Anel, who is half Kazakh and fluent in Kazakh, noted that back at school and now at university, she primarily socialized with Kazakhs. Rather than simply ethnicity, other factors seem to shape social connections of some other respondents. Roman and Anna, for example, explained their choice of friends is based not on a person's ethnicity but on their values and interests. This suggests that for some young Koreans ethnicity is no longer a key determinant in the formation of their social networks. Besides, of those participants who work almost no one engages in ethnic-specific businesses, unlike their parents. For instance, Roman's mother owns a shop selling South Korean products and he sometimes works there as a cashier. Anna's father runs a business making traditional Korean dishes, catering to local Koreans and visiting South Koreans as well. Alena mentioned her parents work in

[26] "Они просто по характеру мне вообще не импонировали [...] они такие движняковые, не знаю там готовые учителю че-то на прямую сказать [...] а мне нравились более такие типа спокойные люди, ну вот такие знают как себя держать в руках."

agricultural fields, maintaining professional ties with other Koreans in farming in Kostanay. These practices allow parents to establish connections with co-ethnics.

When it comes to marriage, my participants express diverse preferences regarding their partners' ethnicity. One group is made of those who either have a Korean spouse or prefer a Korean partner. For instance, Alena is married to a Korean, while Roman and Vlad shared that their parents strongly encouraged them to find Korean wives. Vlad even described this as "*a strong request to avoid interethnic marriage*."[27] In contrast, the second group includes participants who are either married to non-Koreans or prefer non-Korean partners. Veronika, for instance, is married to a Kazakh man, while Anna wished for a local Russian husband rather than a Korean or a Kazakh one. Anna's parents support her choice, telling her: "*It doesn't matter, as long as you're loved and happy*."[28] Even though she and her parents are of full Korean descent, they do not impose restrictions on interethnic marriage and allow her to choose her partner freely. These cases of Roman, Vlad, and Anna suggest that parental opinions remain influential, be it encouragement of ethnic endogamy or support of interethnic marriages.

Anel's perspective offers another unique dimension to this discussion. She noted that on her father's side, relatives have intermarried with Kazakhs, Russians, Tatars, Chechens, and Jews. She even joked she would never think some children of these unions are ethnically half Koreans because of their unconventional Korean appearance. Although her own boyfriend is officially Kazakh (as his father is Kazakh), he is also half-Korean, just like Anel. She shares how frequently treats him more as a Korean because of similarities in experience of growing up in an interethnic household. She values that he is familiar with Korean customs and cuisine too. This

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[27] "большая просьба чтобы кровосмешения не было"

[28] "родители так типа неважно, главное чтобы тебя любили и ты была счастлива. Хоть я чистая кореянка, родители чистые корейцы тоже, мне они разрешают смешивать кровь и братику тоже"

suggests that for Anel it is not so much the ethnicity itself that matters, rather some shared cultural experience.

The last group consists of Artyom and Sasha, who did not explicitly state a preference for their future partners' ethnicity. When asked about their ideal partner, they focused on personal traits rather than ethnic background. Notably, most other participants did not bring up ethnicity right away as well. Rather they mentioned qualities like caring, kindness, trust-worthiness, good at managing a household, etc., and raised this issue only when I directly asked whether a partner's ethnicity mattered (with the exception of Anna who introduced it on her own). In this way, while ethnicity is an active consideration for some (like Anna or Roman and Vlad), it remains a secondary concern for others - not entirely irrelevant but rather implicit, surfacing only when directly addressed.

I suggest there are a number of interrelated factors that potentially contribute to the tendency of younger local Koreans to form such non-ethnic-based social networks and not always opt for endogamous marriage. The small and geographically dispersed Korean population in Kazakhstan, particularly in cities like Kostanay and Karaganda (where most of my participants reside) is one of them. Compared to larger cities like Almaty and Astana, where Korean communities seem more active and visible, the limited local presence in Kostanay for example, reduces opportunities for intra-ethnic interaction outside of one's family network. As Kim (2003) notes, patterns of internal urban migration have led to greater ethnic dispersion and integration in urban environments, contributing to both mixed social circles and higher rates of interethnic marriage (28). Muttarak (2014 quote in Galyapina, Lebedeva,and Lepshokova 2020, 89) also found that ethnic diversity in urban settings correlates with a higher prevalence of intercultural friendships.

This demographic dispersion in urban setting intersects with factors like linguistic Russification of Koreans and their openness to cultural assimilation, which, according to integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation, contribute to development of more open and intercultural relationships (Kim 2001 quoted in Galyapina, Lebedeva,and Lepshokova 2020, 89). Growing up in such multiethnic, multilingual environments, where intergroup contact is normalized, appears to have shaped participants' openness to diversity and social mixing. Nonetheless, it is crucial to consider not only the ideology and size of the ethnic minority group, but also the attitudes and dominant cultural narratives of the titular ethnic group. For example, some participants experienced ethnic-based bullying during childhood. Similar to Veronika, Sasha recalled being bullied as a child and sometimes called Chinese ("китаец") or narrow-eyed ("узкоглазый"). Similarly, Mark Tsoy shared online that as a child he frequently fought with Kazakh peers in his hometown Kyzylorda because they bullied him with similar slurs. These experiences highlight that intercultural contact in multiethnic settings does not necessarily translate into acceptance or equality.

In this regard, I would like to address an alternative factor i.e. the relative invisibility of ethnic diversity in Kazakhstan's public space. As Kuznecovienė (2023) observes that despite the state's official promotion of multiculturalism and "unity in diversity," everyday interactions and public spaces still lack significant markers of a multiethnic society. Instead, the public sphere is heavily Russified, and ethnicity is often reduced to a matter of individual identity (346). At the same time, there has been a growing effort in the Kazakhization of public space i.e. the promotion of the Kazakh language, the popularization of traditional Kazakh cuisine and clothing (often in modernized forms), and broader efforts to revive and reimagine Kazakh cultural practices. Within this context, I suggest ethnic distinctions become less socially relevant, and

individuals shift to emphasize shared human values instead. This perspective is reflected by one of Kuznecovienė's (2023) respondents in a study on descendants of Lithuanian immigrants in Kazakhstan, who said, "we have relations not at the level of national relations, but human relations" (346). This nicely sums up Roman and Anna's perspective on ethnicity as secondary in personal relationships.

