

# Gobonji as a Phenomenon of Ethnic Entrepreneurship among the Koryo-saram in the Soviet Second Economy\*

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## Abstract

*This article aims to make clear the nature of gobonji as a form of the Soviet second economy and to clarify its major constant and variable features as a kind of ethnic entrepreneurship. The most distinguishing characteristic of gobonji is that it was exclusively practiced by Koryo-saram (ethnic Koreans in Central Asia). Thus, one cannot deny the importance of gobonji in that practically all Soviet Koreans were engaged in it, or at least familiar with it, in one way or another during the Soviet period. Koreans acquired their first skills in entrepreneurship through gobonji, which created the initial material and financial basis for active integration into the market economy of the post-Soviet period. Gobonji also played a role in preserving the ethnic specificity of Koryo-saram, including elements of their traditional culture and native tongue.*

**Keywords:** *gobonji*, central Asia, ethnic Koreans, Koryo-saram, second economy, ethnic entrepreneurship

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## Introduction

For over a century and a half, the history of the Koryo-saram (ethnic Koreans in Central Asia) has been permanently mobile, both territorially and socially, and they themselves can be called eternal wanderers. An incomplete history of the movements of the Koryo-saram includes migrating to the Russian Far East from Korea, resettling from the Korean border regions to the northern regions of Russia, being deported to Kazakhstan and Central Asia, adapting to their new lands, enduring labor army mobilization, relocating the Korean *kolkhoz*, seasonal migrating associated with the ethnic entrepreneurship called *gobonji* (*kobonji* in McCune-Reischauer), and urbanizing as Soviet Koreans, each of which involved radical changes in their social structure.

During the Soviet period, Central Asian Koreans used their hard work and yearning for success to transform themselves from uneducated rural people into an urbanized ethnic group characterized by a high level of education and professional qualification. In the post-Soviet era, the non-material achievements of the Koryo-saram, alongside the financial well-being they acquired through *gobonji* and their ability to get on well with other surrounding ethnic groups, allowed Koreans to adapt to market conditions less painfully than other groups. From the 1960s until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Koreans began to move from rural regions to urban areas and widely practiced *gobonji*. *Gobonji* is a compound word consisting of the noun *gobon* and the suffix *ji*. The word *gobon* 股本<sup>1</sup> is an archaic Sino-Korean word and, according to the *Pyojun gugeo daesajeon* (Great Dictionary of the Standard Korean Language), means an investor's share or portion in a joint business venture or a document proving such a share. The word-forming suffix *ji* (*jil* in standard Korean and *jiri* in the Koryo language spoken by Central Asian Koreans) means to denote some kind of action or occupation.

But over time, this original meaning of *gobonji* seems to have changed, and according to the testimony of *gobonji* operators themselves, the precise definition of *gobonji* has become unclear; typically, *gobon* designates the

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1. *Pyojun gugeo daesajeon* (Great Dictionary of the Standard Korean Language), s.v. “고본,” accessed July 8, 2015, <http://stdweb2.korean.go.kr/search/View.jsp>.

land area tilled by an individual family unit that participates in a communal business undertaking called *gobonji*. But this definition does not mean that a *gobon* is a unit of land measurement. According to the farming abilities of an individual family and according to the size of the overall land area tilled by a *purigada* (Russian *brigada* or brigade), the actual area of a *gobon* can fluctuate. For example, if a *gobonji* composed of ten family units leases a total of 30 hectares, then in theory the average amount of land allotted to each family unit will be three hectares. However, because each family unit can differ in its individual farming abilities, the actual amount of land area per household can be more or less than three hectares. Thus, although the average three hectares of land allotted to each household would be a *gobon*, the size of each *gobon* can differ depending on the actual conditions of *gobonji* production. Individual households typically farm just one *gobon*, but households particularly rich in working hands can sometimes work two *gobon*. Such cases are expressed by the Koryo-saram as: “*i beon-e han gobon metta*” (This time I was allotted one *gobon*) or “*du gobon metta*” (This time I was allotted two *gobon*). Thus, *gobonji* is an agricultural activity that cultivates land allocated in this fashion and is characterized by the fact that the actual cultivation itself is carried out individually within the brigade as a kind of subcontract (Back 2004).

