

Chapter 3.

Life as Diaspora.

Two year long project and a month in Kazakhstan.

In 2011, I received an email from Alexander Ugay, a fourth generation Korean-Kazakh artist, who became my friend at an artist residency. The email was a proposal for a project on the Korean Diaspora. It was the tenth year since I had returned to Korea; and a few weeks before I heard from him, I had written the word “diaspora” on the notepad in my computer. I thought it might be a sign.

We discussed the micro and macro perspectives, statistics and existing research data, and six months later, we reset the foundational concept to the “future.”

Let’s keep on talking about the past. Nonetheless, let’s acknowledge that the future is coming and find out which things from the past are still valid.

We met again in the summer of 2012. Of a month, we spent ten days in Ushtobe, the first settlement of the Korean Diaspora, and twenty days in Almaty to work on our projects. It was a short journey, but we met about sixty people from the first to the fifth generation of the Korean diaspora. During that time, there was continuous debate on the topic of modernity and memory.

In 2013, we held the first exhibition on the topic in Seoul. We also published a small catalogue. We called this process a starting point. There are still many more stories.



Ushtobe Railway

The Future is Coming

0. The Beginning 2011. 11.

We wanted to connect the stories of the Korean Diaspora to the future rather than staying in the past.

1. The Future?

However, the future was blocked.

I grew up in a world full of ad campaigns such as “Just do it!” and “Now is the time” repeatedly telling me to “do the best today,” and one of the gurus who teaches people to train the mind and body always said in his wise words, “There is no tomorrow, you must live today.” In a world stressing the importance of today, the future was abstract and as someone has said, it might be a “fake” term; it is a vague concept that cannot even predict the weather or plans for tomorrow.

2. Almaty

Almaty is the former capital and the busiest city in Kazakhstan.

In a rich neighborhood on top of a hill, I could see the horizon when the sun was setting. During the whole summer, the sunsets in Almaty colored the sky beautifully, and it reminded me of the sunsets in Los Angeles. Maybe it’s because of the smog in the city.

{2012. 7. 19.

Incheon Airport → Almaty Airport.

Sasha(Alexander Ugay) found me an apartment that I could rent for a month.

They don’t have elevators in buildings up to the fifth floor. The apartment was on the fifth floor.

I saw the statue of an apple, which is the symbol of Almaty, and Russian signs.}

3. Oh there, Ushtobe!

There was a site in Ushtobe, the land that the first arrivers cleared for farming for the future generations. Maybe we will have more of a will to make a bigger and better world in the future when we are in despair than when we are in prosperity.

The Korean-Kazakhs remember the heritages of their family names. The roots were carried on here. An old lady, who was deported at the age of one, says she didn't know that their lives could be history. I thought they are history and heroes.

The younger generations who were the future for the first arrivers still remember the stories of their great grandparents.

The land and the traces are left behind. The whole scene is poignant and yet nostalgic as if it is a part of a dream turned into reality.

And, what now? What do they dream of again for the future? What do their grandchildren dream of, and where?

I'm not sure where they are turning their visions now. They don't come back to the 'motherland' anymore. In Korea, America, Japan, China, or in Europe, they just hope for a new life.

{The time in Ushtobe: Stanislav Lee, a third generation Korean-Kazakh poet and travel guide; and the driver, Victor, are both originally from Ushtobe, and they stayed with us for the first three days of our journey.

The first day:

Just as standing in a forest of skyscrapers can be a horrifying experience, this vast land gave me an agonizing fear and sublimity. The desolation I felt looking at the endless land was suffocating in the same way I feel the closeness in a small narrow space.

The Koryo people (the Korean diaspora in Central Asia) have survived, dug water channels, and planted seeds for their children. For them, the future was not unreal; it was a desperate reality, for their sons and daughters and grandchildren.

On the road, our car was alone.

During the four hour drive, Stanislav kept asking, "Isn't it breathtakingly beautiful?"

He said, "How can anyone not be a poet or an artist if you were born and raised with such surroundings?" Beautiful? It is. But how do I overcome the unfamiliar and foreign energy of a land that I can't seem to manage? What a shabby outsider I am!