Belonging to an 'imagined' community and diaspora?

In addition to forming non-ethnic-based social networks, most of my participants are not formal members of ethnic organizations like the Association of Koreans of Kazakhstan (AKK) or the Youth Movement of Koreans. Neither do they feel belonging to the Korean community as a group. While Gans (1979) argues that individuals may still maintain ethnic identity through symbolic ties to 'abstract' collectivities without active engagement in functioning ethnic networks, I suggest even this symbolic association can be optional for ethnic identity. Still, it can be manifested when participants interact with official Korean structures in more limited or situational ways.

Most of my respondents are not involved in any Korean cultured clubs or associations, with the exception of Sasha, who sometimes helps at the Youth Movement of Koreans in Kostanay. This also decreases young Koreans' exposure to co-ethnics. In contrast, online ethnographic observation of young Koreans in Almaty suggests a somewhat different dynamic. I looked through some personal Instagram accounts belonging to young Koreans affiliated with organizations like the Korean Theatre or the national dance ensemble Namson. Members of Namson, for instance, frequently refer to one another as a family and seem to have a strong bond formed through shared experiences in dance training and traveling across Kazakhstan for public performances. These performances often occur in collaboration with Korean institutions like the

Association of Koreans of Kazakhstan (AKK), the Youth Movement of Koreans, and the Korean Cultural Center. Additionally, members of the group participate in an annual internship hosted by the National Center for Intangible Heritage in South Korea, further reinforcing their connection to Korean cultural institutions and, more importantly, people of similar background.

Another example is the Youth Movement of Koreans (MDK) branch in Almaty. According to their official Instagram page, they had around 120 active members in 2024. They make frequent updates on weekly team-building activities, leadership forums, professional development workshops, and meetings with official representatives (e.g., the Chairman of the AKK). In one video they refer to MDK Almaty as "one family," while other posts describe it as a source of emotional support and emphasize the main goal to "not just organize events, but create real experiences (события) that inspire the unification of Korean youth."[29] It is worth noting that their activities are not exclusively centered on ethnic traditions. While they do organize events like traditional holiday celebrations or cooking masterclass (e.g., making kimbap), they focus strongly on social networking, leadership development, and civic engagement as well. For instance, recent initiatives included a tree-planting campaign for an orphanage in almaty or outreach visits to elder members of the Korean community on Pensioner's Day. This could suggest that for active members of MDK being Korean may also involve participating in civic life in Kazakhstan and personal professional development, not only preserving cultural heritage. In general, while their participation in this organization does not necessarily mean that their primary social networks are ethnically homogeneous, it does indicate more frequent and structured engagement with fellow Koreans compared to my respondents.

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29 https://www.instagram.com/reel/C0RLDN5M7p3/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

Speaking of my participants, they do not strongly associate themselves with the Korean community. Veronika, Artyom, Alena, and Roman, who see themselves as Koreans, shared that they do not feel like they are part of the Korean community neither local in their hometown nor broader one in Kazakhstan. In this way, their ethnic identity seems to be maintained at a more individual level i.e. rooted in ancestral descent, family traditions, or symbolic markers like Korean food, rather than a sense of belonging to a broader Korean collective (be it imagined or not). Anel's experience with the Youth Movement in Astana also failed to meet her desire for a shared space to connect with co-ethnics. Although her experience is mostly limited to observing the group chat, she still criticized the movement as overly political, vague in its purpose, and out of touch with the everyday needs and interests of ordinary Koreans. Reflecting on her sense of belonging, she concluded: "*I do not feel myself part of this big huge community.*"[30] These examples illustrate how, for some, Koreanness is not experienced through allegiances to a symbolic group, but rather as a personal identity category.

However, there are participants who when externally recognized as part of the Korean community had stronger feelings of ethnic belonging. For instance, Sasha, a member of the Youth Movement in Kostanay, participates occasionally and expresses a hesitant sense of belonging, answering "*more yes than no*" on his connection to the Korean community. Anna shared that she feels a little bit closer to the local Korean community, "*even if they don't know [her]*," after participating in the Miss Ethnos contest. She represented the Korean ethnic group at the oblast level and received support from AKK: "*they helped me with all this, they provided me with costumes, helped me with participation somewhere.*"[31] In this way, recognition by the organization and symbolic public representation of her ethnicity strengthened her collective

[30] "Не чувствую себя part of this big huge community"

[31] "это было плюсом корейской Ассоциации, они мне помогали в этом всем, они мне костюмы предоставляли, помогали где-то в участии"

identification. Vlad's case is similar i.e. after moving from Uzbekistan, he was immediately included in the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan as a representative of the Korean community. He noted that others turn to him for advice about Korean culture: "*When they find out I am Korean, they turn to me for some advice, especially regarding food*."[32] These cases suggest that while symbolic ethnicity does not require direct interactions or active participation, for some people it is an outside recognition and institutional inclusion that matters and what can reinforce their feeling of belonging to a larger ethnic collective.

In addition to asking participants about the Korean community, I also explored their understanding of *diaspora* and whether they associated themselves with it. The goal was to examine whether for them the term "diaspora" carried a distinct meaning compared to "community." Overall, participants generally defined *diaspora* primarily in ethnic terms i.e. as a community or united group of ethnic Koreans residing in a country where they do not constitute the majority population. Anna, for instance, associated the term with formal structures like the Association of Koreans and the Youth Movement. Reflecting on her participation in the Miss Ethnos competition and the support she received from the AKK, she noted it made her feel a bit closer to the Korean diaspora as well. Vlad was the only participant who expressed confidently he felt himself part of the diaspora. He denied it as "*a large clan, made of several families that are gathering together, solving local problems and helping each other*."[33] In contrast, other participants were hesitant (as in the cases of Anel and Sasha) or explicitly distanced themselves from the Korean diaspora (such as Roman, Alena, Artyom, and Veronika).