Relatedly, during the Soviet period, the so-called *seraya ekonomika* or “grey economy” (second economy) and ethnic entrepreneurship were not subjects for scholarly research, except for understanding them as a “manifestation of the bourgeois distortion of Soviet reality” (Khavina and Superfin 1986, 104–112). However, recently some fragmentary notes about specific business activities of Soviet Koreans can be found in a number of works by local and foreign authors (Kim 1993, 125–138; 2000, 324). Furthermore, in the last decade, some journalists and scholars from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and South Korea have demonstrated a closer interest in this issue (Back 2004, 45–89).

Nevertheless, taking into consideration the lack of such studies, we aim to make clear the nature of *gobonji* as a form of the Soviet second economy and clarify its major characteristics as a kind of ethnic entrepreneurship. To do so, we organize this article as follows. First, we define the concept of

*gobonji* and examine its basic organization and operating mechanisms. Next, we give several indications that *gobonji* was a form of the Soviet second economy. Then, we look at the features of *gobonji* as a kind of ethnic entrepreneurship. Finally, in conclusion, we summarize the implications of *gobonji* on the basis of our analysis and discuss the changing features of *gobonji* in transition after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

## The Definition and Organization of *Gobonji*

### *The Definition of Gobonji*

Several authors have attempted to define the main concepts of *gobonji*, and we will give our own interpretation. One of the first publications devoted to *gobonji* was a book by Geron N. Li that contains good empirical material collected by the author from different oral and written sources. The book is not of an academic character but rather is a collection of different materials and data with the author's comments in some cases. The author, referring to the works of some scholars, mentions two traditional forms of land rent in Korea and the Russian Far East. The first—*sojakji* 小作地—is an individual form of leasing plots of land that was widespread at the end of the nineteenth century. The second—*gobonji*—is a collective form of leasing that appeared after the deportation of Koreans to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. According to Li, the essence of *gobonji* is “a form of labor organization based on the mutual interests of the performers of a task (work team) and the customer (*kolkhoz* or *sovkhos*) to produce bigger quantities of final products” (2000, 143–144).

On another page in his book, Li admits that *gobonji* appeared in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic in the period of 1941–45, and the first *gobonji* workers were self-employed or independent:

Independent Korean farms, not engaged in *kolkhoz* production on agreement with leaders of the *kolkhoz* in the Bukinskii region of the Uzbek SSR, started to explore marshy lands on the territory of *kolkhoz*. (Li 2000,

143–144)<sup>2</sup>

On still another page discussing *gobonji* during the post-deportation years, the author writes that the area of its origin was not limited to the Uzbek SSR:

It was then that in some regions of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and the autonomous republics of Northern Caucuses, a mass movement of Korean peasants—*gobonji*—was born. (Li 2000, 192)

In addition, one of the first foreign studies to deal with the ethnic entrepreneurship of Soviet Koreans was a book by Songmoo Kho. Although he does not use the term *gobonji*, he explains that the newspaper *Lenin Kichi* often used the notions of “team contract” and “collective contract” or “brigade trust system” and “collective trust system.” Explaining the meaning of these terms, he writes:

This system denotes that the contract between the administrative authority and production workers is concluded concerning the quantity and quality of products, and workers receive their earnings on the basis of the sub-contract. In other words, the workers don't have a salary before they complete the work; payment is made by its results. (Kho 1986, 76–77)

After the appearance of Koh's monograph, around 15 years passed before South Korean scholar Thae Hyeon Back began to study *gobonji*. In his dissertation, Back explains the term as follows:

*Gobonjil* [*gobonji*] is a mobile lease form of land cultivation in which a Korean farmer, having made a team on the basis of family cells, performs the whole process of agricultural activity from production itself to selling the products raised on the leased land, situated at either a far or near distance and mainly outside the permanent place of residence of this farmer. (Back 2001, 39)

On the other hand, Valery Khan, scholar from Uzbekistan, does attempt to explain the term by giving his own definitive description. Instead, he writes,

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2. All English translations from Russian sources are the first author's unless stated otherwise.

“As is commonly known, *gobonji* is a specific (semilegal) form of lease land cultivation by the Soviet Koreans” (Khan 2005, 123). In another article, his description is even shorter: “*Gobonji*: lease pendulum vegetable growing in which many Koreans were engaged” (Khan 2007, 101). Yet, in a more recent article, he mentions, “*gobonji* proved its value as a form of entrepreneurial activity in agriculture and came to be recognized from high rostrums, from which Koreans were given credit for being pioneers” (Khan 2009, 180–182).

