

# Korean Theater in Kazakhstan as a Cultural Hub of the Diaspora

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## Abstract

*For Soviet Koreans the Korean theater, founded by amateur groups in Vladivostok, became the embodiment of ethnic art, literature, music, dance and costume. After its deportation, the theater worked in Kyzyl-Orda (1937–41; 1959–68) and Ushtobe (1942–59). It moved to Alma-Ata in 1966 and has been based there ever since. For over 85 years, the Korean theater has been maintaining and promoting national culture among not only the Korean diaspora but also the diverse ethnic populations of the Soviet Union. The promoting the cultural interests of the country of origin in a multiethnic environment. This means that the theater’s mission regarding Koreans in the former Soviet Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was and still is twofold: “Diaspora building” and “Diaspora intergration.” The recent challenges and trends faced by this unique diasporic theater demands a synergy between the Korean diaspora and its ethnic motherland’s efforts.*

**Keywords:** Koreans, Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, Korean theater, culture, music, dance

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## Introduction

The year 2017 marked the 80th anniversary of the deportation of Soviet Koreans from the Russian Far East to Central Asia. Train cars from the Far East carried the forcibly deported, alongside salient emblems of Korean culture such as the type-set fonts of the *Senbong* newspaper, ancient books from the library of the Korean Pedagogical Institute, and musical instruments from the Korean theater, which was founded in Vladivostok in 1932.

The Korean theater in Kazakhstan (officially known as the State Republican Academic Korean Theater of Musical Comedy)<sup>1</sup> evolved from a centuries-long tradition within Korean folk culture.<sup>2</sup> It is one of the oldest national theaters in Kazakhstan as well as the first national Korean theater outside the Korean Peninsula. For several decades, the Korean theater was the focal point of the culture of Soviet Koreans. Today it is the key symbol of Korean culture in Kazakhstan, and its popularity extends to all the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries with a Korean diaspora.

Notwithstanding many difficulties, the Korean theater succeeded in not only preserving but also enhancing the Korean national culture. It was used as a vehicle to bring together its Soviet Korean audience—who referred to themselves by the ethnonym “*Koryo saram*” in order to denote their shared history and destiny. The Korean theater has come a long way from amateur groups in Vladivostok to become one of the leading national theaters in Kazakhstan.

The main stages of its development have been the subject of historical and art historical academic work. The study of the history of Soviet Koreans was banned as the Koreans, like other deported peoples, were stigmatized and characterized as “unreliable” until the *Perestroika* years of the late

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1. Academic theater is an honorary title awarded to the biggest and oldest state theaters established in Soviet Russia and adopted by the Soviet Union. Upon the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), this title was adopted by some of the former republics of the Union.
  2. The short name “Korean theater” is used in this paper.

1980s. However, articles about the Korean theater, whose development and achievements were attributed to Soviet national policy, were regularly published in newspapers and magazines, especially on the pages of the *Lenin Kichi* newspaper (Korean language) in Kyzyl-Orda, and later in Almaty. Introductory information about the Korean theater was published in all encyclopedias, including *Bolall en Sovetskaya Encyclopedia* (Great Soviet Encyclopedia), the National Encyclopedia of Kazakhstan and other reference books.

There have been very few works dedicated to specialist research on the Korean theater. The most significant work to date remains that authored by Iosif F. Kim. This work examines the creative performance of the Korean theater and its repertoire, important stage performances, and analyzes the actors' concerts and dramatic activities. Kim's work is an art critique which contains a brief overview of the theater's history (I. Kim 1982).

Three other books devoted to the anniversary dates of the Koreans of Kazakhstan and the theater are comprised mostly of photo albums. Though not part of academic research, they contain important information about the stages of development of the Korean theater, genres and forms of activity, repertoire and its 'star' personalities.

The illustrated history of the Kazakh Koreans contains a section titled "Korean theater" (Kang et al. 1997). A year after its publication in Seoul, the photo album was reprinted in Russian, entitled "*Heureuneun gangmulcheoreom*" (Like a Flowing River) with the subtitle "The 66th anniversary of the Korean theater." Another illustrated volume published on the eve of the 75th anniversary of the theater provides an overview of the formation and development of the theater and outlines the creativity of the people whose talents and hard work enabled the theater not only to survive during its most difficult years but also to reach the zenith of its creativity. A significant part of the book contains biographical information and photographs of the management of the theater, together with artists of drama, ballet and variety shows (Ni et al. 2007). The Far Eastern period of the history of the Korean theater remains insufficiently explored. This gap was filled with research by V.A. Koroleva, who published a monograph with the support of the Korea Foundation (Koroleva 2008).

South Korean researchers, including the late professor Kho Songmoo at the University of Helsinki, have also shown interest in the *Koryo Saram* arts. Kho pioneered the first ever book about Soviet Koreans published in English and devoted its fifth chapter to the Korean theater. Yang Min-ah at the Institute of Korean Culture at Ewha Women's University was the first researcher to study the oval dance and performing arts of the Far Eastern Koreans in the 1920s–30s. The musical creativity of the Soviet Koreans became the object of attention of Gim Bohi and professor Cho Kyu-ick. The creativity of Soviet Koreans' songs was explored by Ten Chu and Um Hae-kyung from the University of Belfast. Professor Lee Aeria of Waseda University, who published a monograph in Japanese on the Kazakh Koreans, also wrote an article about the Korean theater.<sup>3</sup>

Materials and documents at the Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan are among the main sources on the history of the Korean theater as well as those at the Central State Archives of the Russian Federation in the Far Eastern city of Vladivostok (previously based in the Siberian city of Tomsk), the Central Archives of the Khabarovsk region and the State's archives in Kyzyl-Orda, Almaty and Taldy-Kurgan regions. Fund No. 2046 of the Korean theater at the Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan is extremely important. It contains documents dated from 1937 to the end of the 1980s. The second group of sources lists materials of the periodical press: the newspaper *Lenin Kichi* and its legal successor *Koryo Ilbo*. There is information available about the contemporary situation at the Korean theater, its premieres, official tours, creative ties with the historical homeland, etc. posted on the official website of the Korean theater, as well as other Korean diasporic websites. Combined use of all available sources and materials makes it possible to clarify the past and present of the Korean theater.