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[32] "Когда узнают, что я кореец, за какими-то советами, особенно по части еды, ко мне как бы обращаются"

[33] "Клан большой, из нескольких семей собираются, решают всякие свои местечковые проблемы, друг другу помогают"

The fact that my participants do not have a shared sense of belonging to a diaspora supports Anthias' (1998) argument that not all individuals associated with diasporic communities possess the same level of diasporic consciousness. Brubaker's (2005) notion of diaspora as a category of practice - "an idiom, a stance, a claim" - can also be applied here, particularly in recognizing that not all members of a presumed group adopt or internalize this identity (12). However, Brubaker seems to emphasize disagreements with the political, ideological or cultural diasporic claims. In the case of my participants, they do not necessarily reject the diasporic narrative itself; rather, they do not see themselves as part of it as a community in the first place.

Overall, in this chapter I have discussed how young Koreans in Kazakhstan make sense of their ethnic identity i.e. through an interplay of primordialist ideas of ancestral descent and personal engagement with cultural symbols like Korean food and traditional celebrations. I have illustrated how the experiences in terms of the importance of these symbolic practices for ethnic identity can vary among individuals. Moreover, participants largely lack ethnic-based social networks and many report a strong connection to the broader Korean community, be it in their hometown or Kazakhstan as a whole. Yet, these factors do not necessarily undermine their sense of selves as Koreans, but rather suggest a shift from collective, diasporic forms of identity toward more individualized and symbolic expressions of ethnicity.

Chapter 3. Homeland

During our conversation, the Chairman of the AKK in Kostanay found it amusing that I planned to ask young people about their homeland, noting that they are not patriotic these days. She even referred to them as 'people of the world' ('люди мира'), possibly hinting to the effects of globalization or cosmopolitanism. She laughed lightly as if she saw the idea of young people engaging in any way with the concept of motherland as very unlikely. This chapter will be focused precisely on this i.e young local Koreans' understanding of concepts 'homeland' vs. 'historical homeland,' their experience in the multiethnic nationalizing state and sense of belonging to it.

What is my homeland?

As I have mentioned before, classical theory of diaspora emphasizes the 'myth of homeland' as one of the defining characteristics of diaspora (Safran 1991; Brubaker 2005). This orientation toward a real or imagined homeland is rooted in collective memory and a mythic ideal of a true home, envisioned as a place of safety, prosperity, and restoration to which diaspora members might one day return. Nonetheless, taking into account how return is mostly a myth (Safran 1991) and memory is significantly different from reality (Demmer 2005), Faist (2010) suggests to shift focus from homeland return per se to the formation and maintenance of interborder connections and transnational practices of exchange between diaspora and homeland (12). Nevertheless, how relevant this homeland orientation is to the case of local Koreans in Kazakhstan is quite unclear.

In one respect, first generations of Korean deportees, as described in Park's (2017) book, shared the desire to return to 'the place of their birth' and engaged in two waves of repatriation campaigns to the Russian Far East in 1950s and 1990s (86-87). In another respect, the majority

of Koreans stayed in countries of relocation and preferred migration within state borders (Akiner 2005, 47; Diener 2009; Ten 2017, 42). Although this decision might have been involuntary for some (ex. lack of financial means or social capital to make a journey), I suggest others might have "engaged with the myth of homeland, though not necessarily with return," as Atabaki (2005, 7) mentioned, or developed a new understanding of homeland. Noteworthy, today local Koreans in Kazakhstan seem to make a distinction between one's homeland and ancestral home. The younger generations of Koreans in particular in Kazakhstan associate themselves with this country and perceive it as their true motherland (Diener 2009; Ahn 2019). For example, one study participant shared: "I cannot say that I am Korean Korean. I am a Korean born in Kazakhstan. I am ethnically Korean, speak Russian and live in Kazakhstan. I cannot identify myself with one" (Ahn 2019, 231). Similarly, the majority of Kuzhakhmetova's (2022) research participants perceive Kazakhstan to be their homeland and even indicated preference in self-identification i.e. "Kazakhstani Koreans rather than a diaspora" (64, 67).

In the same way, most of the participants in my study stated that their homeland is Kazakhstan. Some participants perceive their homeland as a place of birth and personal development (upbringing early in life and/or more formative experiences later in life). For example, participants Alena, Artyom, and Sasha provide following definitions: "*where I was born,*"[34] "*where I was born, grew up, developed as a person,*"[35] "*a place where I was born and it made me the way I am*"[36] respectively. Likewise, participant Vlad, who comes from Uzbekistan, connects homeland to his birthplace. Importantly, he insists "*even if I receive citizenship, I will still not consider Kazakhstan or Korea my homeland. I was born in Uzbekistan, I, well, was not*

[34] "там где родился"
[35] "то, где ты родился, вырос, сформировался как личность"
[36] "место где я родился и оно сделало меня таким какой я есть"

reborn in Kazakhstan."[37] This response emphasizes an understanding of homeland as unchangeable i.e. a foundational and everlasting aspect of identity, not really affected by changes in residence or citizenship. Participant Veronica emphasized the actual place of birth rather than a documented one: "*according to the documents I was born in Russia, but in fact here. So most likely Kazakhstan.*"[38] It is noteworthy, given that she spent 17 years of her life in Russia before moving back to Kazakhstan.

Participant Anna, who named Kazakhstan and her hometown Kostanay as her homeland, has a more flexible understanding of motherland in contrast to other participants. She replied: "... *the house where you were born, where you feel comfortable, where you know that when you return, people will be waiting for you there. For me, it is here, where my parents' house is.*"[39] To put it another way, her idea of homeland is geographically more narrow, not encompassing the whole country, but rather concentrated on her hometown and her familial home. Additionally, she continued to reflect on her thoughts and said: "*If my parents move, maybe my homeland will be there too, maybe it can be two of them (homelands), maybe even more.*"[40] This suggests that while homeland often includes a physical reference, it can change as it is shaped by emotional ties and a sense of comfort and security. Participant Roman similarly equated it to his familial home and more importantly people there. He replied:

> I would answer the same way as the question about home. Home is a place where you are always welcome. It is not necessarily some apartment, home is more about the people. That is, I can come to my parents at any time, they will still greet me, the same with

[37] "даже допустим получив гражданство, все равно я не буду считать Казахстан или Корею своей родиной. Я родился в Узбекистане, я же ну не переродился в Казахстане"

[38] "по документам я родилась в России, но по факту здесь. поэтому скорее всего Казахстан"

[39] "дом где ты родилась, где ты чувствуешь себя комфортно, где ты знаешь что когда ты вернешься, там тебя всегда будут ждать. Для меня это здесь, где родителей дом"

[40] "Родители переедут, тоже может будет для меня родина там, может их две может быть, может и больше"

relatives, I can burst in on them at any moment and say 'I'm visiting you!' and they will greet me like usual. I think that homeland is also more like people than a place.[41]

This perspective illustrates how for some people the concept of homeland is closely connected with their interpersonal relations, when familial bonds, acceptance, and hospitality matters more than the physical place itself.