We arrived at the first settlement site where the town has disappeared. I felt that our journey had now begun. I saw two gravesites. I saw the hills. Stanislav who was sitting in the front of the car told us that they used to go sledding on the snowy hills. We got out of the car and headed to the graves on the hill. I knelt down and read the carved Korean letters – a record of the birth and death dates of someone – on the steel cross in front of the graves and turned around to see the faraway fields. I turned back again and suggested to Sasha and Stanislav that we bow in front of the graves. This ritual was very important at the moment. I felt that this project had finally began.

The third day:

Here, we are lost every night; like a joke or a comedy.

Since Stanislav and Victor are from Ushtobe, we have a peaceful journey, but day and night, we can't find the right directions.

It resembles our project. The journey makes sense as if it were expected. We look for the roads and get lost. Hence, we take a short break.

Everything turned dark so we were lost for some time and stopped the car. It's dark, it's in the countryside, and as any countryside, it's secluded. Today back at our hostel, the conversation over vodka with Stanislav, who enjoys drinking, may be about Russian poets from the countryside.

The second day:

A week seems to have passed when it's only the second day. Maybe it's because of the land I was looking at for hours on our way here or because of the faraway horizon.

While Stanislav, Sasha, and I were having a conversation at the hostel late at night, we decided to go out into the fields under the stars. It was quite late, but Victor who was taking a rest, unhesitatingly drove the car for us. With an unusually large moon and the bright moonlight, we couldn't see the stars but there was a different feeling in the air. In life, there are those magical nights in which one might dance under the moonlight. We all got out of the car, started walking together for a short moment and then walked separately for a while.

I picked up a few pebbles in the dark; Stanislav was nostalgic about his childhood. Victor, as always, watched us quietly. Sasha had disappeared somewhere, and Stanislav came and said he walked away towards the hill. It was the kind of night that you want to let everything stay as it is at that moment.

7. 28. Saturday.

At the Rainbow Café, we were invited to a party of the second-generation diaspora people who are now grandmothers and grandfathers in the town. They spoke Koryo-mal (the Koryo dialect which is similar to the North Korean dialect) and Russian and doubted my Korean pronunciation. They farmed and raised children all their lives. I felt their joy when they were singing and dancing, and wanted to store up and bring some of that joy back home.

“Make a lot of money and bring us to our motherland,” one lady said. I’m not sure if it’s a motherland they would be content with but I imagine a shift in space to bring them to the East Sea of Korea and have their dances go around on the sand. Pour the heart into a glass of vodka and drink a toast to the grandmothers.

7. 29. Sunday.

Revisit the train station.

History and Heroes: “Who are the modern heroes?” It was the topic of today’s conversation.

Change; Revolution; Early Death; Rebel against the System: Victor Choi is an undying icon of public culture in the former Soviet Union. The idolization of Victor Choi is similar in some aspects to the hero status of Che Guevara. The youth, in a socially unstable and absurd society, hope for a different reality and future by holding on to broken dreams. They are desperate for a voice that speaks for them: a hero, who comes from a similar background, not from a higher status, who sings of hope and cries out for revolution. An action, a step, and a song was a revolution and a culture. His undying soul is the cultural memory. The young soul, that shouted for “change” is still alive. The system has collapsed. But what has changed? Who are the young people waiting for now?



Untitled, 2012, pen on paper, 21 x 14.8 cm



Korean Diaspora Ensemble "Achimnoyl" in Ushtobe, Kazakhstan.

7. 30. Monday.

We revisited the Koryo people's cemetery guided by Vladimir, a powerful man of the town in a position equivalent to a mayor. He offered help since Stanislav, a well-known poet in Ushtobe, introduced us and since he and I shared the heritage of the same family name. The cemetery drew me again with an indescribable thread of connection that I felt there. We stayed under the sunlight for quite a long time.

7. 31. Tuesday

I filmed the river.

I wonder if I can take a flight back when I stay here.

Again, I realize that "contemporary" refers to various time zones.

8. 1. Wednesday

"Goodbye."

As the farewells of the grandmothers lingered in my ears, our short journey to Ushtobe was over. After hours of filming rivers and land, we took the bus back to Almaty.

For the duration of a bus ride of about five hours, the curvy fields outside the bus window filled my view and imprinted their rhythmic ups and downs on my mind.}

4. Kazakhstan

Korea seems more futuristic in appearance than Kazakhstan today.