Finalizing the discussion around the definition of the key word *gobonji*, we are proposing its conceptual essence condensed into one sentence: *Gobonji is a kind of ethnic entrepreneurship originally practiced by Soviet Koreans and with specific characteristics concerning the semilegal cultivation of vegetables (onions) and fruits (watermelons) based on the collective leasing of land, headed by a brigade leader, and connected with seasonal territorial migration.*

### *The Organization and Operation of Gobonji*

The main principle of the Soviet agricultural economy was collectivism, as opposed to a farmer’s individualism. The collective relationship to the means of production (first and foremost, to the land) and the goods produced along with joint labor was for the purpose of cultivating a feeling of socialist equality among *kolkhoz* workers, and the main labor groups in Soviet agriculture and industry were the *zveno* and brigades (Pospelovsky 1988, 437–438).

The *zveno*, or *link* concept, is almost as old as collectivization itself, but it has changed considerably. A *zveno* is a primary work unit of three to eight people on both state and collective farms that can have various degrees of autonomy. This relatively small, informal, and *personal* type of farming allows the workers to recognize and feel responsible for the whole production cycle on a particular piece of land rather than for a single type of operation. The other and more prevalent principle is the larger brigades, based on the division of labor: each brigade deals with a particular operation on a different section of the farm (one area today, another tomorrow). Brigades

are paid by piece work and do not depend on the final products, except that the total income of the parent farm might depend on the work of each brigade. Thus, the brigade system invokes no direct correlation between the income criteria of the farm as a whole and that of each individual member of the farm.

The collective leasing of the land through a *gobonji* was realized through brigades of families, from a minimum of eight to ten to a maximum of 25 to 30, comprised primarily of relatives or good friends. While a brigade was characterized by the rotation of its members, its blood-related core, however, was permanent. Conventionally, brigades came in two types: the first being a brigade of mainly close relatives, and the second type being composed of friends and acquaintances. However, the two types did not differ greatly from each other.

Usually, a brigade leader composed the brigade in one of two ways. The first way was more characteristic of a brigade of relatives, and these brigades were formed long before the beginning of a field season, i.e., before leaving the place of permanent residence. In this type of brigade, all members knew one another, and they repeatedly went as one brigade to earn money. The second way to form a brigade was to agree with a *kolkhoz* about land leasing first and then form a brigade depending on the size of the plot. Irrespective of the way a brigade was formed, each brigade member was free to join or quit a brigade on his own will.<sup>3</sup>

Undoubtedly, as a labor collective, the solidarity of a brigade based on blood relations was much stronger than that of a production brigade. Observations and interviews with respondents from rank-and-file brigade members and leaders demonstrate that in a brigade of relatives all problems and difficulties could be jointly overcome, and a brigade member, especially a woman or a newcomer to a *gobonji*, was provided all-around support and advice.

Clearly, the *gobonji* did not originate out of nowhere; it grew up within the *kolkhoz* system, where a brigade leader was a very important figure. The

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3. Fieldwork by the authors in Ushtobe, 2005. Informants are Yun Sergei Grigoryevich, Chen Moisei Danilovich, and Pak Nikolay Alexandrovich.

role of the brigade leader in *gobonji* was even more significant than in a *kolkhoz* because he made all the important decisions. That an experienced, well-respected brigade leader was called *bugor*<sup>4</sup> among the common people was not by chance since a brigade leader was a man who had to possess numerous professional skills and personal traits of character not only to rationally organize the production process but also to preserve an atmosphere of tolerance and unity among the members of his brigade. If a year turned out to be successful (profitable) and members of a brigade were content with the results of their labor, the leader could keep his titled position. A brigade leader who could find a common language with local authorities, agree about all necessary issues, and organize field work and the quick selling of the crops at high prices soon became well known.

However, while talented brigade leaders were esteemed, according to the interviews and stories of the people who practiced *gobonji* for many years, becoming a member of a brigade with an experienced and competent leader was no simple matter. Because the number of brigade members was limited to an optimal size, aspiring members had to be recommended to the brigade leader and wait for available vacancies. Legends existed about extremely lucky *bugor*. Sometimes an experienced and lucky brigade leader had two or even three brigades simultaneously. Similar to agriculture as a whole, the success of *gobonji* in many ways depended on weather conditions, and any brigade could face failure. If such failure happened in two successive years, a brigade would come apart.

To achieve a successful brigade, all brigade leaders were entrusted with several functional tasks: (1) the choice of region and agricultural crops for the *gobonji*; (2) the terms and conditions for land lease, agricultural machinery, and labor hiring; (3) the provision of materials for construction of temporary dwellings, fertilizers, and food products; (4) the observation of the cycle of fieldwork; (5) the sale of crops; and (6) keeping order in the brigade and guaranteeing the security of its members.