These responses suggest that the concept of deterritorialization often associated with diaspora communities in literature does not always apply to local Koreans in Kazakhstan. In contrast, it is the process of territorialization of identity that takes place when the homeland is socially constructed as communities assign emotional, symbolic, and political meaning to a particular space (Diener 2006). In his research, local Koreans in Kazakhstan attributed a significant value to "being born in a place" and perceived this place as their homeland because attach great sentimental value to it as shown from some literary poems that "[the land of Kazakhstan] became not a stepmother, but a mother to us" (Diener 2006, 207, 215). In a similar manner, my participants have specific geographical points of references, to which they established emotional attachment. Neither do they have any inner conflict on what their homeland is, thus showing that deterritoriality concept and transnational identity do not always apply for descendants of dispersed ethnic communities and question the discussion of diaspora' true ancestral homeland.

Regarding ancestral homeland, I have asked my participants about it and some described it as the place where ancestors were born. There were different variants of places that could

[41] "Я бы примерно также ответил как на вопрос про дом. Дом это то место где тебе всегда рады. Это не обязательно там какая-то квартира, дом это больше относится к людям. То есть я могу прийти к своим родителям в любое время, меня все равно встретят, тоже самое с родственниками, я могу к ним вообще неожиданно вломится и такой 'я к вам в гости' и они меня нормально встретят. Родина я думаю тоже это больше как бы не место, а люди."

count as historical homeland, with some respondents accepting the official rhetoric and others partially or completely rejecting it. For instance, Alena defined it as "the homeland of [her] ancestors" and identified South Korea as such. In contrast, Vlad, who also associated it with the birthplace of his ancestors, considered Uzbekistan to be his ancestral homeland. He explained:

> It's not coming from the heart that my historical homeland is Korea. Our ancestors were born in USSR, we a little bit maybe touched upon it, upbringing - it is soviet, it is not purely korean. I was born in Uzbekistan, I was brought up according to USSR canons, so to speak, so I cannot consider myself historically Korean and Korea as a historical homeland.[42]

In other words, Vlad's perception does not reach back to a distant and abstract past, but is shaped by the lived experiences of more near generations, particularly those raised in the Soviet context. Similarly, Anna recalled her grandmother's deportation from Vladivostok and mentioned the Russian Far East as a potential historical homeland. Anel believes that considering the initial migration of Koreans to the Russian Far East from North Korea, the latter seems geographically more accurate than South Korea for an ancestral birthplace. She mentioned that her friends even joke about her being somehow related to Kim Jong-un. These responses illustrate not only the diversity of interpretations, but also the fact that not all people are equally influenced by the dominant narrative strategically constructed by both Kazakhstan and South Korea (Ahn 2019).

This also aligns with Diener's (2006) observation that, despite some transnational practices with South Korea, local Koreans in Kazakhstan still perceive it as distant and

[42] "не от сердца идет что историческая родина Корея. У нас предки родились в СССР, мы немножко может там чуть-чуть чуточку затронули, воспитание - оно советское, оно же не чисто корейское. я родился в Узбекистане, меня воспитывали по канонам СССР так сказать, то я не могу считать себя историческим корейцем, родину исторической Корею. Это все равно будет Узбекистан, это все равно будет СССР"

unfamiliar. My participants did not express strong sentimental attachment to South Korea. Yes, some mentioned wanting to visit as tourists or move there temporarily for study or work. Yes, they highlighted South Korea's economic development, technological advancement, good infrastructure, and justice system. For example, Vlad noted, "it does not matter if it's a president or an ordinary person [in South Korea], everybody is equal before the law,"[43] while Anel highlighted the people's discipline, intelligence and high achievements in STEM. Nevertheless, similar to Diener's (2006) findings, respondents often pointed out differences in climate, social norms, and attitudes toward Koryo Saram. Anel shared, "I don't really understand their culture, their beauty standards for example, and dating culture I don't understand it at all,"[44] while Sasha stated, "I don't like hanguks and their attitude towards our CIS Koreans."[45] In terms of online observations, sentiments were more ambiguous. For example, participants in programs like the OKFriends Homecoming Camp posted about sightseeing, cultural activities, and emotional goodbyes, but their motivations remain unclear. Was it rooted in some sentimental desire to connect with ancestral homeland and co-ethnics from around the world, or interest in South Korea as a global tourist destination, or maybe both.

Sense of belonging and official language(s)

Participants who see Kazakhstan as their homeland generally describe a sense of comfort and belonging, often tied to a welcoming local environment. For example, Anna said Kostanay feels like home, where she never feels like "in the wrong box"[46] and people are "bright and warm," "one of her own."[47] Alena and Artyom similarly feel comfortable in Kazakhstan and do

[43] "как бы не важно это президент или там простой человек [в Южной Корее] все как бы перед законом равны"

[44] "я их культуру не прям понимаю, там эти beauty standards например и dating ам culture вообще не понимаю"

[45] "мне не нравятся хангуки и их отношения к нашим снг корейцам"

[46] "не бывает такого что я не в своей тарелке"

