PRECARIOUS LIFE IN ANCESTRAL HOMELAND: ETHNIC KOREANS FROM THE CIS IN SOUTH KOREA

By

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Abstract

The Korean labor market is highly dualistic - on the one hand, there are large enterprises and the public sector with better working conditions, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) on the other, which are in constant need of labor force due to low wages. To support the latter, the Korean government developed a temporary labor migration scheme to invite foreign workers. Simultaneously, it offered a visa to the Korean diaspora in China and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in recognition of their ethnic kinship, allowing them to find employment in low-skilled jobs. Ethnic Koreans from the CIS who, unlike Koreans from China, do not speak the Korean language occupy the lowest position in the hierarchy of foreign workers in the labor market. Their lives in the ethnic homeland are precarious, filled with unpredictability and insecurity. This thesis aims to add ethnographic findings to the existing literature on the reproduction of precarity and the ways it sneaks into the interactions between different groups of people affected by it in various ways. By analyzing Korean temporary labor migration schemes, statistical data, and existing literature on precarity, I argue that the variegated visa system for ethnic Koreans in China and the CIS is aimed at the reproduction of a precarious class made of ethnic kin to fill the low-skilled labor market. Participant observation in the irregular lowest-paying jobs and non-contract based factory work was carried out in two Korean cities, Asan and Gyeongju. A close study of the life of ethnic Koreans from the CIS in their workplaces demonstrates how precarity is experienced on an individual level.

Key words: Precarity, Koryo-saram, capitalism, South Korea, diaspora, labor migration

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Introduction

I arrived to Gyeongju city on 16 November 2018 and contacted the middle-man I found on Facebook. He was in one of the groups of Russian speakers who promised to find me a job in a factory for a fee of 100,000 WON (approx. USD 90). Later that day I was asked to meet the *sajan* (manager), who had to look at me and check whether I was suitable. By that it meant that I had to be not older than 40, be attractive, and not overweight to be hired. We met near K-Mart, a small shop, the most common place for meeting among labor migrants. He glanced at me, and invited to sit at the bench. He talked in *panmal* (non-honorific Korean; rude when used with strangers) and asked whether I could speak Korean and if I had any work experience in welding. I answered 'yes' to the first question and 'no' to the second. After a 2-minute conversation, he told me I had to be at the bus stop at 7am the next morning where a bus would pick me up. After a week of working at the factory I was asked to come to the sajan's office during my 10-minute break. The office was a small room, not bigger than 8 square meters which was shared with 2 other people, and was warm and had a smell of instant coffee. I greeted my sajan and he gave me a piece of paper and a name tag which read 'Galina One' (I met Galina Two a week later). I was asked to fill in my ID card information and bank account number on the paper and go back to work. I was given a name tag which signaled the end of my probation period and that I was hired.

This is a standard vignette from a life of an ethnic Korean from CIS, also known as *Koryo-saram* (*saram* i.e. "a person" in Korean) in South Korea. Descendants of the migrants from Korean peninsula, Koryo-sarams mainly live in Central Asia and Russian Federation and speak Russian. With the introduction of a H-2 Work & Visit visa in 2007 for the diaspora in China and CIS, the migration of Koryo-sarams to South Korea has been rising rapidly. The motivation behind the migration is mainly economic, but there is also an important factor of ethnic affiliation and nostalgic, though imaginary, longing for ancestral homeland. However, once in Korea, Koryo-sarams find themselves culturally alien from local population. Lacking the Korean language skills,

they find employment in low-paid jobs and occupy the lowest hierarchy among the foreign workers in the Korean labor market.

In 2018 I conducted a 5-months field-research in two Korean cities, Asan and Gyeongju. Following the most common path of a Koryo-saram worker in Korea, I did participant observation in the lowest tier jobs for 8 weeks, and in a factory for 10 weeks. During my research I found that the life of a Koryo-saram in Korea is precarious, unstable and unpredictable. Two main research questions arose from my participant observation: how is precarity reproduced? How is it experienced on an individual level? Answering these two questions is the primary goal of this thesis.

This thesis is a result of a mixed-method research where both quantitative and qualitative analysis were used to try to answer the posited questions. Statistical databases, official documents and Acts were analyzed to understand the rationale behind the visa policies of South Korea which enable the migration of Koryo-sarams. Ethnographic data was used to take a closer look at how precarity is experienced on an individual level on factory floor where Koryo-sarams are trapped in power relations with certain entities. I argue that Korean capitalism needs to reproduce a precarious class to fill its labor hungry economy and it does it through variegated visa systems for ethnic Koreans in China and CIS. The visa schemes create different kinds of legal dispossessions which lead into various vulnerabilities and precarization. The visa system enables disciplinary mechanisms which are embedded in its nature, uncertain and liminal, which flow into the smallest details of factory floor life and intertwined in the interactions between different groups of people.

The thesis is organized in the following manner: Chapter 1 provides a historical background of Koryo-sarams, their current life in Uzbekistan (country with the biggest ethnic Korean population migrating to Korea) and an overview of their life in Korea. Chapter 2 is a theoretical account of the research and it situates it within the existing literature on temporary labor migration policies of South Korea, visa system for ethnic Koreans and precarity. Chapter 3 is dedicated to methods, reflections and my positionality on the field research. Chapter 4 and 5

provide findings and analysis of the research. The former looks into the power relations Koryo-sarams placed in and analyses the entities which exercise power over them. The latter looks into disciplinary power mechanisms and acts of resistance from Koryo-sarams in the factory.

1 Past and Present

1.1 Historical background

The first migration wave of Koreans to the territory of contemporary Russian Federation took place in the second half of the 19th century. Driven by natural disasters, economic hardships and lack of land ownership, the first migrants were mostly peasants who left their homes and country in search of a better life. The Russian authorities not only let them settle in rural areas of Russian Empire's Maritime Province but newcomers were also provided by 266-acre parcels of land in the south of the Maritime Province and near Amur Oblast' (Kirilov, 1895). Later, in the 1890s, the Koreans were allowed to naturalize, becoming Russian subjects, while many of them also converted to the Orthodox Christianity. By 1883, the population of Koreans in the Russian Far East had reached 100,000, with many of the newcomers having become skilled, even prominent, in agriculture, industry and politics (Adamz, 2014).

In the war of 1905, the Russian Empire lost to the Japanese imperial ambitions, and the Korean peninsula was taken over by Japan. It led to the second wave of migration from Korea to the Russian territory, but this time migrants were mostly political refugees who escaped Japanese domination. In hopes to liberate the homeland, they organized the Korean Liberation Movement (1905-1917), unaware of Tsarist Russia's ambitions for the territory. During the October Revolution of 1917, the Maritime Province was under Japanese threat which tried to expand its territory of dominance. To push back the enemy, Koreans formed All-Russian Korean Association with the help of Bolsheviks, and in 1922 the Russian *status quo* was re-established in the region. In the same year, Koreans were offered Soviet citizenship but about 60 percent declined the offer in hopes to return to free Korea. Instead, they asked for autonomy to establish a Korean province in the region but the Soviet authorities declined it and decided to allow only a limited pre-approved cultural life.

In 1925-1926 political exiles who disagreed with the Japanese regime formed the third wave of migration from the Korean peninsula joining the Koreans who migrated previously. The

majority of them were against Soviet assimilation policies because they thought their presence in the Maritime Province was temporary. However, after Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, it signed an agreement with the Soviet Union which stated that all activities of Koreans in the province had to be terminated.

The life of Koreans in the Soviet Union changed dramatically in 1937. On August 21, Molotov, the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, and Stalin signed a secret order on the deportation of Koreans from the Far East (Kim, 2003). This became the first move in the chain of forced deportations by Stalin. In October the same year, approximately 180,000 Koreans were made to board 'ghost trains' as they would be remembered, leaving everything behind, and being forced on a month-long journey across the Soviet Union. They were disembarked in the steppes of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan far from human settlements. One of the reasons for forced deportations was Stalin's fear of Japanese agents among Koreans in the province. An estimated 70 percent of Korean intellectuals were executed on the ground of being accused of espionage. The remaining Koreans were not offered Soviet citizenship until the death of Stalin and this time they were eager to accept it. With that, restrictions on the movement were lifted and they were permitted to leave the rural areas and settle in towns and attend schools (Yalcin, 1999).

Until the collapse of the USSR, approximately 75% of the ethnic Koreans lived in Central Asia, mostly in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The first census in 1999 in Kazakhstan recorded 99,665 people, and in Uzbekistan, according to the early 2000s data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, there were, approximately 175,000 Koreans (Kim, 2004). In contrast with other minorities in Central Asia, Koreans migrated rapidly to the urban areas and settled in capital cities. 'Koryo-mal' is the native language, which exists in oral form and is used in everyday family life. However, most of those who are 30 and younger lost their language.

