

"Catching the Wave: Connecting East Asia Through Soft Power,"  
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### **Storytelling and Human Connectivity: Songs of Korean Diaspora”**

By

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That the Asian nations are engaged in cultural import and export activities is one thing, representation of Asia is another. Athletic activities, goods and pop cultures actively cross Asian national borders, with Korea recently elevated to a kind of stardom, but “Asia” remains selective and disconnected a concept. For example, the American mainstream academic visions are overwhelmingly lopsided between overrepresentation of a few and underrepresentation of the rest. The academic and cultural maps show East Asia as basically two nations: China and Japan. Lopsided representation of Asia breeds academic and intellectual biases among future generations. The powers vested in arts and humanities should be used to help strike balance in our world by representing the underrepresented as much as possible. An exercise of “soft power” against selective truths, storytelling is a great way to represent peoples, places, and historical understandings. My own work builds on *p’ansori*, storysinging tradition from ancient Korea. The *Song of Hûngbo*, one of the five remaining narratives still performed, upholds the theme of “when hard time’s done, pleasure returns.” In the story, the older brother Nolbo banishes the younger brother Hûngbo from their family home, but Hûngbo never strays from fulfilling the Confucian respect for his older brother. Heaven rewards Hûngbo with great wealth and happiness. Today, while some postmodernists liken Nolbo’s inhumanity and non-giving to modern capitalist bent and Hûngbo’s non-resentment and giving to classic loser mentality, the tenet of traditional morality stays, and the story of Hûngbo remains a telltale of goodness and hope in the face of adversity. The displacement, trial, and tribulation of the character Hûngbo came to represent those of the Korean diaspora spread throughout the world in my recent *p’ansori*-style plays. In *In 1903, Pak Hûngbo Went to Hawaii*, the first of its kind premiered at the Centennial Celebration of Korean immigration to America (January 13, 2003), Hûngbo’s homeless wandering represents that of many Koreans displaced as the Japan’s colonial aggression intensified on the Korean peninsular at the turn of the twentieth century. Hûngbo joins the first batch of Koreans contracted to work in the sugar plantations of Hawaii, the official beginning of the Korean immigration to America in 1903. The character of Hûngbo resurrects in my two-act play, *Pak Hûngbo Went to Almaty*, dedicated to the 70th year anniversary of Korean deportation and resettlement in Kazakhstan (Almaty, July 14, 2007). The historic Soviet ethnic cleansing began first of Koreans of the Far East.<sup>1</sup> Below, I read the Act One chronicling the Stalinist execution of “power,” invocation of the forgotten history of the deaths and deportations of Koreans.

(Dombra play)

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<sup>1</sup>References in English include: *The Koreans of Kazakstan: An Illustrated History 1937-1997*, published by the Association of the Koreans of Kazakstan, 1997; *Korô saram*, documentary film by David Chung (2006).

*Spoken: History repeats itself.*

*Those with power brandish their whims on those with lesser strengths,  
But justice prevails,  
The trials and triumphs of the Korean diaspora of Central Asia is a bittersweet  
example.*

*Flying north out of Almaty on a sunny Sunday morning during my last trip home,  
I captured through the thin filmy air outside the window,  
The aerial views of the geography called Central Asia,  
Thirty-five thousand feet below  
Stretched several aeronautical hours of seeming nowhere-ness,  
This is where, in 1937, under the grand scheme of Deportation,  
They ejected Koreans, practically from the running trains  
many thousand miles from their home away from home in the Far East,  
They were abandoned,  
Young and old, men and women, living, dying, the already cold,  
Like the flicks of dust,  
Like scabs off wounded flesh,  
Like human rejects,  
Like nothings.*

*From the dugouts, abandoned barns, pigpens, and other sites of gloom and  
ghastly condemnation,  
Koreans survived to tell their stories.*

*Korean migration to the Far East began in the mid-nineteenth century,  
When Russia began populating Koreans there to make the barren land habitable.  
And when Russia began granting them citizenships under the Russo-Korean treaty,  
By sea, by land and across Tuman-gang,  
In avoidance of starvation and the Japanese colonial aggression,  
Thousands more Koreans arrived with hopes and aspirations,  
For a life more bearable, meaningful, and dignified.*

*(Actors, dressed as Korean migrants, some wearing bundles on their backs, some  
carrying in their arms, enter. They move slowly chanting the refrain.)*

*Song: Arirang, arirang, arariyo.  
I go over the Arirang hill.*

- 1. With a bundle on my back, I go over Paektusan Hill.*
- 2. Father, Mother, hurry, they say the soil in North Kando is good.*
- 3. Who took my jade soil, and left me a beggar's gourd?*
- 4. He who argues well went to court, and he who works well went to grave.*
- 5. Enemy, enemy, my enemy, he with the gun is my enemy.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> A version of arirang of Sangju regional style, from Kim Sohûi's folksong collection.

*Spoken: But,*

*In the wake of the Soviet ethnic cleansing,  
A saddest case of modern genocide,  
Koreans were the first to be targeted.  
The betrayal of so much enthusiasm, hope, and good will  
Came as a top secret order,  
Signed by Molotov and Stalin, August 21, 1937.*

*More than 2800 Korean leaders and intellectuals were executed,  
More than 172,000 Koreans,  
Squeezed like sardines into the rusty old livestock cars,  
Asking the moon and the stars through the holes in the ceiling, “Why?”  
Chilled to the marrow by the Siberian winter cold,  
With clothing and food to last a month and no more,  
Caring for the sick, the elderly, the children, and the pregnant,  
All headed west to the abysmal depths of the unknown.  
Many perished during the ride,  
Many more died where their rides ended.*

*Song: Ariarirang, sŭriŭrirang, arariga nanne.  
Arirang ūmŭmŭm arariga nanne.*

- 1 Where is our destination in this desolate field?  
Frozen by the north wind, where are we going?*
- 2 Train, Train, heartless Train,  
Bend after bend, tears upon tears.*
- 3 Horses and cows bound for the butcher house,  
Your fate, my fate, one and the same.*
- 4 Indifferent heaven, heartless earth,  
What is happening to us Koryo-saram-dŭl!<sup>3</sup>*

*(The actors end with a uniform gesture the train has stopped. Dombra play)*

*Spoken: The train pulled into Kazakhstan.  
The Kazakhs, our Altaic kin from the times immemorial,  
their hearts big as their steppes and round as their kitchen table,  
despite the Soviet’s stern orders not to aid Koreans,  
and the Little October, the historic famine that took millions of their lives,  
opened their doors to share what little they had with their Korean neighbors.*

*From their Motherland and through the days in the Far East,*

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<sup>3</sup> Music is the Arirang of Chindo regional style, the verses are my own.

*farming was for Koreans a way of building future for their children and grandchildren.*

*In their new settlements, Koreans rekindled their hopes and good will, and*

*(In recitative)*

*Tilled and sowed, planted and transplanted,  
weeded and watered and harvested crops.*

*Song: Rice, cotton, sugar beets, turnips,*

*Peppers, onions, taros, pumpkins,*

*Eggplants, cucumbers, cabbages, chives,*

*Lettuces, carrots, kkaennip, ssukat...*

*(Drumming begins, and the song develops into an exuberant circle dance. End of*

*Act One)*

*(From Chan E. Park, *Pak Hûngbo Went to Almaty*, 2007)*