It should be noted that books on the Korean Theater in Kazakhstan are a bibliographic rarity, mostly unavailable in English, with the last book

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3. Most of this work, with the exception of Ten Chu, was written in Korean, so resulted in a limited proliferation of knowledge with regards to the Korean theater notwithstanding their efforts. See Kho 1987; Yang 2008; Gim 2009a, 2009b; Cho 2013a, 2013b; Ten 1975, 1978; Um 1996, 2000; A. Lee 2002.

published in 2007 (Ni et al. 2007). Therefore, there is a need to present those works to an international audience, and to expand these studies to the contemporary period focusing research on some more specific topics. This article attempts to summarize the most significant aspects of the Korean theater: the historical stages, characteristics, activities, the actual problems of the contemporary era, and the prospects of Korean theater's inseparable link with the Kazakh Korean diaspora. It argues that during the last 85 years of its existence the Korean theater has been continuing to carry out not only its mission as the epicenter of traditional culture and art, but also to serve as a hub for the preservation of ethnic identity, strengthening of intra-diaspora consolidation and the expansion of ties with the historical homeland. This paper marks the blank spaces and lacunas in previous studies of ethnic Korean theater and suggests directions for further research. Taking into consideration recent discourses on the Korean theater, a descriptive method was chosen as the main scientific approach in this article.

### **The Formation of the Korean Theater in Vladivostok**

Korean immigration to the Russian Far East began in the second half of the 19th century. Its history can be divided into several stages of varying sizes and intensities of migration waves depending on the policy of the Russian authorities and the international and domestic socio-economic situation in Korea and Russia (G. Kim 1999, 149–51). Just before the October Revolution in Russia around 100,000 local Koreans, who were mostly poor, believed that the Soviet government would defend and uphold the rights and independence of the oppressed nation. From the beginning of the Civil War and the onset of foreign intervention, patriotically-minded revolutionary ethnic Koreans supported the Bolsheviks. They believed that such support would bring about a victory over the Japanese invaders in the Far East and ultimately lead to the liberation of their homeland (Li 1994, 231–238; M. Kim 1979, 20–21; Pak 1995, 85–88).

By the mid-1930s Far Eastern Koreans, whose number was approaching 180,000, had undergone the Sovietization of education brought forth

by “complete collectivization.” Significant progress was made in literacy, education and the development of national culture and art. In the Soviet Far East, the primary formation of the Korean national intelligentsia in the fields of education, art, literature and science took place (G. Kim and Sim 2000, 130–133).

From the end of the 1920s to the beginning of the 1930s some amateur Korean circles were organized in the Far East: at a tobacco factory in Vladivostok, in the Korean urban settlement called *Sinhanchon* (new Korean village),<sup>4</sup> at the “No. 8” secondary school—a peasant youth school in the village of Putsilovka—and at the Pedagogical Institute in Nikol’sk-Ussurisk. Among the many active participants in these amateur talent groups were Yeon Seong-yong, Kim Jin, Kim Hya-ung, Li Gee-yeong, Li Ham-duck, Li Gil-su, Tae Jang-chun and Choi Gil-jun, who all played prominent roles in the formation and development of theatrical art among the Soviet Koreans (I. Kim 1982, 6–8).

Young Korean workers founded a Korean theater (*Teatr Rabochei Molodyozhi*: TRAM) in Vladivostok in 1930. The producer of the theater was Yeon Seong-yong, the director was Eom Sa-il, and TRAM’s creative staff included 30 people, former theater actors such as Yeon Seong-yong and others. The propaganda repertoire of TRAM was aimed at transforming traditional Korean society (I. Kim 1982, 9). In 1931, due to financial and material difficulties, TRAM was reorganized into a Korean propaganda team attached to the Central Committee of the *Rybnik* (fishermen) trade union, which took over the upkeep costs. It mainly performed in communities where Korean collective farmers, fishermen and miners lived and worked. The Far East regional Korean theater was created in

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4. From the beginning of Korean immigration, Vladivostok (*Haesamwi*) became the hub of all activities aimed at the liberation of thought, education and culture. In the early 1890s, the Korean population of Vladivostok numbered 2,816 people. Urban Korean society was now established in Vladivostok. In 1893, some local Korean and Chinese residents were relocated by city authorities from the downtown to the suburb residential area named ‘*Sinhanchon*’ in Korean and ‘*Novokoreyskaya slovodka*’ in Russian. It was in *Sinhanchon* that hosted all advanced Korean immigration and contributed to the growing role of Vladivostok as a socio-political, cultural and educational center for Korean immigrants.