But the harmony of different races and ethnic minorities in Kazakhstan suggests a more humane and advanced form of culture.

The reason that we started this research project of the Korean Diaspora might be also driven by an obsession with bloodlines. In the many uncertainties about the future, we are depending on our vision and sentiments about our history to find some answers.

Other than those very few people who are free spirited and able to move around freely, the majority of populations migrate due to inescapable forces such as economic or political reasons rather than chosen preferences.

Let's think about it once more: About the future of ourselves and the people of the Korean Diaspora. Since no one knows where the wind blows from or where it is going, we can put our heads in different places and our thoughts cross with those of others.

The dreams of Utopia and of making personal wishes can be put away for a while. Let us think for a moment about the validity and possibility of making a plan in a specific place for the people who we will leave behind. Still before that, let's talk about the possible conditions of a life in the near future in which we can be in harmonious groups, not separated into different ethnicities.

{8. 2. Thursday

Back in Almaty.

We visited the Korean library, but it was closed.

We faced some bureaucratic attitudes here as well.

8. 3. Friday

We heard from Stanislav. He was guiding a group of travelers from Busan (the second largest city in Korea) with the tour title of "The Journey with Poets," and invited us to their seminar where the speakers would be well known first generation Korean-Kazakhs in the community.

The highlight of the day: The meeting with the historical figures of the first generation. The three men in their late eighties who were composers and directors were incredible people as they were sorts of Renaissance men. They were born in Korea, went to North Korea, and studied in the Soviet Union. As they were against the idolization of Kim Il-sung, they asked the Soviet government for protection from North Korea and finally settled in Central Asia. They were elites and great thinkers who were fluent in Korean, Russian, Japanese, Kazak, and some English. They seem to have history engraved on their bodies. The record of history is an integral part of the individual. I had a conversation about Lenin and Stalin, North Korea, and about the future with one of these men, Mr. Jeong Chu, a great composer who studied in the Tchaikovsky School of Music. These outside (expatriate) men are still, in aspiration, watching the nation, our era, and our people.

I also met the editors and publishers of all three Korean and Koryo newspapers in Almaty.

8.10. Friday

I filmed the performance of fifth generation Korean-Kazakh youths in the Koryo Theatre, the oldest theatre for performances in Korean.}

5. Before the Exhibition

We shouldn't move forward too fast. There are unfinished discourses. Like the wandering ghost in Gogol's short story, "The Overcoat," the conditions given by our time are still profound. Most of the fourth and fifth generation youths speak of Korea as a country where you can earn a lot of money like Japan or the United States and they call it a western country.

Sasha couldn't complete his research of a statistic survey of generational changes in occupations. Many young Korean-Kazakh people he approached were not comfortable answering his questions. We were a little puzzled since we thought of it as a simple statistical survey. However, the questions asked of minority people can be uncomfortable to the younger generations who have mingled into the majority culture.

Teul of Taekwondo:

In a taxi in Almaty, Sasha mentioned that he found "Teul" of Taekwondo and wanted to put it in our book as a mnemonic. As I told Sasha that Korean Taekwondo now teaches "Poomsae" as a set of forms, I started wondering what "Teul" is in Taekwondo. We stopped by an Internet café and found that "Teuls" were the basic set of movements in early Taekwondo organized by Choi Hong Hi, the founder of Taekwondo, and named after great historical Korean figures including great kings, generals, and political leaders. We decided to include this early concept of Taekwondo as a historical documentation in the archive section of our book. The patriotism is also implied in Choi Hong Hi's wish that historical figures of Korea be remembered in the form of a marshal art as it becomes more popular.

{2012. 12.

Gravestones: They are the traces and records of the lives of a minority group in an era of upheavals. At the time of their deaths, depending on their living conditions and the social and political systems, the shapes of gravestones would change. As I plan to make replicas of these gravestones, I ponder. How did their wishes for the future and its promises change as time went by?

(I should make) A futuristic portable family urn: It will be a portable memorial with each compartment filled with the cremated ashes of family members as the ashes will be also used in making the urns.

2013. 1.

I shouldn't say "that place" in my statements.

I should say "over there": Where the horizon was softly visible over the land.