Additionally, the brigade leader had the right to convene a brigade meeting or set certain rules to make the activities of a brigade efficient,

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4. Originally, *bugor* meant a person with indisputable authority in criminal groups.



maintain the working atmosphere, and promote friendly relations among members and between the brigade and the local population. A general meeting of a brigade was called as needed to discuss issues related to production activities.<sup>5</sup>

With regard to the performance of his many functions, a brigade leader was remunerated or compensated for his work by his brigade members. When a brigade was small, a brigade leader had a *gobon*, like the others, but he did not have to pay his share of the total payment for leasing the land from the *kolkhoz*. If a brigade were large, the brigade leader had too much responsibility and too many functions for him to work land and participate directly in the production process. In such cases, brigade members remunerated him. In general, brigade leaders with great experience in *gobonji* became wealthy.

### **Gobonji as a Second Economy of the USSR**

#### *The Marginal and Semilegal Character of Gobonji*

In Soviet agriculture, the key words were “to collectivize, to mechanize, and to specialize.” To accomplish these tasks, all farms were organized as either collective (*kolkhoz*) or state (*sovkhov*) farms. The number of collective farms declined from 67,700 in 1958 to 39,800 in 1962, whereas the number of state farms increased from 3,171 in 1958 to 4,606 in 1962. In 1961, the average sown area for collectives was about 6,600 acres and for state farms about 23,800 acres. Although Soviet authorities expected a single type of farm to eventually prevail, its exact nature had not been made explicit. State farms appeared highly favored in principle, but there was considerable pride in the relative independence of the collectives. This fact, along with the larger capital investment per worker required on state farms, accounts for the reported

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5. Fieldwork by the authors in Ushtobe, 2005; Almaty, 2006; Ushtobe-Almaty, 2007. Informants are Yun Sergei Grigoryevich, Chen Moisei Danilovich, and Pak Nikolay Alexandrovich.

1.8 times higher productivity per worker on state farms than on collective farms (Baker and Swanson 1964, 36).

Thus, the two main pillars of agricultural production under the Soviet system were the *kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz*. But contrary to original expectations, over time these institutions experienced steady declines in both efficiency and production. The agricultural production quotas of the collective farms were determined in the context of the overall planned economy, and agricultural produce was supplied to cities at prices lower than the market price. The members of the collective farms were thus bound to suffer considerable difficulties because of the system of exploitation carried out by the socialist middle class under the cloak of socialist principles (Luxenburg 1971; Newth 1961; Nove 1970; Prybyla 1962; Volin 1959).

Although *kolkhoz* participants contributed their labor and knowledge to the production process, members of *gobonji* brigades had to contribute considerable financial resources as well. *Kolkhoz* members were protected by the state in case of bad crops caused by weather conditions or other reasons. In contrast, *gobonji* brigade members bore their losses collectively, disregarding their own individual faults. Neither a brigade as a whole nor any member of it could expect any state compensation for their losses regardless of the cause.

It was not infrequent that conflicts occurred between a *kolkhoz* and a brigade. Usually it happened when a *kolkhoz* chairman demanded more than had been agreed upon in the contract. In that instance, the brigade was always the loser because it was common practice to accuse a brigade leader or brigade member of a crime for violating laws or legal regulations. Brigade members themselves admitted that, in the process of operating a *gobonji*, they had to violate existing laws because if they had stuck to them fully, the *gobonji* would have been impossible to carry out and lost its purpose, i.e., gaining maximum profit.

Furthermore, in compiling agreements with *gobonji* brigades, *kolkhoz* chairmen themselves often violated laws because they were also interested in obtaining personal profit from such deals. Unsurprisingly, all participants came up with various ways to evade the laws. For instance, *gobonji* brigades were made to appear as *kolkhoz* production units on paper with

established plans, tasks, and wages. Similar papers forged by *kolkhoz* chairmen were used for selling *gobonji* crops.

### *The Leasing of Land and Its Arrangement*

The principal issue for *gobonji* was land, and the lease terms for an arable irrigated plot depended on many circumstances. Final results, to a great extent, depended on correctly choosing a region, *kolkhoz*, and land. Since all USSR regions were divided according to soil fertility, the better the quality of land, the higher the rent.