Vladivostok on September 9 1932, comprised of former TRAM actors and the best representatives of amateur groups. The early years of the Korean Regional Mobile Theater were very difficult, its problems are described in a V. Korolevareva article (Koroleva 2002, 178–179).

Reorganization of the Korean theater took place in July 1933, at which point the troupe had 18 people: 15 male and three female actors. The situation began to improve gradually with the appointment of a new director, Victor Ten, and an invitation was given in 1934 to director Chae Yeong, who was a graduate from the VGIK (*Vsesoyuznyi Gosudarstvennyi Institut Kinematografii*, All-Union State Institute of Cinematography) in Moscow. Soon the theater received the full official name of the Far Eastern Regional Theater of Korean Music and Drama. Then Victor Ten and Chae Yeong, who had good managerial skills, succeeded in taking control of the project and the theater began to receive subsidies to widen its repertoire and to improve the quality of the acting.

Two topics prevailed in the work of the Far East Korean theater: the struggle for national liberation against Japanese rule in Korea and the participation of Korean workers during the Civil War as well as their struggle against foreign intervention in the establishment of Soviet power in the Far East. This can be seen quite clearly from the list of the performances staged by the Korean theater (I. Kim 1982, 199–200). The national struggle for liberation of the homeland was tackled in the performances “*Fakel Janpendona*” (The Torch of Jangpeongdong, 1933), “*Krasnyi oboz*” (The Red Wagon, 1933), “*Vostochnyi partisan*” (The Eastern Partisans, 1934), “*Olimpik*” (Olympics, 1936), and “*Raby*” (The Slaves, 1937) (I. Kim 1982, 30).

On September 6, 1935, the *Sinhanchon* circle in Vladivostok performed the Korean folk play “*Skazanie o devushke Chun Khian*” (The Story of Chun Hyang). The script was written by Li Jeong-rim and the performance was directed by Yeon Seong-yong in the genre of the national opera *Changkeuk*. This play became crucial for the theater. In an announcement of the performance published in the Korean newspaper *Senbong*, “The Story of Chun Hyang” was called the theater’s maiden production, despite the fact that the theater had already existed for three years and had delivered more than ten plays. There was logic in that description because it was the theater’s

first truly national show (I. Kim 1982, 65). During the Far East period, the specific character of the national Korean theater was already manifesting itself. The theater had to reach out and travel to various settlements where Koreans lived. On tour, the theater staff carried out not only drama performances but also concert programs. Consequently, along with folk songs brought from Korea, new earlier unknown song genres began to appear. In the early 1930s, influenced by Russian musical culture, texts of popular, traditional and new Soviet songs were translated from Russian into Korean by poets and songwriters like Yeon Seong-yong, Tae In-su and Bak Yeong-jin.

Thus, during the Far Eastern period from 1932 to 1937, the Korean theater gradually began to acquire its unique specialization and grow as an organization, but this crucial process of cultural and educational development of the Soviet Korean population was interrupted by the forced and total deportation of the entire Korean population from the Far Eastern Territory.

### **Deportation and a New Stage of History (1937–1967)**

Far Eastern Koreans were the first ethnic group to have suffered total deportation, followed by dozens of other peoples of the Soviet Union—Germans, Kurds, Crimean Tatars, Poles, Chechens, etc. The idea of the deportation had a prehistory, whereby during the late 1920s and the early 1930s the Soviet leadership was already harboring plans to resettle ethnic Koreans from the maritime border regions to the remote areas of the Khabarovsk Region. The deportation of the Koreans was a planned, organized and carefully controlled large-scale action by the totalitarian regime. With a view to achieving the unimpeded implementation of the deportation of the Koreans, the first step of the totalitarian regime was to arrest the diaspora's most prominent leaders.

In the depths of the NKVD (*Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennykh Del*, People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs), a regional Korean insurgent center was fabricated, which was alleged to have been preparing an armed



insurrection so that the Far East Korean Territory could secede from the USSR. To be able to justify the unlawful deportation of the Koreans, shortly before the campaign started a powerful propaganda machine began to whip up an atmosphere of spy-mania.<sup>5</sup> Declassified archival documents show that the top leadership of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) was merely told about the decision to deport the Koreans without any prior discussion of the matter (G. Kim 2001).

After the deportation of Koreans in 1937, the theater staff found themselves split up—the bulk of the troupe was in Kyzyl-Orda, with a smaller group staying in Tashkent. In line with the decision of the government of the Kazakh SSR on January 18, 1942, the Korean Music and Drama Theater moved to the town of Ushtobe in the Karatal district of the Taldy-Kurgan region. In 1950, the Taldy-Kurgan and Tashkent theaters were merged.

Over four decades of the Soviet era, the composition and size of the creative team at the Korean theater in Kazakhstan changed greatly. In 1932 the acting group consisted of 16 members, but by the early 1950s there were 50 and by 1964 the numbers had further increased to 69. These quantitative changes meant a higher professional level was attained by the team and the troupe. In 1968, 18 persons had higher theatrical education, and another 11 had secondary special education. The creative core of the acting troupe between 1940 and the first half of the 1960s included the founders of the Korean theater, who were talented amateurs of the early period in the Far East. These were Kim Jin, Li Gil-su, Li Ham-duck, Li Gyong-hee, Choi Bong-do, Park Chun-seop, Lee N. P., Kim Ho-nam and Song Byeong-ho.