1.2 Koryo-sarams in Uzbekistan and reasons for migration

Uzbekistan announced its independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Situated in the heart of Central Asia its population reached 33 million in 2018, nearly equaling the sum of the populations of four neighboring countries in the region (Migration Data Portal). The average nominal wages in September 2019 was 2,217,827 UZS (approx. USD 217). However, the amount varies considerably in the regions far from the capital city Tashkent. In 2018, the official unemployment rate was reported to be at 9.3 percent which is unlikely to be accurate because it underestimates the informal sector (World Bank). Thus, due to economic difficulties and lack of job opportunities, labor migration has been rising steadily. The biggest destination country is the Russian Federation taking more than 75 percent of labor migrants. It is followed by Kazakhstan and Turkey (Seitz, 2019, 12). More than 26 percent of the poorest Uzbek households have at least one family member working abroad. In 2018, personal remittances constituted 15.07 percent of the country's GDP according to the World Bank data, although these estimations do not cover informal transfers. In the research carried out by a group of experts, an exercise in the framework of the research showed that the absence of remittances would drive the national poverty rate from 9.6 to 16.8 percent (Seitz, 2019). According to the UNDP reports, in the Human Development Index which measures average achievement in "a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and have a decent standard of living", Uzbekistan ranks 105 (1 = High, 188 = Low).

Since South Korea introduced special work and leisure visas for ethnic Koreans abroad in 2007, it remains the main destination country for Korean migrants from Uzbekistan. According to Korean Statistical Information Service, in the period from 2013-2018, there were 37,505 Koryo-sarams from Uzbekistan legally residing in South Korea on H-2, F-4, and F-1 (given to the spouse of a Koryo-saram who is not ethnic Korean) visas (KOSIS). The main reason behind the migration apart from economic hardships and the high rate of unemployment in Uzbekistan is the opportunity to visit ancestral homeland which was not available before. After the dissolution of the USSR, ethnic minority communities such as Russians, Germans, Greeks, Polish, and many

others left the region to settle in their respective nation-states. However, this was not the case for Koreans due to the lost connection with both Koreas and geographical obstacles.

Economically developed South Korea is enticing for ethnic Koreans because of high wages and easy access to the labor market. Starting from 2020, the minimum hourly pay in South Korea is 8,590 WON ($7.43), which is 2.9% more than it was in 2019 (Pulse News). In 2019, an illegal worker in the lowest paying job could earn about 60,000 WON (approx. USD 50) for an 8-hour workday which totals USD 1,250. It is 5.7 times more compared to an average monthly income in Uzbekistan.

1.3 Koryo-sarams in South Korea

To acquire a Korean visa, one has to prove his/her Korean ethnicity by providing birth certificates of one of the parents and grandparents; criminal record issued in the last three months; test for tuberculosis from an international hospital specified by the Korean consulate. In the case of previous visa violations, misdemeanor, or criminal offenses on the territory of Korea the visa issuance can be denied. Once in Korea, individuals have to navigate through certain bureaucratic procedures, including a medical check for HIV and other transmittable diseases, registration in the local immigration center and completing a 3-hour Early Adaptation Program where he/she is taught about the life in Korea and the laws which apply to people on the H-2 visa. If one wishes to seek legal employment, he/she has to apply for a 3-day (16 hours) course after which the person's information is uploaded to the database of labor agency. However, it does not guarantee employment and the person is responsible for finding it himself/herself (Immigration and Social Integration Network).

Koryo-sarams live in small communities in many Korean cities, especially in industrial towns with factories and medium-size workshops. People whom I met during my stay in Korea talked about their experience working in fields picking strawberries, potatoes, and onions for 12 hours under the sun with no special protection; cleaning chicken coops; washing oil containers;

picking sea-weed on the beaches; cracking open pearl shells; deconstructing rooftops of old houses; digging out tree roots. A friend of mine talked about his experience carrying thousands of dead poultry from farms and burying them during the bird flu outbreak in 2017 without any extra caution. Life in Korea for a Koryo-saram can be tough; physically, and especially, psychologically. Apart from working long hours in 3D (dirty, difficult, dangerous) jobs, the degrading attitude of local Korean managers can exacerbate the working conditions. In one of the interviews I conducted for my previous research, my respondent said about local Korean managers at work:

"… They think we are starving to death in Uzbekistan that's why we come here. They don't believe you if you say that you have a higher education. No matter how smart you are they will treat you like crap" (Khegay, 2016, 35).

Younger generation Koryo-sarams do not speak Koryo-mal, the dialect of Korean spoken by ethnic Koreans in CIS. Besides, modern South Korean has changed immensely compared to the limited knowledge of the elderly of Koryo-mal. Because Koryo-sarams do not speak Korean, they have a hard time finding legal employment in factories. As a result, despite having work visas, many of them are employed illegally, distributed across 3D jobs (Song, 2019, 70). There is no official information about the number of illegal workers among Koryo-sarams. However, during my participant observation in Asan, where I worked in the lowest tier jobs being hired daily, and in Gyeongju, where I was employed in a factory, the number of legally employed Koryo-sarams was insignificant. In Asan, none of my co-workers were employed legally, and some, including me, could have been fined if caught working. In the factory in Gyeongju, among more than 80 Koryo-saram workers only two were employed legally. Both have been working for over 5 years and spoke Korean.

There is a hierarchy of jobs available for Koryo-sarams. The most desirable one is legal employment in a factory, which does not involve harmful production. This type of employment

has become rare among Koryo-sarams due to high competition with ethnic Koreans from China who speak Korean. The second tier is an employment with no contract or social security but on a permanent basis. That means there is a verbal contract between a middle man and the Koryo-saram, but no paper contract which means no insurance, holiday bonuses, and a 13th-month bonus (a payment worth 1 month of salary given to a worker who worked for a year). Then comes a type of job where one is employed as long as he/she can work. If he/she misses a day or two for any reason, the job will be given to someone else. The last type of job is when there is no guarantee that one would be employed daily and it depends on the demand on that particular day. On this type of job, one can expect to do the most difficult type of work and treated the worst in the workplace because he/she was hired just for one day. Thus, there is no need to know the person's name nor feel sympathy towards him/her.

2 Theoretical account

Korean economic development is often regarded as miraculous, as it skyrocketed from one of the poorest countries in the early 1960s with gross national income (GNI) of $120 to the 12th largest economy in the world with GNI per capita $30,600 as of the year 2018 (Macrotrends.net). Its GDP rose 31,000-fold since the end of the Korean War in 1953, and it is the fifth-largest exporting state (Dillinger, 2019). It was possible due to the Korean five-year economic development plan starting from 1962 until 1996, after which it took a course towards market-based policy formations. The Korean government clearly defined the strengths of the nation and implemented them for the best. The abundance of the educated labor force and foreign loans were the major components of Korean fast industrialization. The government used these resources to produce labor-intensive products as light textiles, footwear, and clothes and exported to the neighboring countries. In the 1970s, the economy targeted heavy and chemical industries, machineries, and electronics, like shipbuilding and oil refineries. By setting export quotas annually for the companies, the state stimulated the production by picking winners and encouraging competition among them. Starting from the 1990s, Korea implemented liberalization policies in its market and created conditions for the creation of "chaebol", family-controlled businesses, opening the access to the global market (Koreatimes.co.kr). As the Korean economy started growing rapidly, the labor market became highly dualistic – it was divided between large enterprises and the public sector with better working conditions on the one hand, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) with low-quality jobs and low wages on the other. In order to supply the labor force to the latter sector of economy, the government introduced Industrial Trainee System (ITS) in 1991, which allowed SMEs to import labor force from developing countries. Although the official narrative of the government about the aim of ITS was "skill transfer and international cooperation with developing countries", soon the deceptive nature of the policy gained attention of the civil society and was criticized for violation of human rights of the foreign workers (Kim, 2018, 142).

As Korean economy slowed down in the aftermath of the events of 1997, the public criticism of the ITS temporarily stopped. East Asia was forced into a financial crisis, which started with the float of Thai baht. David Harvey (2004) writes that hedge funds attacked Thai and Indonesian currencies which led to the crush of the financial sector, and it allowed the IMF to force its "savage deflationary policies" (p. 78). Major companies of Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, and Hong Kong were overexposed to the foreign-currency risks and were first to fall victim. 1997-1998 was a period of pressure on the currencies, high domestic interest rates, the bankruptcy of big companies, and unemployment of millions (Ito, 2007). According to Harvey (2004), the crisis was caused by Western capital in search of surplus-value and new sites for capital accumulation. Capital accumulation by appropriation of "social means of subsistence and of production" was described by Marx as "primitive accumulation" (Marx, 1967). It was the first stage of industrial capitalism in Europe and the capital was accrued through various forms of dispossessive processes such as land seizures and appropriation of resources through violence. Building upon Marx's term of 'primitive accumulation' David Harvey introduced his concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' to explain the processes of accruing capital that is relevant to the contemporary world. Harvey argues that in addition to older practices of primitive accumulation there are now many mechanisms of accumulations by dispossession which happen through neoliberal reforms and it "can occur in a variety of ways and there is much that is both contingent and haphazard about its modus operandi" (p. 76).

South Korea's temporary labor migration schemes went through a neoliberal transformation in the beginning of the 2000s once the economy started recovering from the financial crisis.. According to Stuart Rosewarne (2010), "commodification of labor migration" is a part of the neoliberal transformation across the globe. Referring to Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation,* Rosewarne states that "(t)he precarious position of the temporary migrant worker can be considered a product of capitalism's myopic and liberalist drive, to treat labor as if it were a commodity" (p. 105). The commodification of labor migrants in South Korea happened with

the introduction of the new temporary labor migration scheme which aimed at welcoming diaspora from China and the CIS on the basis of ethnic kinship. In reality, however, the main agenda was to create a new class of workers for the Korean economy. I will demonstrate the relation of labor migrants to capitalism and precarity in Korea through the analysis of the visa system and empirical analysis of its outcome in the form of precarious lives.