[47] "как-будто все люди свои"

not experience alienation of any kind. Sasha, despite occasional negative experiences due to his limited Kazakh language proficiency, emphasized that he does not feel like "an alien" in Kazakhstan, even remarking that "*Kazakh people treat [local Koreans] better than Hanguks in Korea*."[48] Thus, this sense of inclusion and belonging is closely connected to personal interactions in their immediate social environments (something Agnew refers to as *Locale*) rather than broader ideas of national unity and official rhetoric of the state (what Agnew names *Location*).[49]

Noteworthy, for one participant, this sense of belonging is closely tied to the knowledge of the state language. Veronika (the respondent who used to live in Russia) insisted it is a lack of fluency in Kazakh that "*does not give [her] the right to consider Kazakhstan [her] homeland*."[50] In other words, she has this internalized expectation that Kazakhstani citizens should speak Kazakh. Learning the national language appears to be a responsibility or a duty she needs to fulfill to finally qualify for a Kazakhstani. This sentiment does not seem to come from any experience of social exclusion on the basis of poor language proficiency. She did not mention any negative attitudes or public criticism and instead focused on her husband's family support: "*I constantly encounter [the Kazakh language] because my husband's relatives conduct 50% of their dialogues in Kazakh. They are understanding, but they hope that over time I will start speaking*."[51] Her experience illustrates that the state official language can function as a symbolic marker of legitimacy and full membership within the nation, especially for those coming from abroad.

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[48] "Чувства что я чужой нет, даже наоборот казахский народ лучше относиться к нам чем хангуки в Корее"

[49] see in Diener 2009, 466

[50] "этот момент не даёт мне права считать Казахстан своей родиной"

[51] "[с казахским языком] постоянно сталкиваюсь так как родственники мужа 50% диалогов ведут на казахском. с пониманием относятся, но надеятся что со временем начну разговаривать."

Similarly, participant Anel perceives language not only as a means of communication but as a tool for cultural integration of non-titular ethnic groups. Coming from an interethnic family (father is Korean and mother is Kazakh) and attending a school in Karaganda with Kazakh as language of instruction, she had a unique experience of growing up in a multilingual environment (predominantly Russian at home, Kazakh - at school). Despite stereotypes and bullying from classmates and even their parents, today she proudly uses her excellent knowledge in everyday life. Usually encounters such as conversations with taxi drivers or service workers lead to astonishment and admiration, as she explains her background and education: "*They're like "Where are you from?" I'm from Karaganda. They're like "Aa, Karaganda, what is your ru?" I don't have ru, I'm Korean and they're like "[sounds of surprise] What? It can't be? How can you speak so well?" I'm like, I graduated from Kazakh school with altyn belgi. They're like "Well done!*"[52] Anel values these moments of external recognition, especially from titular nationality representatives, because she challenges stereotypes and can demonstrate them that non-Kazakh ethnicities can and do engage with Kazakh language and culture too.

The perspectives of these participants resonate with the official rhetoric of state organizations such as the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan and the AKK. For example, the *Doctrine of National Unity* states that "mastering [Kazakh language] should become the duty and responsibility of every citizen of Kazakhstan," regardless of ethnic background (6). In this regard, the Association of Koreans in their *Concepts of Development* even proposed developing accessible methods for learning conversational Kazakh and increasing the visibility of prominent Kazakhstani Koreans speaking Kazakh to encourage growing generations. During my digital

[52] "они такие типа вы откуда, я говорю с Караганды. Они такие аа, Караганда, какой ру? У меня ру нету, я кореянка и они такие типа [звуки удивления] че? Не может быть? Как ты можешь так говорить хорошо? Я говорю вот закончила казахскую школу на алтын белгі. Они такие типа молодец!"

ethnography, I have noticed similar sentiments shared by Mark Tsoy, a local Korean blogger. He makes short entertaining videos[53] about experiences of local Koreans in Kazakhstan and uses phrases like:

- We are Kazakh Koreans and sometimes we speak Kazakh more than Kazakhs themselves.[54]
- We are Kazakh Koreans, and it is easier for us to learn our native Korean language simply because we know Kazakh.[55]
- Koreans in Kazakhstan—some of us speak 🇰🇿 fluently, and some are only learning.[56]

Through these phrases he, similar to Anel, tries to show that there are Koreans willing to engage with Kazakh language. In addition, in his short video series, *"Korean Orders Food in Kazakh* 🇰🇿🇰🇷*"*[57] Mark proves his knowledge of the state language by using it in everyday interactions. He often receives admiration in the comments section for his vocabulary and pronunciation, reinforcing how language proficiency not only facilitates interpersonal communication but also symbolizes cultural engagement and social integration. In other words, this shows that for some young people, speaking Kazakh is not just a practical skill but part of what it means to belong and be a Korean *here*, in Kazakhstan. In this way, the locality component of ethnic identity is important as being Korean is not solely a matter of biology or cultural heritage, but something dynamic—shaped by the socio-political context of their homeland.

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[53] https://www.youtube.com/shorts/Fog62h1vews; https://www.youtube.com/shorts/2XTRfsfKCXs

[54] "мы казахские корейцы и иногда мы разговариваем на казахском больше чем сами казахи"

[55] "мы казахские корейцы и нам легче учить свой родной корейский язык просто потому что мы знаем казахский"

[56] "Корейцы в Казахстане - свободно владеем 🇰🇿, а кто-то только учится"

[57] https://www.youtube.com/shorts/7K778RF7cuk; https://www.youtube.com/shorts/_Jhlz_cWwNA; https://www.instagram.com/p/DA3d_S1N3YL/

By contrast, my other participants exhibited a more neutral and pragmatic perspective regarding the state language. For instance, Alena and Artyom do not speak Kazakh. They expressed that they have neither faced challenges nor encountered situations where knowledge of Kazakh was essential.[58] Anna, Roman, and Vlad reported a slightly different experience, noting they can understand some Kazakh but are unable to respond fluently. In such situations, they typically disclose their ethnicity - saying, for example, "*I am Korean, not Kazakh*" - and often ask to switch to Russian language. In such situations Roman mentioned people usually have accommodating attitudes, even in predominantly Kazakh-speaking western regions of the country: "*Westerners are usually stricter about this, but when you say that you are Korean and not Kazakh, it's fine [when I ask to talk in Russian].*"[59] Vlad acknowledges his limited proficiency and still makes an effort to meet his clients' needs: "*If clients come and speak Kazakh, I can help them, but I immediately say that I speak poorly. Still, I will do my best to assist.*"[60] Anna in turn focused on alternative strategies for navigating such interactions, highlighting that external support is readily available: "*We have a translator, we have people. You walk down the street, and there will be someone who understands Kazakh and can speak it. There are also friends who know Kazakh—people you can write to or call, and they will help*."[61] Essentially these participants do not perceive a practical need to learn Kazakh because encounters with this language rarely disrupt their daily lives. Available alternatives combined