The theater group was first reinforced by the alumni of the Korean drama school, who graduated from the Tashkent Institute of Theatrical Arts named after A.N. Ostrovskii in 1960. In 1962–1965 the Department of General Stage Management at the Tashkent Institute of Theatrical Arts had 19 places purposefully allocated for the Kazakh Ministry of Culture, including those for training stage directors for the Korean theater. By the

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5. “*Podryvnaia rabota yaponskoi razvedki*” (Subversive work of Japanese intelligence), *Pravda*, April 23, 1937.

mid-1960s two theater staff held the distinguished titles of the People's Artist of the Kazakh SSR, namely: Kim Jin and Lee Ham-duck. Three people had the title of the Honored Art Workers of the Kazakh SSR: Tae Jang-chun, Chae Yeong and Yeon Seong-yong. There were also the Honored Artists of the Kazakh Republic: Li Gil-su, Choi Bong-do, Li Young-su, Park Chun-seok, Kim Ho-nam and V. E. Kim (G. Kim and D. V. Myeong 1995).

In the postwar years the repertoire of the Korean theater was as extensive as its genres: tragedy, drama, comedy and others. The greatest level of audience interest was attracted by a play by Tae Jang-chun<sup>h</sup> about 'Hong Beom-do,' who was a legendary fighter for the liberation of Korea and the establishment of Soviet power in the Far East. The Korean patriot and revolutionary internationalist Hong Beom-do was at the helm of the anti-Japanese guerilla movement from 1907 to 1922. The playwright Tae Jang-chun intended his play "Hong Beom-do" as the first part of a planned trilogy. In the first part, the author depicted the voluntary and non-revolutionary struggle of Hong Beom-do as a peasant leader. In the second part, he showed Hong becoming commander of the Red partisans under the influence of the Bolsheviks, and in the third part presented Hong's transformed character—turning into an ideologically convinced revolutionary internationalist after a meeting with Vladimir Lenin.

The Soviet authorities hoped that the subject of Korea's struggle against the domination of the pro-American regime of Syngman Rhee, as well as that of the Korean War of 1950–1953, would enlighten the audience about the need for "fraternal aid" to North Korea. Therefore the Korean theater staged such plays as "*Na osvobozhdennoi zemle*" (The Liberated Land, 1948) and "*Yuzhnee 38-oi paralleli*" (South of the 38th Parallel, 1950) directed by Tae Jang-chun, "*Korea v ogone*" (Korea under Fire) by Yeon Seong-yong (1951), "*Moranbon*" (Moranbong) by Jeong Dong-hyeok (1962) and others (G. Kim 1989, 54–55).

Plays about the Great October Socialist Revolution and the establishment of Soviet power in the Far East became significant milestones in the creation of the Korean theater. Under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, Korean patriots and internationalists fought in the Red Army and guerilla detachments against the White Guards and foreign interventionists. Plays

such as Tae Jang-chun and Chae Yeonge “*Partizanyi*” (Partisans, 1957), Chae Yeong’n “*Rasvet*” (Dawn, 1962), Chae Yeong and Em Sa-ilin “*Nezabyvaemye dni*” (Unforgettable Days, 1963), Maeng Dong-uk “*Doroga na sever*” (Road to the North, 1966) and others discussed the effect the October Revolution had on the awakening of the national liberation movement of the previously oppressed peoples of Russia.

The Korean theater staged productions on classic material to develop national performing arts throughout its history. A poetic medieval story about a girl, Chun Hyang, enjoyed wide popularity among the Korean people. “*Skazanie o devushke Sim Chen*” (The Story of Sim Cheong) remained for many years part of the repertoire of the Korean theater. Kim Du-chil displayed the heroic tragedy, “*Non Ge*” (Non Gae, 1962) based on historical records which informed the audience about the war of the Korean people against the Japanese invaders (1592–1598).

The performance of the Korean theater continued annually in the areas of compact residence of the Soviet Koreans in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Russia. Annual reports of the theater from 1950 to the early 1980s indicate that around one play or one concert out of ten was performed on the theater’s stage, whereas all others were shown on tour and during outreach trips.<sup>6</sup> The geographical boundaries of touring performances of the theater steadily expanded. In the early postwar years the theater performed only in the Taldy-Kurgan and in Kyzyl-Orda Regions, but from the second half of the 1950s the tours took the theater far beyond Central Asia. The Korean theater audiences met in Kazakhstan’s capital for the first time in the autumn of 1955, and 20 actors and musicians from the Korean theater were involved in the week-long festival of Literature and Arts of Kazakhstan in Moscow in December 1958. In the summer of 1956 the theater took a trip to Ukraine, the Russian Federation (RSFSR) and the Trans-Caucasus with nearly the entire troupe of 55 members (Ni et al. 2007, 37–38).

One of the problems faced by the Korean theater in its creative work

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6. *Chentralyniy gosudarstvennyy Arkhiv Respubliki Kazakhstan* (State Central Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan); f. 1890 (Ministry of Culture of Kazakh SSR); f. 2046 (Korean theater of musical comedy of Kazakh SSR); f. 1242 (Bureau of arts of Cabinet of ministers of Kazakh SSR).

was the lack of original plays written by Kazakhstan Korean authors, among whom only a few could be called professional playwrights. Literary authors from among the Soviet Koreans could hardly be differentiated by genre specialization because many of them wrote plays as well as poems, short stories and novels.