Korean capitalism needs to reproduce a precarious class for capital accumulation, and in the case of ethnic Koreans from developing countries, to fill the labor hungry economy. Through masterfully tailored visa policies for ethnic Koreans in China and the CIS, the Korean government enables a constant flow of laborers to the lowest paying jobs. By granting visas to Chinese and the CIS ethnic Koreans with the discourse of support for ethnic kin, the Korean government creates a class where people are caught in the state of precarity and power relations where it is hard to step out of due to the legal categories. These visa policies enable Koryo-sarams to sell their precarity and disposability as cheap labor which is prized in the Korean economy. I explain the mechanisms of the reproduction of the precarious class in the section below.

2.1 Temporary labor migration scheme

Majority scholars of migration studies agree that East Asian countries differ from Western counterparts in implementing labor migration policies (Castles S., 1986, 2004; Weiner, M. and Hanami, T., 1998; Tsuda, 2009). They argue that states in Asia-Pacific develop their policies in a way that labor migrants are prevented from settling down. One of the reasons for such strategies is to prevent culturally alien labor migrants from affecting the social environment and cultural homogeneity within the state. However, in the last several decades many states, both in the Global North and South, have been experimenting with ethnic return migrations, attracting diasporas from abroad for a wide range of reasons. (Tsuda, 2009, 2019; Seol, D. H. and Skrentny, J. D, 2009; Xiang, 2013). Several scholars have done comparative researches between European and East Asian states. The main argument of their works is that East Asian states use ethnicity preferences

for economic goals, whereas European states' preferences are justified by the protection of co-ethnic populations (Joppke, 2005; J. D. Skrentny, et al. 2007).

According to the OECD report for 2019, 70% of Koreans age 25-34 enroll in universities, which makes the Korean young workforce highly skilled. This causes a labor shortage in manufacturing and service industries because these jobs are highly unpopular among the population both due to low wages and social status (OECD, 2019). Thus, to support the SMEs the Korean government developed a temporary labor migration program. Act on the Employment, etc. of Foreign Workers was first introduced in 2003. The purpose of the Act was "to promote a smooth supply and demand of manpower and the balanced development of the national economy by introducing and managing foreign workers systematically" (Article 1). In 2004, the Employment Permit System (EPS) came into force and through bilateral agreements with foreign countries, Korea started receiving low-paid labor force. To qualify for the labor migration under EPS candidates pass a basic Korean language test in their countries of origin. Once they enter the pool of candidates, the list is sent to the employers in Korea who can choose the workforce based on nationality, age, and gender (OECD, 2019, 20). The E-9 visa issued under the EPS program does not allow uninterrupted stays long enough to qualify for permanent residence and prohibits family reunification preventing the labor migrants from settling down in Korea. To re-apply for the visa upon expiry, the labor migrant has to qualify for a 'faithful worker' category, which means being employed in one place for four years and ten months. It gives significant power to the employer who decides whether to help the worker to re-enter the country for a period of E-9 visa, thus stripping the worker off the chance to search for better employment opportunities and bargaining power (Kim, 2018).

In parallel to the development of E-9 visa for foreign workers, Korean diaspora in China and the CIS (Eastern diaspora) came to the forefront and received a special visa in recognition of them as ethnic kin, thus earning them preferential treatment. This meant that, despite being under the EPS program, ethnic Koreans had access to the labor market through a different and much

easier pathway such as H-2 (Work and Visit) and F-4 (Overseas Korean) visas with more available employment sectors and less dependency on the employer. The development of these visas has been analyzed over the last two decades since they were first developed. The analysis shows that Korean policies have been evolving together with the changing economic and political situation (Kim, 2008).

With the rapidly aging society, more than half of South Korea's population is expected to be over the age of 65 by the year 2065 threatening the economic capabilities of the country. In 2019-2020 the population growth decreased to 0.09 percent earning Korea the lowest fertility rate in the world (World Population Review). From this, it might be inferred that Korean migration policies for diasporas might have a long-term goal to mitigate the demographic crisis. However, according to the OECD report on labor migration, Korea's ethnic preferential visa policies do not aim at reducing downward demographic trend, but rather address the immediate labor needs in certain sectors. Despite the fact that H-2 and F-4 visas may lead to the permanent residency of ethnic Koreans, the main objective remains fulfilling the short-term demands of the labor market (OECD, 96). However, the number of foreign workers with E-9 visas has long been surpassed by the number of ethnic Koreans from China and the CIS and it keeps growing. I argue that the ethnic preferential visas are aimed at creating a constant labor force to the Korean economy which requires low-skilled manpower, turning the ethnic Koreans into a precarious class.

2.2 Special visas for ethnic Koreans

The H-2 visa, introduced in 2007, is issued for three years with a possible extension for up to four years and ten months. One of the explanations for the duration of the visa is that it is two months shorter than required to apply for permanent residence, preventing ethnic Koreans from settling down in Korea. The list of authorized employments was extended in 2018 and included 80 occupations. In order to control the flow of labor migrants, a government quota was set at 303,000 and it has not changed since its first introduction.

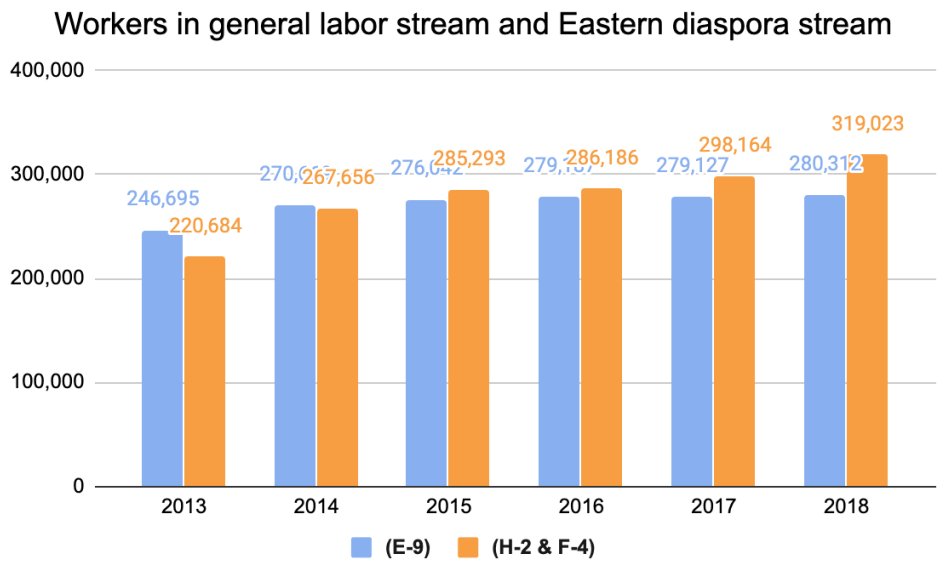

Figure 1. Source: Korean Statistical Information Service

The F-4 Overseas Korean visa, initially available only to the descendants of those who once held Korean citizenship, excluded Eastern diaspora until 2010. The argument was that the Korean state was formed in 1948, thus the earlier migrants who left before its establishment did not qualify for the status. In 2010 the visa policy was changed to include the ethnic Koreans from less developed countries to eliminate the discrimination based on the country of origin However, it had an additional requirement which stated that a person had to be "a university graduate, the CEO of a corporation, a certified technician and others, from China and the former Soviet Union region who have a very low chance of finding a job in simple labor services" (Visa Instruction Guide, 2015, 235). This requirement conveniently filtered out the unskilled ethnic Koreans, yet defending the policy from the accusation of being discriminatory. The F-4 visa prohibited employment in low-skilled jobs, which also made it less attractive.

In 2016, the number of H-2 visa holders was 255,000, and according to the OECD report, the reason for the relatively small number was the introduction of F-4 permanent residence type of visa for Koreans in China and CIS. H-2 visa holders were given pathways to change their visa status to F-4 in three scenarios:

- "First, H-2 visa holders who worked in the same work place in manufacturing in rural areas (population centers with less than 200,000 inhabitants) and agriculture for at least two years were allowed to adjust status. Two years as a baby-sitter also qualified (F-4-24).
- Second, persons over the age of 60 are eligible for status change (F-4-25).
- Third, since the F-4 visa is not meant for low-skilled employment, ethnic Koreans who acquire a professional certification are allowed to change status (F-4-27)." (94).

When speaking about visas for citizens of the CIS it must be noted that the list includes Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Russian Federation. However, citizens of the Russian Federation can apply for an F-4 visa without the tertiary diploma starting from 1 November 2011. Whereas, for the rest of the states ethnic Koreans have to be highly skilled, meaning having higher education to be able to apply for it. There is no information about why Korean policies differentiate citizens within the CIS states. I can only infer that the Korean government discriminates against Central Asian citizens based on their host country's economic standing.