[58] "я не говорю на казахском языке, пока это не пригодилось" (Alena)

[59] "Даже западные, там обычно строже к этому относятся, но все равно когда говоришь что кореец, а не казах, то нормально [когда я просил говорить на русском]"

[60] "если клиенты приходят и говорят на казахском, я могу им подсказать, но я сразу говорю что я плохо говорю, но как могу я подскажу"

[61] "у нас есть переводчик, у нас есть люди, ты идешь по улице и найдется человек который понимает по-казахски и может говорить, найдутся друзья которые знают казахский, кому можно написать позвонить и они помогут"

with the general public's understanding responses, mitigate any urgency to learn the state language.

I suggest several factors may explain why most of my participants demonstrated such a functional approach to the Kazakh language. Firstly, the Soviet-era policies of linguistic Russification led to a widespread shift towards Russian in the peripheral republics, resulting in diminished competence in titular languages (Brubaker 2011, 1795-6). After independence, Kazakhstan aimed to promote Kazakh language and introduced specific policies. Yet scholars like Dave (2007) argue these initiatives were largely symbolic and targeted Russified urban Kazakhs rather than non-titular populations. Plus, no real economic or social pressure seems to have been put on Russian-speaking citizens at that time (112). This could explain why ethnic minorities like Koreans feel relatively unaffected by these nationalizing policies. Moreover, these participants' residence in Kostanay, still a predominantly Russian-speaking northern region, may reinforce this dynamic. Nonetheless, one participant, Sasha, noted that he occasionally encounters hostility, sharing: "*sometimes I hear negativity or threats on the street because I don't know the Kazakh language.*"[62] This suggests that today there may be a growing societal expectation for non-titular ethnic groups to learn the state language, considering the growing public tensions and a requirement to take a Kazakh language proficiency test to qualify for governmental positions.

Secondly, participants may view language pragmatically as a resource, the perceived utility of which determines its value. Ahn (2019, 230) found that some Kazakhstani Koreans prioritize learning the South Korean dialect, which offers economic and educational opportunities, over the traditional *Koryo mar* dialect, seen as outdated. In a similar fashion I

[62] "бывает что слышу негатив либо же угрозы на улице из-за не знание казахского языка"

suggest some of my participants perceive Kazakh language as somewhat irrelevant in relation to their future aspirations and current life circumstances. Successfully utilizing their ethnicity to avoid public reprobation in everyday interactions, people like Anna and Roman do not have external motivation to learn Kazakh language. Vlad expressed his desire to move to Europe, which gives him motivation to learn foreign languages like English and French instead of Kazakh. Meanwhile Anel plans to stay in Kazakhstan and potentially pursue a career in government, which explains her continued interest in the state language since school years.

Multiculturalism

The interplay of traditional culture of the ethnic group and the culture of the dominant majority is particularly visible through food and holiday celebrations. Absadikova (2023) in her research on food culture of local Koreans in Kazakhstan highlights how traditional cuisine was adapted to incorporate elements of local traditions and products. For instance, alongside maintaining food authenticity with dishes like kimchi, they have incorporated things like Russian bread, Kazakh baursak and shelpek into their diet. In addition, dishes with meat, especially beshbarmak, have become an integral part of any Korean table. Beshbarmak is often paired with Korean salads, especially kimchi, creating a fusion of traditions that is celebrated both at home and during special occasions (Absadikova 2023, 47–49).

Some of my participants mentioned a similar hybridization of cultures through food. Veronika noted they make beshbarmak at celebrations, while Anel described how it is present at the table during New Year in particular. Moreover, she shared an interesting case of cross cultural exchange between two sides of her family, father's (Koreans) and mother's (Kazakh):

> First we go to dad's side, celebrate with them, eat, then we go to mom's side, there we get beshbarmak, there are mainly manti, chicken with mashed potatoes, salads, besh with kuyrdak maybe, from salads only olivie, there is beetroot salad, there is nothing Korean

there and then dad brought his kimbap, they just adore it and are like "did you bring kimbap?" Dad is like "yes, here, but there is little left." Everyone is like "ah, how is that possible?!" They even buy soy sauce specially for this, "so delicious!" they say.[63]

This shows how a Korean household integrated Kazakh and Russian elements into its daily culinary practices, as well as how members of other ethnic groups appreciate Korean food (e.g., the enthusiasm the mother's side of the family shows for kimbap).

Some digital content created by Mark Tsoy, whom I have mentioned earlier, reinforces this narrative of cultural hybridity. In his series “We are Kazakh Koreans …” he humorously portray how Kazakhstani Koreans navigate their dual cultural heritage:

- We are Kazakh Koreans and not a single feast goes by without meat.[64]
- We are Kazakh Koreans and first of all we treat foreigners abroad with kurt.[65]
- We are Kazakh Koreans, we love horse meat and beshbarmak with kimchi.[66]
- We are Kazakh Koreans, we have got all Kazakhs hooked on our salads and something else (funny picture of a corgi).[67]

This similarly illustrates how elements of Kazakh and Korean cuisine interact with one another so that cultural boundaries between two groups become blurred and they merge into a new localized identity. His casual and humorous tone could demonstrate that similar cultural exchanges are normalized in everyday life (although his generalization of all local Koreans’

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[63] “сначала мы едем к стороне папы, с ними празднуем, кушаем короче потом едем к маминой стороне, там получается бешбармак, там в основном манты, курица с пюре короче, салаты, беш с куырдаком может, из салатов чисто оливье, там свекольный салат, корейского там нет ничего и папа когда привез кимпаб свой, они прям обожают и такие “ты привез кимпаб?” Папа такой “да, вот, но мало осталось.” все такие “аа, как же так?!” Они покупают соевый соус специально для этого, “так вкусно!” говорят короче.”