Yeon Seong-yong, Tae Jang-chun, Han Jin, Kim Jun, Kim Gwang-hyun, Maeong Dong-uk, Park Il, Chae Yeong, Kang Tae-su, Lim Ha and Han Sang-uk were among the most prominent authors of the Kazakhstan Koreans. Yeon Seong-yong was the author of dozens of verses, poems and plays staged at the national theater from 1946-1966: “*Korea v ogone*” (Korea Under Fire, 1951), “*Chan Gok i Nam Khon*” (Chang Gok and Nam Hong, 1961), “*Krasnaya maika*” (Red Shirt, 1963), “*Yan San Byak*” (Yang San Baek, 1969), etc.

Songs (texts and tunes) by Yeon Seong-yong such as “*Ssireul hwal hwal ppuryeora*” (A Sowing Campaign), “*Nae Sarang*” (Oh, My Love!) and “*Jeongnyeongko jota!*” (How nice!) were very popular among all Koreans of Kazakhstan and Central Asia in the 1940s–60s, and were published in Yeon’s anthology in Korean at the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> Writer Kim Jun, a member of the Writers’ Union, was the most famous Korean author, whose works were published both in Korean and in Russian. Kim Jun was known as a translator of artistic works. He translated into Korean the “*Razgrom*” (Defeat) by A. Fadeev, “*Povesti o nastoyashchem cheloveke*” (The Story of a Real Man) of B. Polevoy and drama works by Soviet writers.

Kim Gwang-hyun (pen name *Musan*) was one of three Korean authors who published their work as separate collections.<sup>8</sup> Translated works, such as “*Sinii platochek*” (The Blue Scarf) by V. Kataev, “*Imenem revolyutsii*” (In the Name of the Revolution) by M. Shatrov, “*Oh uzh eti devushke*” (Oh, These Girls), by K. Baiseitov and K. Shangitbaev and others were staged at the Korean theater.

Soviet Korean playwrights wrote 70 original plays and translated other 71 plays into Korean. At the Central State Archive of the Republic of

7. Refer to the Pak (2002).

8. Refer to the Kaz-Lit.kz (Website).

Kazakhstan in fund number 1890 of the Ministry of Culture of the Kazakh SSR for 1946-1966, the manuscripts of 32 plays in Korean are stored and so far they have never been published. The first collection, consisting of ten plays by Han Jin, was published in 1988. Han Jin belonged to a group of Korean poets and writers of the second generation who were raised and educated in North Korea and Moscow. This group also included Maeong Dong-uk, Nam Hae-yeong (Nam Cheol), Yang Won-sik (Won Il), Li Jeong-hee and others (Ni et al. 2017, 17).

In the spring of 1959, the government decided to return the theater from Usttobe to Kyzyl-Orda. In line with the decree of the Kazakh SSR as of January 1, 1954, the Korean Musical Drama Theater changed its status from that of a regional institution to that of the Republican level. The theater's history gained momentum in 1968. It was marked by the move from Kyzyl-Orda to Alma-Ata—the capital of Kazakhstan, where the theater changed its name to become the Republican Korean Theater of Musical Comedy.<sup>9</sup>

### Theater During the Period of 'Developed Socialism' (1970–80)

At the new location in the theatrical season of 1969–1970, the premiere of the play “*Kremlevskie kuranty*” (The Kremlin Chimes) based on the eponymous play by N. Pogodin was staged by directors Chae Young and M. Novozhikhin. Iosif Kim wrote in his book that the director Chae Yeong and the leading actors studied the experience of all the leading theaters in staging the stage image of Lenin. Directors and actors of the theater embarked on a creative trip to Moscow in order to familiarize themselves with the existing museum and archival materials. The performer of the role of Lenin, actor Nikolai Li, reached new heights in the art of representing a truthful image. The performance received good reviews in the press,<sup>10</sup> and in 1970 the theater was awarded the Certificate of Honor of the All-Union Festival of Dramatic Collectives. In 1978 the name of the theater was changed to the

9. *Lenin Kichi*, January 10, 1968.

10. *Vechernaia Alma-Ata*, November 5, 1969.

Korean Theater of Musical Comedy.<sup>11</sup>

Decades of life in the Soviet Union and in Kazakh SSR left its mark on the repertoire of the Korean theater, which staged its first plays of Kazakh classical drama. People's Artists of the USSR K. Kuanyshpaev, A. Mambetov, X. The Bukeeva, People's Artists of the Kazakh SSR S. Kozhamkulov, Karmysov K., K. Badyrov, A. Tokpanov and others selflessly assisted by sharing their creative experiences, and by helping to understand the distinctive culture of the Kazakh people at a deeper level.

This mutual cooperation between Korean and Kazakh theater workers was continued in the work of modern Kazakh comedies: "*Oh, ush eti devushki*" (Oh, Those Girls!) by K. Shangitbayeva and K. Bayseitov, and "*Volchonok pod shapko*" (A Wolf Cub in a Hat) by K. Mukhamedzhanov. In the 1970s the theater performed plays by O. Bodikovpe "*Karakumskaya tragedii*" (The Karakum Tragedy) and G. MukhtarovMu "*Ya dzenyusi na babushke*" (I Will Marry a Grandmother). A special place in the creative life of the Korean theater belongs to M. Auezov's plays such as "*Enlik-Kebek*" (A Tragic Love Story of Enlik and Kebek, 1961), "*Karagoz*" ('Black Eye' in Kazakh, popular female name, 1970) and "*Koblandy*" (A male name with a heroism symbol, 1979), which were very successful among Korean audiences.