While it may be true for Chinese Koreans that an increasing number of people are changing their status from H-2 to F-4, it may not be the case for Koryo-sarams. First of all, because Chinese Koreans speak Korean they are most likely to be employed legally and have the opportunity to change their status to F-4. The second reason is that they are motivated to acquire F-4 visa as it allows them to open small businesses such as grocery shops, cafes, and restaurants, which is again tied to their knowledge of Korean and having to face fewer difficulties when it comes to bureaucratic procedures in starting a business and attracting local customers. As for the Koryo-sarams, for the majority of them, H-2 visa is the only option. Because of the lack of the Korean language, they are mostly employed illegally, and acquiring professional certification to be allowed to change their status is also difficult due to the same reason. Thus, the number of sojourners with H-2 visas from the CIS in Korea is still almost twice as much as the number of F-4 visa holders (Figure 2). Besides, even if a Koryo-saram is eligible for an F-4 visa, he/she is most likely to apply

for H-2 in hopes to be employed legally in a factory because F-4 does not permit employment in low-skilled sectors. As a result, Koryo-sarams involuntarily end up in most difficult jobs, employed illegally with no to little chance to change their status from H-2 to F-4. I argue that precarity starts with visa policies that are developed and periodically changed in such a way that lead Koryo-sarams to fill the most undesired labor gaps.

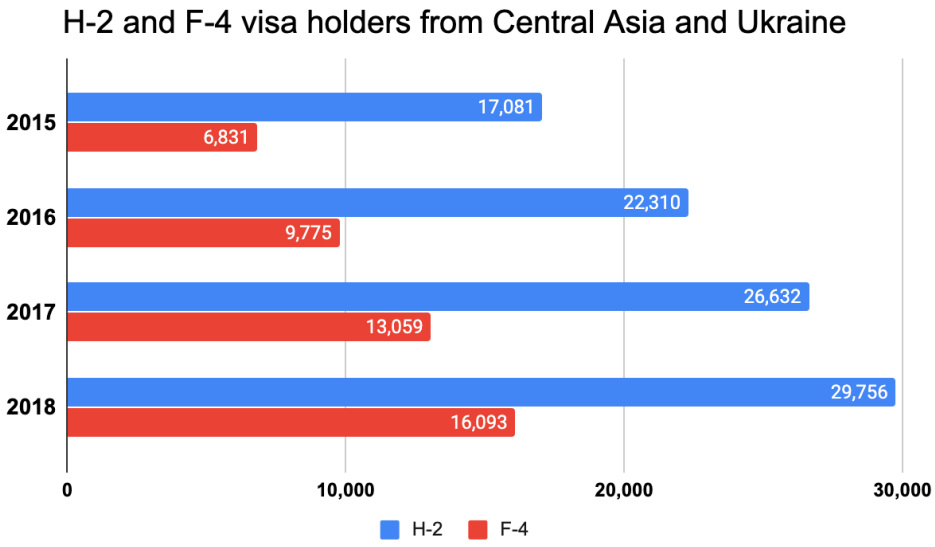

Figure 2. Status of foreign resident by nationality and status of residence

It's also worth noting that age restrictions for H-2 visa were changed from 25 to 18 in 2019 (Korean Embassy in Uzbekistan). This might be the result of the fact that more than half of the H-2 and F-4 visa holders in Korea are over the age of 50. (OECD, 96). This leads to younger generation Koryo-sarams entering the Korean labor market earlier even before attaining higher education, which can push further their chances of acquiring skills to qualify for better-paid jobs in the future and remaining low-skilled labor force in Korea.

Until 2011 ethnic Koreans had to pass a language test if they did not have living relatives in Korea to qualify for H-2 visa. They would then apply for an electronic visa lottery. This caused problems for Koryo-sarams as they did not speak the language, unlike Koreans in China. But since 2012, the language test requirement was lifted, but the general presumption remained that the visa

holders speak Korean. Given the fact that foreign workers with E-9 visas and Chinese Koreans speak Korean but Koryo-sarams do not, they end up in the lowest position in the hierarchy of the desirable workforce, which pushes them to take up the least favorable jobs available.

The variegated visa system – E-9, H-2 and F-4 – creates different kinds of legal dispossessions which flow into differentiated landscape of precarisation and vulnerability. E-9 visa under the EPS scheme for foreign workers create a labor force which is controlled through limited stay, dependence on the employer's good will and lack of opportunity to bargain for better working conditions and higher wages. H-2 Work &Visit and F-4 Overseas Korean visas for ethnic Koreans despite being less restrictive in terms of renewal and availability of job opportunities in low-skilled sector, remains *de-facto* labor visa. Koryo-sarams, who do not speak the language, flow into the labor market only to face harsher realities compared to other foreign workers due to their inability to secure legal employment. In a way, the visa ensures the flow of labor force simultaneously legally dispossessing them and pushing them into a precarious state.

2.3 Precarity

The previous section explained the visa policies as the minimum threshold of guarantee that the Korean government provides ethnic Koreans abroad. This section turns to the terrain Koryo-sarams enter once in Korea which is full of uncertainties, insecurities, and liminality. These are the main features of precarity widely used in academia when talking about refugees and migrants. And so are the experiences of Koryo-sarams with their status in Korea as temporary residents with no guarantees for citizenship, illegal employment due to lack of Korean language, and difficulties they face as disposable labor.

The concept of precarity was first developed in the 1970s in French schools of sociology and economics to describe the social conditions that led to poverty. Several decades later, the idea of 'precarisation' started being used in academia to describe the phenomena of unstable and insecure employment and uncertainties that followed it. (Lazar, Sanches, 2019). In the period from

2001-2006, it was embraced by European social activists who protested against cutbacks in social welfare and the proliferation of unstable employment (Foti, 2005; Casas-Cortès, 2017). And lately, the concept has been a useful theoretical tool in studies of citizenship, labor, and migration (Carl-Ulrik Schierup and Martin Bak Jørgensen eds., 2016).

Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter (2008) in their article *Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception* argued that precarity is not a new phenomenon but appears so only when the Fordist system of labor and the Northern welfare state is taken as a norm. Thus, the discourse of precarity could not be applicable on a global scale but remains in the framework of the Europe-based social movements which started as a response to the decline of the welfare state. They argue that "it is precarity that is the norm and not Fordist economic organization" (p. 54). However, Nancy Ettinger (2007) notes that despite the Fordism's golden age and the welfare state were confined to the geographical frames of the US and Western Europe certain variations of Fordism spread across the globe in the forms of branch plants and ensured the proliferation of precarious working conditions in the rest of the world (p. 322).

Guy Standing (2010) popularized the term *precariat* (from adj. 'precarious' and n. 'proletariat') as 'a class-in-the-making'. The idea he proposed was based on the European activist analysis and included those who had little trust relationship with the state and capital, but were not united enough and expressed "anomie, anger, anxiety, and alienation" when faced with contemporary political realities. Standing has been criticized for his Eurocentric views on the labor norms and his concept of precariat. Munck (2013) was particularly censorious in his deconstruction of the term saying that "(it) perhaps captures some of the feelings among Northern academics, themselves subject to casualization and the end of job security," but was inapplicable beyond the North Atlantic (p. 747). He criticizes the concept for ignoring the fact that the type of work it entails "has always been the norm in the global South" (p. 752). Lazar and Sanchez (2019) followed up Munck's criticism and Standing's response to it in 2014 where he specified that he did not include all workers into the category of the precariat, but rather only the educated youth who

found itself left without the future their parents' had in the Fordist economy. Lazar and Sanchez argue that because "neither welfare state nor secure waged labor has ever been widespread" in the global South, the term precariat is "indeed mostly the European subject of the social movements" (p. 5).

For Lorey (2015), precarization is more than job insecurity among European younger people, but rather a worldwide practice used for governing and accumulation of capital. She argues that precarity surrounds the whole existence of a person, destabilizing his/her life making him/her live "with the unforeseeable, with contingency" (p. 1). Anne Allison (2015) in her work *Precarious Japan* wrote about precarity that went beyond unstable work and entered into other dimensions of life where human condition itself became precarious. In describing precarity in the daily lives of Japanese people Allison manages to trace precarity in their way of being. She argues that anything that does not fit into capitalist value system such as time, energy, and social life is managed or tossed out into a 'social and human garbage pit' which she calls precarity (p. 16).

Ayse Parla (2019) in her book *Precarious Hope* says that 'precariousness' is often used interchangeably with 'vulnerability' and it is due to Judith Butler's definition of the concept as an existential condition inherent to human nature (Butler, 2006). The distinction between the two terms is often blurred and as a result, the important feature of the former is lost - its differential distribution "by such factors as class, citizenship, and race" (Allison, 2016). For the sake of clarity, I have to delimit the terminology of precariousness I use in this thesis. I follow the Latin etymological meaning of precarity used by Didier Fassin (2012) "lives that are not guaranteed but bestowed in answer to prayer, or in other words are defined not in the absolute of a condition, but in the relation to those who have power over them" (p. 4). Following Ayse Parla, I draw a distinction between vulnerability and precarity to bring under spotlight what differentiates Koryo-sarams' experiences from Chinese Koreans and other foreign workers who also struggle in Korea. My goal is to show how the entitlement as ethnic kin and preferential visa policies co-exist and contribute to the precarity of Koryo-sarams in their ancestral homeland.

3 Methods and reflections

This chapter introduces methodological approaches used in this research and my reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the research methods I utilized. It also discusses my positionality as a researcher in the field.