Palette: I remember the color of Kazakhstan as ocher, especially in Almaty. In Ushtobe the color green protruded from time to time. People often describe Seoul as a gray city, but in the first year I was back in Seoul, I thought the colors resembled the look of a morning drama series on TV in that they had a vivid color spectrum with no mystery.

2013. 7. 22.

Compared to the auditory and optical senses, the olfactory sense is obviously more sensitively connected to wakening memories, but I realized that the sense of taste is also quite accurate in that function. I find myself craving Guksi, a dialect name for the Korean noodle dish, Guksu that is topped with meat, tomatoes, and cucumbers, a dish which I often had that summer in Kazakhstan as it was so easy to find in almost any restaurant there.

While I was there, I thought the energy from the land of a big continent was too strong for me to live there, but without understanding how my body adjusted to life there, some experiences stayed with me exactly one year later. Maybe there was a connection with the sentimentalities of the Kazakh nomads. In the humid weather of the summer days, I miss the crisp Kazakhstani light falling on my body.}

6. After the Show

I started this project with a mind of an excavator but at this point I cannot help feeling that the exhibition just seemed like a noble play. Although we said it was a starting point, we didn't even unfold one third of what we had in mind.

{2013. 5. 25.

On the last day of the exhibition, one of the scholars from the Korean Diaspora came to visit and lightly scolded me for not paying attention to the network of Koryo laborers in the Ansan and Dongdaemun areas who are returned Koryo people – I wasn't really sure whether we should say that they came back. My excuse was that I didn't want to start the storytelling of the Korean Diaspora as if I were going to start a study of Koreans in Korea towns in foreign countries.

But I remembered later that before I went to Kazakhstan, in the beginning of this project, I did meet and have conversations with some of the Koryo laborers from Central Asia over dinner. One of them was a friend of Sasha. They were also hesitant to answer the survey since they were concerned that it might influence their stay in Korea. There wasn't any questionnaire about complaints or discomforts in Korea, but we understood their caution.

However, some guksi I had in an alley of Dongdaemun on the last day of the exhibition seemed as good as a bowl of Korean soft tofu stew I had in the L.A. Korea town. The Uzbek Koryo student who went with us disagreed strongly.}

Peace, Harmony, Racial Mixture - the words I wrote as the first impression in Kazakhstan.

Namsi (Koryo-mal dialect for naemsae which means smell in Korean) is a word that the generations of Koryo people, who remember Koryo-mal (Korean dialect) and call Korea the "motherland," often use to describe their feelings.

Excerpts from the written interview, "Artist as Cultural Researcher," published in the art magazine, Article issue #34, May 2014:

The perspectives of the future and reflections on reality by the Korean-Kazakh young people were not very different from those of Korean young people. As Korean young people in their twenties learn about the Japanese colonial time and the Korean War by education, Korean-Kazakh young people hear their history of deportation as it is passed down to them by their grandparents and great grandparents. To the fifth generation, the forced deportation happened almost 80 years ago and although it is an unforgettable incident, it's not a memory that they felt or experienced themselves. Nevertheless, they cannot be identified with Korean young people as being in the same "globalized youth generation" although they share similar concerns about the present and the future. The identity of a minority group doesn't disappear; it is partly covered by others but still continues on.

...

The older generations' opinions of the former Soviet Union was also different from what I expected. There are now some conditions to be considered among the countries that share a border with Russia, but there are people who miss the Soviet time with their faith and belief in Socialism. There are also generations who prioritize the status of a citizen of Kazakhstan. Of course there are individual differences, but their lives and perspectives, which were not revealed on the statistical data, sometimes astonish me. There were many incredible thinkers among the older generation who participated in the future plans and space exploration.

...

In Korea, we forget that there are ethnic Koreans outside watching us. They don't live in the same land, but they still have their ethnic identity that they have preserved or sometimes, they are labeled so by others. When we are in Korea, we compare our nation with other countries, but they are looking at us with the connection of the same ethnicity. There are people who believe the language maintains the identity of an ethnic group, but even after the language is lost, they continue their attempts to make connections to their ethnic roots through new media such as Internet.

THE FUTURE IS COMING FROM ALL DIRECTIONS, exhibition view, Gallery175, Seoul, 2013