The theater marked its 50th anniversary in 1982 with a performance in Moscow. In the same year, for merits in the development of Soviet theater art and timed to coincide with its 50th anniversary, the Republican Korean Theater of Musical Comedy was awarded the Order of the Badge of Honor.<sup>12</sup> In the following year, 1983, the dramatic troupe and the 'Ariran' (Arirang) ensemble toured Belarus, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The theater spent the whole of April and May performing in various cities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Along with the concert program there were performances of "*Kolokola ada*" (The Bells of Hell) by Yeon Seong-yong, "*Ariran*" (Arirang) by Chae Yeong, and others.

By the end of the 1980s the theater's position was slightly improving

11. *Lenin Kichi*, December 8, 1970.

12. *Lenin Kichi*, December 17, 1982.

and it was able to go on a tour to the Taldy-Kurgan region, to the capital region of neighboring Uzbekistan, the Khabarovsk Territory and the Sakhalin region, that is, to regions of relatively compact settlement of the Koreans, where reasonable ticket sales could be expected. By that time, its relations with North Korea (DPRK) had progressed, and 30 artists from the dramatic troupe and ensemble Ariran took part in the 'April Spring' festival in Pyongyang. In October 1989 the theater was invited to tour South Korea (ROK) for the first time in its history.

Because of intensifying contacts with the historical homeland, the theater staff prepared new performances such as "Vesennii veter" (The Spring Wind) by Huh Ung-bae, "Skazanie o devushke Sim Chen" (The Story of Sim Cheong), "37-oi tranzitnyi" (The 37th Transit) by V. Kim, and "Deti Kolumba" (The Children of Columbus) by M. Park, under the new chief director of the theater, Honored Artist of the Kazakh SSR Maeong Dong-uk.<sup>13</sup> A year later, the theater was twinned with the National Theater of Korea in Seoul.

In September 1990, the artists of the Korean theater went on tour in the Khabarovsk and Primorye Territories and Sakhalin, with a total of at least a hundred performances, which were attended by at least 20,000 spectators. In the same year, for the very first time, the drama troupe of the Korean theater went on tour in the DPRK, where the audience welcomed the production of the play "Kolokola ada" (The Bells of Hell) by Yeon Seong-yong with great warmth and understanding. Because of an upcoming tour of the Far East, the theater was working on the performances of "Hyn Bu i Nor Bu" (Hung Bu and Nol Bu) by Tae Jang-chun, "Ne stoit raskachivati derevo" (Do Not Swing the Tree) by Han Jin and "Kolokola ada" (The Bells of Hell) by Yeon Seong-yong. That year, tours to the Soviet Union and Kazakhstan took place by the theatrical ensemble 'Ariran' and 'Meari' created the year before under the direction of tenor singer Sohn (Ni et al. 2007, 189).

The leadership of the theater and its entire staff made every effort to overcome the difficult conditions of the approaching political and economic collapse of the country, and began to establish ties of cooperation with both

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13. Koryo Ilbo, June 28, 2007.

North and South Korea. The collapse of the Soviet Union is known to have had consequences for the Koreans (as for all the other Soviet peoples). Some of these problems were common for all post-Soviet Koreans, and some were specific to those that now found themselves in separate countries (V. Kim 2014; Bugai 2014).

Consequences of a general nature included, first of all, the loss of unity of the Soviet Koreans divided by citizenship in the newly formed post-Soviet republics. The commonality of the Soviet Koreans rested on a single Soviet citizenship, as well as in the common Russian language, the presence of such single national and cultural centers as the Korean Theater, the inter-republic newspaper *Lenin Kichi* (*Koryo Ilbo*), and a common national and ethnic identity.

### **New Challenges and the Main Achievements of the Modern Stage (1991–2019)**

As a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, caught in acute financial and economic crisis, the socio-political situation in the newly formed nation states sharply deteriorated. People did not receive wages for months, stores had empty shelves, there was no electricity in the cities at night and the funding of cultural institutions, including that of the Korean theater, fell sharply—which meant that the theater had to start raising its own funds. The collapse of the Soviet Union destroyed all previous ties between the former Soviet republics and the theater’s touring performances had to cease. This situation was further aggravated by the fact that as a result of the erroneous decision of the leadership of the theater, it lost its own stage. At that time the Korean community, represented by the Association of Koreans of Kazakhstan (*Assotsiatsia Koreitsev Kazahstana*, AKK), did not leave its theater without attention. In line with an agreement with the Embassy of the Republic of Korea, the theater found a temporary shelter in the Korean Education Center—sharing a roof with the AKK.<sup>14</sup>

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14. Yelena Yu. “Novyi adres Melpomeny” (The New Address of Melpomena), *Koryo Ilbo*, August 27, 1999.



In 1998, the city authorities of Almaty handed over the building of the former cinema “Zhalyn” to the Korean theater. Funds from the state budget, support from the Association of the Koreans of Kazakhstan and sponsors from the historical homeland of the Republic of Korea made it possible to renovate the building, equip it with new seats for spectators, sound and light equipment, and create a stage for theater productions and concert programs. Since that time, every year a new theater season opens in this building on Papanin Street.

In September 2002, the Korean theater of the Republic of Kazakhstan celebrated its 70th anniversary. On October 1 of the anniversary year, a significant event took place. The head of state—President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev—visited the Korean theater in connection with its anniversary celebrations. President of the Association of the Koreans of Kazakhstan Chae Yuri, who was in the entourage, told journalists of the cooperation of the public organization and the state Korean theater for the preservation and development of national culture and art.<sup>15</sup> On September 18, 2002, on the stage of the Kazakh State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater named after Abay, a performance and a gala concert were held in honor of the 70th anniversary of the Korean theater.