3.1 Mixed methods

I used both quantitative and qualitative data to answer the main research questions in this research. I use statistical data to analyze economic and political background of Korean labor migration. Statistical databases such as the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics and World Bank Open Data were used to provide a comprehensive economic background of Uzbekistan to explain the rationale behind outmigration from the country. Additional data were extracted from official immigration database on the Korean Immigration Service website, Korean Statistical Information Service and Korean Embassies in CIS. Legal documents and Acts were analyzed to explain the economic rationale of Korean migration policies. I also referred to Immigration Control Act and the Act on the Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans to extract relevant information for the purpose of explaining the ethnic visa policies implemented in 2007-2018.

Extensive ethnographic data was analyzed for this research. I did participant observation in South Korea between September 2018 and February 2019. During this period I worked in the lowest tier jobs available for Koryo-sarams being employed on a daily basis in Asan city. In the second half of the research I was employed in a factory in Gyeongju city illegally, but on a temporary basis where I worked for 10 weeks alternating day and night shifts. It was done to commit myself to "complete participation" becoming a member of the society to study the experience of the Koryo-saram people (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 20; Spradley 1980).

As Geertz (1995) reflected on participant observation, "you don't exactly penetrate another culture, as the masculinist image would have it. You put yourself in its way and it bodies forth and enmeshes you" (p. 44). Ruth Behar (1997) replied to this saying "Yes, indeed. But just how far do you let that other culture enmesh you?" She believes that participant observation is a paradoxical method and an oxymoron "because the ethnographer seeks to understand the native's viewpoint, but NOT 'go native'" (DeWalt and Dewalt 2011, 28; Behar 1997). The work of a participant observer is paradoxical also because it dictates: "act as a participant, but don't forget to keep your eyes open" (Behar 1997, 5). In my research, I did not "act" but was a participant of the precarious work life in the factories. "Keeping my eyes open" was not always feasible as I would often catch myself thinking as a person who was afraid to be fired and internalized petty humiliations at work rather than keeping a curious eye on the environment.

3.2 Research design

In 2016 I travelled to South Korea for a month-long field research for my thesis project in the OSCE Academy. Being a Koryo-saram myself, I was able to acquire a Korean visa. My initial plan was to conduct semi-structured interviews with Koryo-sarams about their lives in South Korea. When I approached people asking whether they would be willing to talk to me, they would either walk away or deny my request immediately. After a week of failed attempts, I was able find work in a sweatshop where I worked along with 2 other elderly women from Uzbekistan. The job was to pack cosmetic facial masks which did not require much concentration, and it gave me an opportunity to get close with my co-workers. With their help I was able to meet other people in their community and collect necessary data. Back home analyzing the material I gathered through interviews I would notice the bitterness and anger in my respondents' words. Though I thought I knew about the struggle they went through, I could not fully grasp what made them so angry with local Koreans at work given the fact that they were aware that life was tough in Korea before coming there and they were being paid for their work which was the main purpose of them

working there in the first place. As more and more people whom I knew personally, friends and some extended family members, took the path of those I interviewed and went to Korea, the discourse about the toughness of life in Korea did not cease and in 2018 I decided to re-visit Korea and let myself experience what it means to be a Koryo-saram in the ancestral homeland.

Because of the previous research experience, I knew I had to find a way to be employed on a regular basis in order to conduct participant observation and fully immerse into the field I wanted to experience. The first destination was Asan city, where I had an extended family member of mine who agreed to help me find a housing and show me where the *samushil,* i.e. "office", a hiring agency was located. Because of the competition among workers, temporariness of jobs and physical challenge of the work itself, I did not have time and an opportunity to establish trusting relationships with workers in that office. In the early mornings, when driving to the work destination people would sleep and on the way back we would be too tired to talk. Only the breaks between shifts and lunch time I could communicate with my co-workers.

3.3 Positionality

My ethnic background granted me access to the community of Koryo-sarams; as a Russian speaker, I could communicate to people from all the CIS countries. I also had basic Korean language skills, which allowed me to find a job in a factory relatively easier compared to those who do not speak the language.

The question of positionality between a researcher and a Koryo-saram worker has been a bit problematic for me from the start of my research. I knew that in order to write about precarity of Koryo-sarams in Korea I had to experience it myself. However, I had difficulties distinguishing between my identities as a researcher and a worker when my job would get extremely exhausting and I would experience negative feelings towards the people who had power over me as a disposable worker. I would also engage in discussions of the unfairness of the shift-manager or the Chinese Koreans with my co-workers as their behavior directly influenced me.

Asking about the background of a person was not common in the factory. Questions such as "Why are you here?" would be outrageous and nearly insulting. Inquiring about the past of the person was equal to "being noisy" and I would not dare asking such questions until I felt I knew I would not be misunderstood. Thus, I could not reveal my purpose of being there from the first day. It was not until the third week in the night shift when we finished our work and sat near the heater when I started asking questions about the pre-Korea life of my co-workers in hopes to be asked the same question. When I told my story and the research I was carrying out, my colleagues were confused. "With your education, you are wasting your time here and killing your health" said one of them. I was afraid to be perceived as someone who was there out of "curiosity" whereas the rest worked out of necessity. I feared to be thought of as someone who thinks she is better than the rest because I was there to "study" them. I did not notice any change in their attitude towards me, except maybe lack of surprise when I showed interest in their opinion about something unrelated to work.

When I asked about their stories during long breaks, my co-workers would say "Write about all of this. Include this one into your book" and they would bring up cases of harassment in their previous workplaces, injustices and fraud among the Koryo-saram people. Though I would remind them that the research is not guaranteed to be published someday, they would not take my excuse. It was important for them to feel that there was someone who can speak on behalf of them, someone who can tell their stories; an outlet for their despair.

According to Geertz (1996), "we lack the language to articulate what takes place when we are in fact at work" (p. 120). For this thesis, I use descriptions to translate the realities of workers within the established networks of power, as well as my own feelings while going through the experience. Behar (1997) writes that to overcome the contradiction of the participant observation, an ethnographer must be a "vulnerable observer", bringing her own pain into both research and writing, and I choose to agree with her and implement it in my own work.

4 Hierarchies of power

The visa system for Koryo-sarams and the legal limbo reproduce precarity. Though being imposed from above it flows into the minute details of factory floor life and interactions between different groups of people. To talk about the production of a precarious class, one needs to start with the analysis of the types of power relations workers are placed in. This chapter presents research findings in the city of Asan in work life of Koryo-sarams who are hired daily. It consists of three parts: i) the middleman, ii) the shift-manager, iii) the 'better' Koreans. The three figures play an important role in the lives of Koryo-sarams as they struggle to earn a living. In this chapter I demonstrate how the precarity is experienced on an individual level where the three entities exercise power over Koryo-sarams in their specific way and the degree of dependence Koryo-sarams have on each of them.

4.1 The middleman

N. and I went to *samushil*, an office of a middleman who hires people and gets percentage from daily wage of a worker. This particular samushil charged about 10% which was quite high, but the chances of being hired was higher than in other two. About 50 people from age 18 to 70, women and men flooded the room from 6.30am. Some were drinking coffee and talking to each other, others were sitting on a couch, and some stood near the wall, observing, and me among them. An elderly local Korean woman, who was about 75, energetically entered the room with a piece of paper in her hand, and the room started moving and suddenly everyone was silent. She looked at us and started calling out names very quickly. As she started calling names, people started leaving the room. They were the ones on a permanent employment in a factory, which produced and packed wet towels. Then a group of 8 women left the room, and they were sent to do laundry in a motel. About 6 women were told to board the mini-bus and were sent to a coffee-packing workshop. Others were told to go home and try their luck the next morning. When the room

started emptying, N. approached the table and pointed at me. She asked whether I spoke Korean and asked for a copy of my residence permit and wrote down my name. I would come there four more days before I get picked for work.

As I became one of the regulars in the samushil, I started noticing patterns. There were 'permanent' workers, who would always get picked and sent to the same factory. There were men who would not enter the room, but wait for the bus to arrive near the building while smoking. There were also less 'permanent' men, who had to be in the room to be told which factory they were going, but they would always be picked. And then there were those who would be picked because there were openings. Later, I found out that factories tell a day in advance how many workers they would need the next day and our middle-woman had her list ready.

Somedays another woman in her 60s would visit the office. She dressed better than our middle-woman and as she looked over us she would have a contented smile as a farmer who looks at her harvest. Her son in his mid-30s would often come in his pajamas and drive one the mini-vans which took us to the factory. By the manners and behavior of our middle-woman in front of her, I could tell she was the boss of the samushil.

By 7.00am two busses and two mini-vans would be packed with workers. Each destination was about 25-40 minutes drive from the office. The middleman would know when and which factories were checked by immigration services and would not send people who did not have H-2 visa. It was important to be in a good relationship with her which meant not complaining; not refusing a work she picked a person for; behaving in the workplace; never missing a day even if the daily work was not guaranteed; be willing to work on the weekends. N., who used to come to samushil herself for over a year before finding a job in a factory herself, told me she was a grudge-holding person, and if someone upset her particularly badly, she could tell other samushils to put the person in a "black-list" and he/she had no choice but to move to another city to find work.

The power of a middleman is to decide whether a person would be hired or not. Her personal opinion about the person (she would criticize young women who wore ripped jeans or

shirts with open shoulders) was one of the main criteria whether to give a person a chance to earn money or not. Though many of the workers were displeased with her be it for her arbitrary decisions, yelling if someone misbehaved and the 10% of daily wage, majority had no a choice, but to comply with her rules and obey.