[64] “Мы казахские корейцы и ни одно застолье не проходит без мяса”

[65] “Мы казахские корейцы и в первую очередь иностранцев за границей угощаем куртом”

[66] “Мы казахские корейцы, любим конину и бешбармак закусывать кимчи”

[67] “Мы казахские корейцы, подсадили всех казахов на наши салаты и на кое-что другое” (смешная картинка собаки на экране)

experiences should be taken with caution). Moreover, by referring to local Koreans as Kazakh Koreans he could be trying to emphasise their connection to Kazakh culture or possibly stronger identification with Kazakh ethnicity rather than with a broader idea of Kazakhstani nation (another possibility is that it is just linguistically simpler and shorter than "Kazakhstani Koreans).

In addition to food, holiday celebrations like Nauryz further illustrate this multicultural dynamic. Anna and Anel mentioned they celebrate it (the former attends public festivities, while the latter celebrates with her family). Meanwhile Artyom even called it his favorite holiday because there are "many days off." Otherwise, the celebration of national holidays is more evident online, when observing the Instagram account of Association of Koreans and the Youth Movement. There is a post dedicated to the celebration of Nauryz in Almaty this year, which depicts members of a Korean dance collective giving traditional performances. The Youth Movement of Koreans in Kostanay shared a video report from the Nauryz celebration there: in a yurt there were mannequins in traditional Korean costumes and a counter with South Koreans consumer products from Miko, one of the popular shops in Kostanay.

Still, living in a multicultural environment is not always a wholly positive experience. As I mentioned in earlier chapters, some participants shared that they were bullied during childhood because of their "Korean" appearance. I found this particularly striking, considering that phenotypically, Koreans and Kazakhs appear quite similar. I had always assumed this physical resemblance was one of the reasons Koreans were eventually able to blend in more easily with the local population, especially since the language barrier was shifted with time. Beyond appearance, there are also challenges related to cultural norms and belonging. Yes, in videos on Mark Tsoy's instagram account he talks frequently of the way Koreans have adopted some

principles and mode of behavior from locals. However, there is a different side to it, which Anel's experience illustrates well. Although she is ethnically half-Kazakh and speaks Kazakh fluently, she said she doesn't feel like she fully belongs among Kazakhs because of her interethnic background. She also shared that she has difficulty making friends, particularly with Kazakhs, because her upbringing didn't expose her to certain unspoken socio-cultural codes of behaviors. This lack of familiarity makes her feel uncertain, especially when she thinks about her dream of working in government or, more broadly, in a predominantly Kazakh team. She worries she won't fit in. This suggests that although Koreans in general are believed to have successfully integrated into Kazakhstani society, it is important to recognize more nuanced and personal experiences as well.

To conclude, in this chapter I have discussed the concept of homeland of some young local Koreans in Kazakhstan and illustrated that it is rooted in lived experience, emotional attachment, and immediate social environment of people, not some imagined ancestral territory to which a group might one day return. While participants were aware of various "homelands" attributed to them, be it South Korea, North Korea, or the Russian Far East, they described Kazakhstan (or in the case of Vlad, Uzbekistan) as their true homeland, often tied to their birthplace, upbringing, or the presence of their family. These findings challenge the classical diaspora model's assumptions that all members of the group share mythic homeland orientation and deterritorialization. Instead I suggest a more grounded and relational understanding of belonging. Though diaspora as a framework offers important insights, my data demonstrates that identity today is increasingly shaped by individual histories, localized attachments, and practical engagement with multicultural local environments. Further research could explore how these patterns evolve across generations and in different regional contexts of Kazakhstan.

Conclusion

Overall, in this research I aimed to explore the complexities of ethnic identity among the younger generation of local Koreans in Kazakhstan. I have been focusing on three main research questions: 1) How do young Koreans in Kazakhstan perceive and define their ethnic identity? 2) In the context of weakening diasporic ties, cultural assimilation and globalization, how is their ethnic identity maintained and expressed in everyday life? 3) What is their perceived homeland and how is this perception shaped? To answer these questions, I conducted four semi-structured interviews with and received four responses in a written form from eight participants from Kostanay and Karaganda. I supplemented this data with digital observation of Instagram accounts belonging to official organizations and some individuals from Almaty and Astana. To examine multiple dimensions of participants' ethnic identity I drew mainly on Cohen's (2004) and Koh and Baek's (2020) framework on elements of ethnic identity and Gans' (1979) concept of symbolic ethnicity.

I argue that in the context of weakening diasporic ties and decreasing communal activities, the ethnic identity of young Koreans in Kazakhstan becomes highly individualized and symbolic. It is constructed from interplay of elements like biology (the idea that it is inherited and rooted in blood and ancestry), culture (rituals, family traditions, national food), locality (language, place-based belonging) and individuality (unique and meaningful personal experiences). Although many participants initially stated that their ethnicity does not play any role in their daily lives, I suggest this is not entirely true. Yes, ethnicity appears less visible and more secondary in many aspects, but it is not entirely absent as it takes more subtle and often symbolic forms. For many of them, ethnic identity is no longer sustained through collective practices, but rather through symbolic markers - like Korea food, rites of passage, Korean New

Year and Parental Commemoration Day, even one's surname - and family-based networks with immediate and extended family members. Notably, although their ethnic identity often takes symbolic forms, this does not make it nominal or superficial. On the contrary, these markers are tied to deeply personal and emotionally significant experiences, making the experience real and meaningful.