After a long break in 2006, the theater went on tour around Russian cities including Moscow, with the play “*Ariran*” (Arirang) by Choi Yeong-guen and theatrical performance “*Kazakhstan-moi krai rodnoi*” (Kazakhstan is My Native Land). These performances were hugely successful with audiences. The play “*Dom Bernardy Alba*” (The House of Bernarda Alba) took part in international festivals of theatrical art in Germany and South Korea. In 2007 a tour of the cities of the Russian Far East took place, with the final performance in Vladivostok. It was a project of the Korean theater “*Poezd Pamyati*” (The Train of Memory), dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the theater. In 2007, the Koreans of Kazakhstan widely celebrated the 70th anniversary of their residence in Kazakh land and the 75th anniversary of the Korean theater. In honor of this anniversary the book “*Istoriia koreiskogo*

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15. “President posetil koreiskiy tsentr” (President visited Korean theater), *Koryo Ilbo*, October 4, 2002.

*teatra*” (History of the Korean Theater) was published. In the jubilee year, the theater recruited its fifth generation of actors—young graduates of the Tashkent Theater Institute. These are Choi Anastasia, Chae Yuri and Nam Igor. Despite financial difficulties, the theater found an opportunity to accept three more graduates from this institute.

As part of its 80th anniversary, the State Republican Korean Theater of Musical Comedy organized “Days of the Korean Theater” and presented its best performances and concert numbers to the audience. The highlight of the celebrations was the festive theatrical performance “We are 80,” staged on September 28, 2012. In that jubilee year, the Korean Theater Museum was opened during the festive “Days of the Korean Theater.”<sup>16</sup>

A drama troupe, vocal soloists, a folklore group ‘*Samulnori*,’ a dance group, and the Quartet “Premium” successfully worked together on the theatrical stage. Among the leading artists of the theater are honored artists of Kazakhstan—Alexander Moon, Rosa Lim, Maya Pak, Zoya Kim, Veniamin Li; the Recipient of the Order “Dostyk” of the II Degree, and the “*Maediniet kairatkeri*” (Honored Cultural Worker): Galina Kim, Antonina Pak, Eduard Pak, Roman Choi and Anastasiya Choi.

In 2014, when the 150th anniversary of the migration of the Koreans to Russia was marked, the OOK (*Obscherossiskoye Obshchestvo Koreitsev*, All-Russian Association of Koreans) invited the Korean theater to come on tour. Throughout the year, the theater held lengthy tours in Siberia, the Urals and Southern Russia. As part of the anniversary tour in July 2014, the theater performed on the stages of Chelyabinsk, Tomsk and Novosibirsk.<sup>17</sup> In October 2014, artists of the Korean theater visited Volgograd, Rostov-on-Don and Voronezh. Russian viewers saw a theatrical performance, “Linked by One Destiny,” directed by Elena Kim and Nadezhda Kim. The actors of the drama and ballet troupes, soloists-vocalists, as well as musicians

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16. I. Seong, “*U koreiskogo teatra poivilsya svoi muzi*” (The Korean Theater Got Its Own Museum), *Koryo Ilbo*, October 5, 2012.

17. “*My svoyo prizvanie ne zabudem. Koreiskiy teatr vernulsya s gastrolei po Priural’yu*” (We Will Not Forget Our Mission. Korean Theater Returned from a Tour of Ural Region), *Koryo Ilbo*, July 21, 2014.

of the *Samulnori* folklore group, took part in the play.<sup>18</sup> At the end of the tour across Russia, the Korean theater staged a theatrical performance and concert program at the closing event in Moscow.<sup>19</sup>

The final part of the festive events timed to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the Koreans' residence in Russia and the CIS was hosted in the ROK. In honor of this significant event on October 10–13 there was a large International Forum in which scientists, journalists and public figures—ethnic Koreans from the CIS countries—took part. The Korean theater from Kazakhstan was warmly received by South Korean spectators at the Palace of Folk Art in Seoul and on the open ground in Ansan city.<sup>20</sup>

Since its early years, the theater paid much attention to the creation of concert programs. As a rule, two new performances and a concert program were prepared for each tour. Among the current vocalists of the theater are such well-known singers as pop artists Alena Kim, Zoya Kim, Sergey Kim, Vitaliy Li, Maya Li, and Oleg Yun, as well as performers of romances and operatic parties: Veniamin Li and Ilona Ten. The ballet troupe of the theater performed Korean and Kazakh dances and dances of the peoples of the world. Gulmira Bakytchanova, Nina Du, Laura Erzhigitova, Maria Kim, Nadezhda Kim, Anastasia Ogai, Anastasia Choi, Anna Choi, Natalia Choi and Yulia Choi are among those who were on stage.

In recent decades no concert programs, theatrical performances and celebratory events could do without performances by the so-called '*Samulnori*' group. The origin of the samulnorist ensemble in Kazakhstan is associated with the names of Han Myong-hee, a professor at the Institute of Arts of the Republic of Korea, who arrived in Almaty in the summer of 1993 and convinced Han Vladimir to become the leader of the first *Samulnori* band. Several compositions by the group have changed over the years, and now the Korean theater includes the director George Yun and musicians

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18. "Gastrol'i koreiskogo teatra Kazahstana proshli po gorodam Rossii" (The Tour of the Korean Theater of Kazakhstan were Held in Russian Cities), accessed October 10, 2014, <http://kazembassy.ru>.