4.2 Shift manager

Once in the samushil and picked for a work, worker's body does not belong to him/her. He/she is boarded onto a bus or a mini-van, taken to the factory, told what to do and where to go, and taken back to the bus stop by the end of the day. By the end of the month he/she gets the salary to the card. There are no contracts between the worker and the middleman. There are no evidences that he/she ever worked in the factory, or was sent to work by the office. If something happens to you during the work, the responsibility falls on you.

The shift manager tells each person what to do. His decision to place the worker in the easier job or the toughest one is arbitrary. Standing in a row I would have my fingers crossed to not be picked for the hardest job. For the manager it is a decision of several seconds because all he wants is to get the job done. But for a worker, it is a matter of the next 10-12 hours which can be either relatively easy or extremely exhausting.

Once on the territory of the factory, one obeys the rules, spoken and unspoken. A person relies on the kindness of one of the Koryo-sarams to fill her in where and how to behave. On the first day when I was chosen to be sent to the wet-towel packing factory, I tried to communicate with people whom I was sitting close to on the bus. Many were sleeping, as it was still 7 am in the morning, others had their headphones on. I managed to talk to a girl on the way from the bus to the changing room. She showed me the hanger with uniforms for 'one-day' people like me. I was chosen to substitute the young woman who did not come that day. I decided not to take my clothes off because I did not want the uniform to touch my skin, which I regretted after couple of hours. My job was to look after an assembly line, which stuck the stickers on the lid of the package. The

glue was hot, and I had to refill it every half an hour. As a result, I was sweating not just from the work, but because of the tank of boiling glue next to me. I figured out a way to prepare my stock of lids and rolls of stickers in a way that would spare me extra 5 minutes every 30 minutes so I could take a rest between the time when the stack of lids and the roll of stickers run out. In the second time-shift one of the women called me out and told me not to do that if I wanted to hold on to this job. She explained me that I have to follow the normal routine and pace, and be busy all the time. I never returned to that factory again.

After about two weeks in the samushil, I was once sent to a new place with three other young women. My co-workers did not say anything about the type of work except for complaining about the time it would take to change into a uniform. As we got out off the mini-van, a strong smell hit my nose; I thought it was the smell of fertilizers because the big building was surrounded by farmland. However, the smell was even stronger inside the factory – mix of chili pepper, spices, rubber and machine oil. We waited for a staff member who came out of the building, handed us gloves and hairnets and guided us to the locker room. Because it was a food producing factory, we had to follow strict rules with uniforms. There were three pair of shoes one had to change in order to enter the workplace. One pair was designated for walking from the locker room to the main entrance; another pair to enter the food processing area, and the third pair to go to the kitchen during the lunch break. If one wanted to walk out of the building during a 10-minute break every two hours to breath fresh air, one had to take off the uniform and shoes. The changing time would require longer time, so we would just sit in the building in order not to lose the precious 10 minutes when we could stretch and let our bodies rest.

The shift manager took us through several packaging stations where workers would pick one among us. The first girl thanked the women who chose her, and I did not understand why. However, as we moved further, the types of sauce packages got bigger, from 200gr packages it went to 3kg, and later that day I would find out how I got a bad luck. In the end it was me who was left and the woman whom I was given to complained that I was "too small".

The work I was assigned to was in the wet section. Hot sauce was poured into 2kg and 3kg plastic packages, then held in a freezing water to cool down for about 20 minutes. The containers looked like baby-cribs - metal bars as high as 1 meter and 2 meter in length. One had to operate a machine to pull out the container out of the water and place it on a wagon. My job was to drag the wagon, water dripping, to the assembly line, pick sauce packages out from the container and hand it to the woman who put them in a box of 6. I was given a heavy rubber apron which was ankle length and rubber boots knee high to protect myself from getting wet. To pick up the packages, I had to bend over the bars. It would get especially exhausting when the container was half empty. By the end of the first 2-hour shift, my back hurt so much I laid down on the bench during the break when everyone left. It was a 10-hour workday and by the end of it I could hardly straighten up from the excruciating pain on my back, on my neck from the weight of the rubber apron, and my hands from lifting those packages.

When the middle-woman picked us up later that evening she asked me how I liked the job and I begged her not to send me there ever again. She smiled and I never returned there again. My skin, hair, clothes all smelled like the sauce I spent 10 hours lifting. The next day in the samushil, women asked me how I liked the job and laughed. I told them what I did and they said that it was a man's job and that I was unlucky to be picked to work there. "You are officially christened now as a real worker" said one of them smiling.

After sometime, I was sent to the coffee packing workshop regularly, which meant one of the women lost her job there. The shift manager, an elderly man in his 70s watched over us as we worked on putting instant coffee packs into a plastic cup and closed the lid on it. The easiest job in the line was to put the plastic cup on the beginning of the assembly line where it was stamped with a date, and proceeded further down the line to be filled with a pack of coffee, plastic stick for stirring and the lid. It then went down the heated oven so the plastic cover would seal the cup. In the end of the line, two people had to do a quality check of the cup and place it onto the paper

trays. Because it was close to the oven, the heat would make the work quite difficult - after about an hour my eyes would burn and my mouth get dry.

On the first day of work I was placed in the end of the line. But on the second day, the shift manager decided to put me at the beginning of the line. He commented on my appearance saying that I had a pleasant face to look at. By the end of the workday, he would tell us to tell our middle-woman to send younger and more beautiful women the next day. I don't know whether it was his way of joking or not, but sometimes some of us would not be sent there again.

The power of the shift-manager is to decide the intensity of work one gets to do. He can assign the worker to the hardest job because he did not like that she spoke loudly, or place the worker in the easiest job because she is pleasant to look at. He can also choose among the those the middle-man sends and request not to send certain workers because of different reasons.

4.3 "Better" Koreans

In the coffee-packing workshop there were 7-8 women who were sent there regularly, and 2 were Chinese women in their 40s. They worked in the assembly line putting a pack of coffee in a plastic cup. My co-workers told me that the two women insisted on working alone there claiming that it was too hard to keep up with the speed, but in fact that was an easy job because it did not require lifting heavy boxes and walking long distances to refill items. Besides, they were afraid to be replaced by younger women, so they did everything to protect their job.

Our middle-woman would pick us up in a mini-van, and the Chinese women would sit in the front seats. As we drove for about half an hour, they would tell the middle-woman about the day, who was ill-behaved and talked much, and whom the shift-manager did not like. Though my co-workers did not understand Korean, they knew the Chinese women told on them. That's why none of us wanted to confront them when they ordered us around or yelled at us for some reasons. Since they spoke Korean, they would talk to the shift manager and find a way to get the easiest job. They would also "take the responsibility" for us Koryo-sarams to explain something.

They would also behave as managers when the shift-manager was not in the room, and order around. Because of their language skills, they also had better relationship with the middle-woman. They would tell on a person whom they disliked or showed disobedience and the person would not be sent there ever again.

In the locker room where we spent our breaks, they would behave as if they were in charge. They would show the new-comers which uniforms to wear and where to put their belongings. They can also talk up to the shift manager, so they are cut some slacks. After the work shift was over, they would leave the work area leaving Koryo-sarams to clean assembly lines and wash the floors.

Despite being on the same terms as Koryo-sarams - illegal worker with the same type of visa - Chinese Korean women felt superior to us. They would show that in their attitude towards us and their way of talking. It was due to the fact that they knew we could not communicate and speak for ourselves. They knew they had the power to get us fired if they wished and showed it to us with their actions.

This chapter demonstrated how Koryo-sarams are trapped in power relations with middle-man who hires them, shift-manager at work and Chinese Koreans who speak the language. The visa system ensures that Koryo-sarams have an access to the labor market falsely assuming they speak the Korean language. Unable to find legal employment due to their limited knowledge of the language, they are pushed to fill the most undesirable positions. Their vulnerability gives power to the middle-man to treat them as a commodity; the shift manager can treat them as a disposable labor force; and the Chinese Korean, despite being in the same legal category, because of their language skills can exercise power over them.

5 Disciplinary power mechanisms and resistance

"Working for 10 hours and making about 70 USD, we cleaned our robots with baby dresses which were sold at the price of about 30 USD each. What the hell is wrong with this world?"

(from field notes 6 December 2018).

The Foucauldian concept of disciplinary power is broadly used in literature of factory floor anthropology and sociology to depict the reality of factory work where it "increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility)" and boosts the production (Foucault 1979, 138; Ong 2010; Burawoy 1979). Disciplinary power is productive as it creates docile bodies which "operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines" (Foucault 1979, 138). While I use Foucault's ideas as a basis to describe the working conditions of Koryo-sarams in a factory, I also analyze what happens when illegality and freedom from responsibility enters the terrain. This analysis shows that while disciplinary mechanisms create docile bodies, illegality of employment contributes to further unpredictability and insecurity of workers' lives. However, it also opens a window for micro-resistances from the workers.

This chapter demonstrates how disciplinary power combined with uncertainty of employment, lack of Korean language knowledge and arbitrariness of decisions on the factory floor contributes to the precarity of Koryo-sarams.