People from older generations of local Koreans sometimes criticize third and fourth generations for practices of interethnic marriage and blame the fading knowledge of rituals and cuisine on their disinterest. Yet, based on my findings I suggest a picture is a bit more complex. For some participants, their ethnicity and cultural engagement truly seem less relevant to their everyday lives and future aspirations. Others not only acknowledge the fragmented transmission of traditions in general, but also experience it as a personal struggle. In other cases, what seems to emerge is not disinterest but rather **detachment** and some sense of distance that is rooted in the lack of opportunities for communal engagement, limited interaction with co-ethnics, and the absence of meaningful collective events. On the one hand, the few institutional spaces that could potentially foster ethnic connectedness, such as the Association of Koreans or the Youth Movement, are often perceived as overly politicized and out of touch with the everyday interests and needs of young local Koreans (see also Kuzhakhmetova 2022). At the same time, digital observation of Youth Movement branches in Almaty and Astana illustrates frequent team-building activities, public engagement, and a strong sense of fellowship among members. Now it is unclear what accounts for these regional differences. It could be the difference in funding, institutional capacity, local leadership, or just population size. Further research can determine whether these differences persist in the context of other regions of Kazakhstan and if

so, what are the reasons behind them and how different levels of communal engagement influence ethnic identity of young people.

Taking this into account, my findings also suggest that diasporic identity may no longer be a relevant framework for understanding younger generations of local Koreans. Most participants distanced themselves from the notion of diaspora and expressed little connection to formal ethnic organizations or a sense of belonging to the wider Korean community. Moreover, most respondents identified Kazakhstan (or Uzbekistan in one case) or more specifically, their hometown as their true homeland and shared a strong sentimental attachment to it. Even when there was interest in transnational practices with South Korea through work, study, or cultural exploration, it was positioned as a desirable foreign destination host country) rather than a lost ancestral homeland. Notably, by shifting the focus of my research from diaspora to individual level identity, I do not intend to fully reject the diaspora concept. Rather, I argue that its continued application to the case of local Koreans - whether as a concrete group or even as a "category of practice" (Brubaker 2005) - should not be taken for granted. Future research should consider the extent to which this concept remains relevant for local Koreans today and whether analyzing their identity through the lens of ethnicity and ethnic group instead could offer more valuable insights.

Importantly, findings of this research are not generalizable and do not represent the sentiments of all young local Koreans in Kazakhstan. The variations among even a small number of my participants shows how heterogeneous the experiences are within one ethnic group. Future research could focus on an intersectional approach and explore factors like young people's gender, rural-urban background, socioeconomic status, level and type of education, etc. and their influence on perception of one's ethnicity and engagement with it. Also, the experiences of those

young people who have engaged in transnational practices, like studying or working in South Korea, as well as those who actually took part in OKFriends Homecoming Youth Camp, are understudied. Additionally, this study included only one participant from an interethnic family. Similar cases, particularly when Korean ethnicity is not the official one but can be traced through a parent or grandparent, are worth being further explored, especially in the context of multiethnic Kazakhstan and high rates of interethnic marriages among local Koreans. Moreover, given that my digital ethnography was limited in scope, further studies could investigate how digital media platforms are used as means to express Korean ethnic identity and engage with cultural symbols, as well as potentially foster connections among co-ethnics.

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Appendix 1. The Interview Guide

Demographic questions

- Age:
- Gender:
- Student/work:
- Home country/city:
- Ethnicity:
- Ethnicity of your parents:

General questions

1. Could you please tell me a bit about yourself?
2. What do you usually do during the day/week? (routine activities)
3. How do you like to spend your free time? Hobbies?
4. What do you like to eat? What do you eat on holiday/ at home/ when you go out?
5. What is your favorite holiday or celebration?
6. Do you like traveling? Where have you already been? Where would you like to go?
7. Could you please share what languages you know and which ones you would like to learn in the future. Why these languages?
8. Do you have any plans for the near or far future? What are you dreaming of in the future?
9. What kind of online content do you like to read/watch on the internet? + What social media do you use and what for?

Some more questions:

1. What are the important aspects of your life? (the ones you cannot image your life without)
2. How would you describe yourself? (whatever comes to your mind like traits of character, personal values, favorite things, etc.)
3. How do you think other people see you?
4. If you could change any aspect of who you are now, what would it be?

Family and friends

1. What is your family like?
2. Do you spend much time together? What do you do when you gather with your parents and relatives?
    a. How much do your parents and family influence your sense of being Korean?
3. Could you please tell me about other people you spend your time with? (friends, classmates, colleagues etc.)
    a. Who do you primarily socialize with (eg. family, friends, colleagues)? Are they mostly Koreans, Kazakhs, or people of other ethnicities?
    b. What do you usually do with these people? (activities)
4. Are there many Koreans in your social circle? Who are they?

Homeland and Kazakhstan

1. Have you ever thought about moving to another city? Country? Why?
2. If you could choose a country to be born in, what would it be?
3. What does 'homeland' mean to you? What do you consider to be your homeland?
4. Have you ever thought about 'historical homeland'?
5. Do you feel like you belong in Kazakhstan? Have you ever felt uncomfortable living here or like you do not fit in? Please explain.
6. Have you ever been mistaken for being Kazakh or another ethnicity? How often does this happen?
    a. How do you feel when someone assumes you are Kazakh before knowing your actual ethnicity?
7. Can you share any humorous or interesting experiences related to being Korean in Kazakhstan
8. How do you navigate situations where people expect you to speak Kazakh? How do you usually respond?

More specific questions about being a Korean

1. What things do you associate with Koreans?
2. What do you think makes you a Korean?
3. What does being Korean mean to you personally?
4. Can you share any experiences where your Korean identity was particularly **significant** or **challenged**? - важна, помогла vs. стала препядствием
5. Do you celebrate any traditional Korean holidays? Do you participate in any traditional ceremonies like celebration of one year, commemoration of the dead, etc.?
6. Have you heard about the term Korean **diaspora**? What in your understanding is a diaspora?
7. How did your family come to be in Kazakhstan? Have you heard the term deportation?
8. How important is the local Korean community to you? Do you feel connected to other Koreans in your hometown and/or in Kazakhstan in general?
9. Have you ever faced any difficulties as a Korean living in Kazakhstan?
10. Are you interested in South Korean culture? ex: Do you like k-pop or watch korean dramas?

- How has your sense of identity changed over time? → ethnicity (have you questioned being Korean, have you rejected being Korean) + nationality (being Kazakhstani)
- Is there anything else about your life or experience as a young Korean man/woman in Kazakhstan that you think is important to mention?