19. S. Irina, "Etot yarkiy yubiley" (This bright anniversary), *Koryo Ilbo*, October 10, 2014.

20. "Sviazannyye odnoi sud'boy" (United by One Common Destiny), *Koryo Ilbo*, October 31, 2014.

Sergei Kim, Vitaliy Li, Eugene Li and Oleg Yun.

Throughout its history, the national Korean theater has always been bound by one destiny with its people. It served as the spiritual, cultural and moral center of the Korean diaspora, the best creative forces representing the main genres of national art and literature were concentrated in and around it. The repertoire of the national theater is diverse, ranging from dramatic performances to concerts, modern variety shows, and popular theatrical performances such as “*Chuseok*” and “*May Dano*.” On the stage of the Korean theater there are competitions and festivals of amateur art, including those held at an international level. The theater also conducts cultural and charity events for Soviet veterans of war and labor.

Thanks to the Korean theater, inhabitants of the most remote rural areas have had opportunities to become acquainted with the classics of the world as well as classical Russian, Soviet, national Kazakh and Korean dramatic works. The theater has successfully collaborated with Kazakh writers, directors and actors. With the establishment of diplomatic relations, cooperation has been developing with South Korean theaters and representatives of the creative circles of the ethnic homeland. The Korean theater has travelled a long way and has accumulated tremendous background experience amassed by numerous generations of those without whom stage art is inconceivable.

The Korean theater, as noted in the press, is experiencing a renaissance—young actors are joining the troupe and the creative team gets more and more fans every day, especially in regions where people greatly appreciate ethnic art. Its artists win prestigious awards at international competitions and festivals. Director Liubov Ni has been managing the theater for the past 20 years. The jubilee year of 2017 was marked by a truly historic event for the Korean theater—it was awarded the honorary title of an academy. An academic theater was the highest honorary title in the Soviet Union, and it was given to the largest and oldest theaters with strong creative traditions, famous actors who grew through the ranks on the job and gained wide recognition among spectators and the theatrical community.

## **Conclusion**

In the jubilee year of its 80th anniversary, the Korean theater sees its main aim as enhancing its repertoire with new national plays. Raising creative levels will enable it to become an ambassador of not only Korean culture, but also Kazakhstan's theatrical art at the international level. Whilst preparing and presenting its new concert programs and theatrical performances, it will continue to inform audiences about ancient Korean culture.

The theater is not only an "art temple," but also an enterprise that must provide jobs, pay wages, earn money, establish business cooperation alongside creative pursuits, find alternative sources of financing, etc. Therefore, like every enterprise, be it a cultural institution, a plant or a factory, along with specific internal problems there are "ailments" inherent in its historical development. Thus, like any other enterprise, the Korean theater makes an annual plan and develops projects and development programs.

As of May 23, 2018, the Korean theater finally moved to a new building, a change closely connected with the Public-Private Partnership Initiative, which is an instrument of interaction between businesses and the state. For the Korean theater, being bestowed with a new building in the city center provides new opportunities to attract private investment, including South Korean financial support. The ability to attract new capital will make it possible to solve a wide range of creative and educational problems facing the theater on the basis of an equitable sharing of responsibilities and benefits.

Owing to its status change and convenient location, the Korean theater and its affiliated structures, public organizations and educational and cultural institutions can further diversify their activities. For example, now the theater has an exposition about the history of the Korean theater, which has no analogue in other Korean ethno-cultural associations. It is worth discussing the possibility and feasibility of creating a digital museum exposition of the Koreans of Kazakhstan. There is also the potential for a theater studio in which future actors could be trained in parallel with the Kazakh National Academy of Arts, named after T.K. Zhurgenov, because future Korean actors should study systematically and in-depth the Korean

national culture, history and art of Korea, as well as the Korean language.

The Korean theater has been at the center of all cultural life for the Soviet Koreans for many years. The best creative talents in literature, music and fine arts have always served at the theater or were in close contact with it. The national Korean theater maintained close links with the Koreans and shared their plight. The national theater has a whole gamut of plays ranging from dramas to folklore theatrical performances, such as “*Chuseok*,” “*May Dano*,” concerts and contemporary entertainment shows. Contests and amateur folk festivals have taken place on stage at the Korean theater, including international events. The theater also holds cultural and fund-raising charity events for war and labor veterans. The Korean theater has received awards for its contribution to the development of the theatrical arts. It is a proud owner of high-state awards, numerous honorary certificates and diplomas, including international ones.

Support for the ethnic Korean theater from the Kazakh government provides the Korean diaspora with a unique opportunity to have its own cultural hub that not only preserves but further develops the culture of the Koreans residing in the multiethnic republic. Thanks to the Korean theater it became possible to bring world classics as well as classical works by Russian, Soviet, national Kazakh and Korean playwrights to residents of the most rural areas. The theater has successfully collaborated with Kazakh writers, directors and actors. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties, cooperation has been developed and maintained with South Korean theaters and representatives of creative circles from the ethnic motherland. The Korean theater, by definition, must continue to maintain the strongest possible ties with the ethnic homeland, develop cooperation with partner theatrical collectives, creative associations and unions and prepare and present joint plays, performances and musical-choreographic projects. It's time to move from episodic joint events to long-term planned partnerships.

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