5.1 Mechanisms of discipline

The factory in Gyeongju city manufactures car seats, but none of us knows for which car company. Two white buildings stand next to each other in the middle of a field with no address signs. The bus drops off the workers at 7.30 AM at the entrance who line up in front of the gates to check-in with a finger print. As most of the Koryo-sarams do not speak Korean, the

communication between them and the shift-managers is reduced to a sign language and basic commands such as 'go', 'don't', 'must', and 'not allowed'.

The factory floor is divided into two sections: robot-welding and assembly line. Women mostly work on the robot-welding and men assemble heavy car-seat carcasses on the assembly line. The robot-welding part of the area has 36 cells which evenly stand in two lines. Each cell is divided into two windows with a welding robot, a pre-programmed machine widely used in automotive industry to increase the accuracy of welding (Picture 1). The robot does repetitive motions conjoining small metal workpieces to the bigger ones. The worker's job is to set up the workpieces to be welded on a platform in a cyclical regime which allows loading and unloading while the robot is in motion. The ready item is checked for proper welding in each part and marked with a marker of the shift (green - day shift; blue - night shift). The number of the robot cell is written on the item and stored by 10 in a box. Defected items are the ones with improper welding due to incorrect set up of items, with splatter because the working station is not cleaned timely or the tip of the robot arm (high-heat torch) is not replaced on time. After the work shift is over, the worker must clean the work station and grease the welding platforms where workpieces are loaded. To protect the worker from the arc-eye (eye pain caused by the burn from the exposure to the ultraviolet in the welding process) and welding spatter (drops of molten metal) each window has to be closed with a rubber curtain. The worker also wears two fabric gloves and a plastic glove in between to handle welded hot pieces, a face mask or a respirator to protect oneself from the fumes, and an apron to protect one's clothes.

Once the workpieces are loaded, the worker presses the yellow button to drop the curtain and then green button to start the welding process. There is also a red button to stop the robot in case of an abnormality in the welding process. The control panel is in Korean, and the worker is not taught to operate it. Thus, each time the robot pauses due to a disfunction, the shift manager has to be called to restart it. Though some of us know how to read Korean and can use the control

panel, we are prohibited from touching it. This lets the shift-manager to control his 'environment' and not give autonomy to the worker.

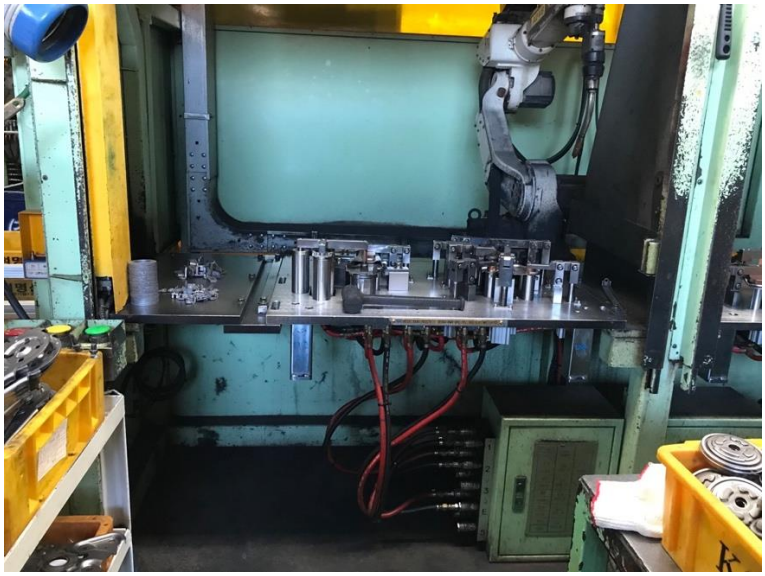

Figure 3. Robot-welding work station

Each cell has a screen which shows the time the robot was turned on and the number of items welded. This allows the shift-manager to control the work speed. The workday is divided into four 2-hour shifts with 10 minutes break between each and 50 minute break for lunch between the second and the third shift. The day shift starts at 8am with the first ring. By that time the working station must be ready - the boxes and carts of workpieces filled, robot's arm checked and greased, empty boxes ready for finished parts to be stored.

On the manufacturing site, the worker waits for the shift-manager to assign the robot to operate. Robot #23 is hard to work on - the tip of the robot arm has to be replaced more often. Smallest misplacement of a workpiece can cause the robot to pause, which means that the work stops until the shift-manager comes and restarts it. Encounter with the manager is not a pleasant one. Each time the robot stops, the worker expects to be yelled at, especially if the shift-manager is having a break when he is asked for help. On the way to the working station he wears a glove, shouts at the worker some slurs, and mumbles the whole time when fixing it. Robot #14 and #31 weld heavy pieces, and usually men get assigned there. But sometimes, the shift-manager can make one of the female workers work there, and we would try to help her during breaks or after the last

break. The randomness of the shift-manager's decisions creates the sense of unpredictability and lack of control over one's time and body.

Every time a worker is assigned to a new robot, it takes time to adjust to it. Each robot has its own pace and has certain peculiarities when in operation. If I was assigned to the same robot several days in a row, I would consider myself lucky. Walking after the shift-manager when he choses a robot, I would hope to be assigned to the one I operated the day before. I never knew what he based his decision on when choosing which robot to assign. I would always think how fast and arbitrary his decision was which determined how difficult my life would be for the next 10 hours.

Inside the factory it always smells of machine oil, burned metal and rust. When the robots are in operation, the fumes fill the space and the air extraction systems are not efficient enough for a clean air circulation. I wore a fabric facial mask and a respirator on top of it and the hood over my head to protect myself from the fumes. Despite that by the end of the second shift the smell would be absorbed by my skin, hair, clothes, and I would feel metal taste in my mouth. Most of my colleagues would not wear facial masks or cover their heads. Women often put on make-up, had their hair done, and in general cared about the way they looked. It always amazed me how after a long night shift they still looked fresh, had energy to talk and laugh, whereas I would be covered up from head to toe, "pale as a ghost" as my colleagues described me and not able to show any emotion but misery. Analyzing my previous work experience where the shift-manager insisted on having "pleasant looking" workers, I concluded that for women to hold on to the job, working hard was not enough. They would say: "If you can withstand three months here, you will get used to it" referring to the effort to look "presentable" during work.

The work shift consists of 8 regular hours and 1.5 hours of overtime paid at double price, which means that work starts at 8.00am and finishes at 5.30pm. However, because the night shift starts at 8pm, the day shift workers have to wait for the bus to arrive with night shift workers until 7pm. The night shift starts at 8pm and accounts for 8 regular hours and 6 hours of overtime.

Saturday and Sunday work hours were counted as overtime, and for each hour the worker is paid twice the regular price which makes weekend work more desirable. Saturday night shift starts at 5.30pm and lasts until 7.30 Sunday morning, earning the name 'long Saturday' among us. The shifts alternate every week, which makes it physically exhausting to adjust. When I worked night shifts and had long Saturdays, I would distract myself from sleeping during the day, going 32 hours without sleep, and wake up on Monday at 6.00am to go to the day shift. Physical exhaustion from the periodic change of day and night shifts challenges one's physical and mental health making her even more vulnerable.

Night shifts despite being more challenging are less monitored. The shift-manager and local workers (5 men) work until past midnight and spend the rest of the shift inside the room equipped with sofas, benches, fridge and a TV where non of Koryo-sarams would dare enter. After midnight we would speed up our work pace and finish by 3 o'clock without taking any breaks. Some people have places where they would go to sleep until 7 in the morning. Two women would sleep between the wall and the last robot case on the boxes. Some would go to the storage area where it is colder, but more isolated, and sleep on the plastic boxes. Others, including me, would sit under the tin roof near the heater on the bench talking, eating food or watching videos or playing games on our smartphones. Because the last meal is served at midnight, the factory provides workers with some type of food. There is a box inside the managers room with soda, instant noodles and sometimes sweet buns. In order to get one's portion, the person has to open the door to the room and reach out to the box in the corner while the manager and some local workers sit inside watching something or chatting drinking hot beverages. When a person takes the food, he/she has to show it to the people inside in proof of not taking more than allowed. I did not understand why they had to have the box inside the room. Besides, if the food was for workers, why not to give the box to them so they can take what they need. I found it humiliating and went by without it for several days until someone told me that even if I did not want to eat it

myself, I had to take it and give to those who wanted it. She told me not to leave what belongs to me to local Koreans, and I never did again.

The disciplinary mechanisms in the factory such as ring bell, a monitor counting the items, daily quotas, timely check-ins and -outs – all a part of a factory work. They organize the bodies in the most efficient ways, boost production and maximize performance. However, what is different in this particular case is the limited freedom due to random assignment of workplaces and petty humiliations. Because none of the workers know which robot she would operate, preparing in advance to save time is not possible. It also does not allow to adjust the workplace for one's convenience. In spite of working there permanently, though illegally, a worker can expect to be told not to come to work for the next several days or weeks without pay. The work schedule is not shared with workers and a person can be told to work on weekend. Since refusing would threaten one's employment, a worker does not have the freedom to plan the weekend for her own.

5.2 Mechanisms of self-discipline

What I call self-discipline is the rules that Koryo-sarams share among each other that were inferred or guessed from the behavior of the shift-manager. These rules are based on the assumptions some people made when co-workers were fired and the inferences from the analysis of the shift-manager's behavior when he lost his temper. Because there is no clear-cut set of rules what is right and wrong, or a list of misbehavior which can lead to getting fired, Koryo-sarams have to constantly be on guard for possible reasons to lose the job. The unpredictability when being assigned to the robot, silent supervision of work process, lack of accountability of the shift-manager when firing people or mistreating them – all of these intensify the precarity of Koryo-sarams making their lives vulnerable to the whim of the shift-manager.

Anytime during work a smartly dressed local-Korean can stand behind the worker observing the screen on the workstation and the welding process. He would make some notes, tick some boxes in his notepad and leave. None of us knows who the person is or what exactly he

measures and what is considered 'bad'. When the robot is welding, it gets noisy and often the worker would not notice anything going on behind her. While I was being observed, sometimes my neighbor would let me know that the person was behind me. I would immediately straighten up, become conscious of each movement of my body as if there was an agenda how my hands and legs should move. I would get anxious whether I had the correct workpieces, whether it took me the 'right' amount of time between the loading and unloading of the items and whether I was standing in the right distance from the curtain. Because none of us knew exactly every single detail what was the right way of working by the instruction, we would police ourselves each time whether we were doing it correct.

By the end of the second shift it is time for lunch. By 11:30 we notice local-workers and shift-managers passing us and going to the canteen. At 11:50 some of us would finish the work and go to the bathrooms. "Do not enter the kitchen before the ring," warns me Irina on the first day. She says it makes local-Koreans mad when we enter before the allowed time. She tells me a story how one of the workers was "cut", i.e. fired, several months before and neither him nor his co-workers knew what was the reason. But some mentioned that he entered the kitchen 2 minutes prior to the ring and that must have been the reason he lost his job. Thus, after coming out of bathroom, Koryo-sarams wait near the main building for the ring and only after start walking towards the canteen which is 15 meters away. By the time we enter the canteen, most of the local Koreans leave their tables. We line up in front of a buffet station with trays and cutlery, and when menu includes fish, chicken or meat, the kitchen staff serves food by portions. Though the room was not separated, the unwritten rule for non-local workers is not to occupy tables close to the TV.

Another instruction I received is to never stand idle when a local-Korean is around; "always pretend you are busy". If there is nothing to do, a worker is to relocate workpieces from one box to another creating the image of "busyness". "Do not walk during the work to another co-worker if it can wait until the break." Talking loudly and gathering in a group of several people

during the breaks should also be avoided. Shift-manager gets irritated when he hears that we talk loudly in Russian and laugh. He might think we bad-mouth him.

Checking-out even several seconds early is another thing one should avoid. One has to wait until the last second to press their fingers on the screen. People line up in front of the entrance, in the cold, counting seconds before they can check out. The longer they stand there, the colder it gets, and so does one's fingers. The finger-print machine takes longer to operate, and the people stand there waiting. Even today I do not know what was the reason for such punctuality which did not make any sense. The shift was over, the work was done, but the check-out time had to be precisely after the 19.00 for day shift and 7.30 for night shift.

It is not the discipline in the factory that makes lives of Koryo-sarams precarious, but rather it is what the discipline turns into when combined with lack of responsibility from the hiring side and the lack of knowledge from the Koryo-sarams' side. Factory discipline, when observed regularly, leaves a window of freedom for the worker as she knows exactly what is expected from her and what type of work she is to perform. Discipline excludes unpredictability. However, in the case described in this chapter, the discipline combined with illegality of workers turn the work life into an unstable experience, full of insecurities and humiliation.

5.3 Mechanisms of resistance

The discipline imposed from the management and the self-discipline internalized from the uncertainties open a window for small everyday resistances in the factory life. As a way of coping with the rigid power mechanisms, Koryo-sarams resist though deliberately slowing down the work pace, petty theft of defect items, altering the location of workpieces on the working station, or pretending not to understand the manager's verbal abuses – all of it is practiced and shared with new comer Koryo-sarams. However, what I observed in that particular factory is not unique. James Scott (1985) described 'every day resistance' from the oppressed as a response to domination, and how in fact that type of response is much more common than organized rebellions among

peasants. This chapter provides an overview of the response of Koryo-sarams to the disciplinary measures and arbitrary control mechanisms imposed over them in the factory.

On my first day in the factory, Irina, a young 20-year old girl was assigned to teach me how to work. Patient and very kind, she carefully explained the work process as I worked with her on robot #34 for a week. She also introduced me to the "do's" and "do not's" in the factory. "Do not exceed the quota" was the first rule she shared with me. It was important to keep the number of items per shift consistent. I was taught how to 'drag' time by cleaning the place more thoroughly, restoring small workpieces from one box to another and filling the cart half-full when in the storage. The daily quota was 180 items, 45 per shift, when I first started working. The worker has to calculate the timing to not to exceed the number. However, the quota rose constantly despite the efforts from our side and by the time I was leaving the factory, the quota was set at 250 items per workday. At least 2 of my co-workers were fired, and 4 sent to 'rest' until called again.

"Be careful not to make too many *pullyan*s (i.e. 'defect')" was another advice. One of the definite ways to get fired was to ruin items by misplacing the workpieces, or having the item with spatter on it. In case the item was ruined, there was a box in the corner where all the defected items had to be stored with a number on it. Once the box was full, the items would be taken away and fixed. However, the shift manager would count the number of ruined items and fire those who were, in his opinion, careless workers. Hiding pullyans, not putting a number on it and discarding it into the box later when no one is around is one way of evading punishment. But when manager sees the pile of unnumbered items, he would get angry and shout at everyone, making it hard for the rest of the workers. If a worker has a good relationship with one of the co-workers who knows how to operate an angle grinder (we had two women who could do it) she can ask them for a favor to fix it, and re-weld it afterwards (Picture 2). However, if the item was ruined beyond repair, the worker would just hide it in her backpack and throw it away on the way home far from the factory site. This type of solution to the "problem" is explained by the lack of

responsibility from the hiring factory which does not guarantee anything to its Koryo-saram workers. Thus, in order to avoid giving a reason for the shift-manager to fire the worker, she is willing to steal the item.

Small workpieces are placed in the boxes on the right and left side of the working station. It takes time to reach out to each box, so we would have a pile of each on the working station near the platform. It is prohibited to have them there because when the robot welds the pieces, drops of molten metals scatter across the workstation, covering the pieces as well. However, it is easier and faster to have them there, and after the item is welded, scrap out the spatter from the piece before storing it in a box. In order to prevent us from doing that, there is a person who walks around once or twice per shift. When one of us sees him, we would raise one of the items in our hand and signal that the person is coming. Once the supervision is over, we would put the pieces back and continue our work.

Figure 4. Co-worker fixing defect items with an angle grinder

Another method of coping with pressure from the management is to pretend not to understand when someone berates the worker for the mistake she may have done. Welding the wrong workpieces together, mixing up the boxes of night shift and the day shift or causing damage to the robot welding station would cause a serious rebuke, and even losing the job. In order to

avoid the confrontation, the worker would pretend not to understand what she is being criticized for and smile while nodding. My co-workers would say that one has to learn how to ignore all that and keep in mind that the main goal is to keep working and getting one's salary. "It goes in one ear and out the other" said in gestures was our way of supporting a person who was scolded by the shift-manager.

Small acts of resistance described in this section help workers to cope with higher workload, threat of losing the job and humiliation. They are developed in response to the disciplinary techniques and the unpredictability of management's decisions. Some of them being a sign of support they would give Koryo-sarams the sense of solidarity with one another against the local workers and the shift-manager.

This chapter focused on the mechanisms of discipline. The uncertainty created by the variegated visa system acts as a disciplinary power itself legally dispossessing the Koryo-sarams. This, in its turn, enables the factory employees to impose disciplinary measures on them which are embedded in the very uncertainty and randomness of work. The discipline produces internalization of insecurity and self-discipline which contribute to the precarity of work and further precarisation of life itself outside the factory.

Conclusion

This thesis explored the precarious lives of ethnic Koreans from the CIS in South Korea. It analyzed literature and statistical data on Korean capitalism, temporary labor migration schemes and ethnic visa policies for diaspora in China and the CIS to explain the necessity and reproduction of precarity. It demonstrated how Korean capitalism supplies low-paid labor to its economy through capitalizing its diaspora in China and the CIS by elaborately constructed variegated visa system. The legal limbo and uncertainty enabled by the visas serve as a disciplinary mechanism for the Koryo-sarams who are pushed into the low-paid and illegal employment due to their lack of Korean language skills. Ethnographic findings showed how their precarious situation and vulnerabilities allow certain groups of people, such as middle-man or factory shift-manager, to impose disciplinary measures on them. Randomness and uncertainty in the workplace flow into self-discipline and self-policing at work which contribute to the precarity which shapes everything in their lives. This thesis adds to the existing literature on the reproduction of precarity by demonstrating how it penetrates into the minute details of interactions between different groups of people in the factory and how it is experienced on an individual level.

Feminization of labor is not attended in this thesis due to limited space and time. However, this research would benefit from the close analysis of the feminization of work in South Korea among ethnic Koreans from China and CIS, as well as labor migrants from other countries.

This thesis opens up a space for an analysis of the Korean society which connects to other works on social hierarchies and positionality. Petty humiliations that happen on the factory floor and discussed in the thesis are one of the factors which exacerbates the precarious work life. The reasons for such occurrences would be interesting to study as they would show the social hierarchies in South Korea through examination of economic and sociological position of Koryo-sarams in relation to Korean capitalism

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