In addition, during the Soviet period, the agreements concluded between *kolkhoz* and Korean brigades were outside the framework of land leasing relations. The whole bloc of agreements and arrangements were often the outcome of many negotiations between a *kolkhoz* chairman and a brigade leader. An experienced leader always tried to protect his brigade against unexpected circumstances and to include as many material/financial responsibilities guaranteed by a *kolkhoz* as he could in the texts of agreements. Although the land was the most important means of production, success could not be achieved without an effective solution to a number of issues such as: the conditions for using agricultural machinery, irrigation systems and water, and fertilizer supplies; the provision of construction materials for temporary dwellings; and the supply of foodstuff and transportation of harvested crops. While *kolkhoz* brigades received all of these provisions for free since all expenses were included in *kolkhoz* plans and all means were allocated for them, for the Korean brigades such cost-free allocations might or might not be the case, depending on the mechanisms of the *second* (informal, shadow) economy. For instance, a local tractor driver using a *kolkhoz* tractor and fuel might plow the Koreans' plot for three rubles' cash or a bottle of vodka—its equivalent. Likewise, a *merab* responsible for watering *kolkhoz* fields might direct water to the Korean land out of turn (Mamedov 1969; Shumakov 1969).

Since only the main points of land leasing regulations were reflected in the agreements, foreseeing all details was impossible. Besides, both the *kolkhoz* chairman and the brigade leader wanted to reserve some freedom of

action for their own interests. As a rule, the parties reached consensus on all disputes, but if a mutual agreement was not reached, the aggrieved party was, of course, a semilegal brigade of land tenants.

Moreover, the method for calculating land lease costs and forms of payment varied by time and region. At the initial stage of *gobonji*, payment was in kind, i.e., a *kolkhoz* received some part of the produce, usually half. Gradually, *kolkhoz* started to transition to cash payments. However, even when in-kind payment was common practice, selling its crops at the state purchase price or the *kolkhoz* market price was more profitable for a brigade than giving them to the *kolkhoz* at a lower price. Both in past and current practice, the amount and form of land lease payment varies by region. As a rule, payments are made in cash after sale of the grown products. The total amount for the land consists of shares paid by each member of a brigade for a plot, collected by the brigade leader. Each member's share also includes expenses for the collective use of agricultural machinery, water for irrigation, electricity and other materials, and goods and services necessary for the production process.

In terms of the use of leased land, a common piece of land leased by a *gobonji* brigade is distributed among its members based on the cultivating possibilities of each member and the size of his family. Technically, plots are distributed by casting lots. However, if a brigade member decides to get a *gobon* for himself alone, he can do so without casting a lot. Notably, the most favorable plots of land are those close to an access road.

### *The Selling of Produce*

It is well known that the losses of produce grown under the Soviet economy were huge. Grain burnt on *kolkhoz* threshing floors was spilled on the roads during transportation, and vegetables rotted in storage places or during long-distance transportation all over the country. With such losses, *gobonji* would be ineffectual.

Thus, in *gobonji*, all stages of production were important, but final results depended on successfully selling the products. *Gobonji* profit came from the difference between the resources invested, including labor, and the

income from the sold produce. Both during the Soviet period and after its dissolution, products were sold individually, that is, by each member of the brigade and his family. However, in Soviet times, the brigade leader had the very important function of delivering cultivated onions and vegetables to the *kolkhoz* in payment for land and to state vegetable storage facilities at purchase prices. According to informants, sometimes experienced brigade leaders managed to sell their products to *kolkhoz* in regions where vegetable production targets had fallen short. In those cases, prices for vegetables were higher than those a *kolkhoz* landholder paid. Accordingly, such deals were mutually beneficial. As a rule, after most *gobonji* products were sold in this way, some were left as a personal share for each member of the brigade to sell quickly and profitably.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, in the Soviet Union, it was extremely difficult for individuals to sell agricultural products to the state or to other individuals at free prices. But a network existed of local *kolkhoz* and municipal retail markets that sold meat, dairy products, vegetables, and fruit. In addition to the established official norms of Soviet trade, such markets had their own rules. The first rule concerned obtaining places at the market, which were limited and therefore difficult to obtain at the height of the vegetable and fruit season. Local sellers usually controlled such places. Thus, Koreans either had to sell their produce to market-stand holders, but at prices lower than in the market, or find other ways of obtaining a place and selling for themselves at a high price. Sometimes, Koreans made barter deals, i.e., they exchanged products for vinyl film, construction materials, or small agricultural machinery. Selling at markets usually took 25 or 50 days, but if there was too much stock of vegetables for local consumption, the seller had to stay until the New Year holidays to sell everything. In addition, the burden of selling in the markets was borne mostly by women, who tended the counters while men brought in goods from the fields, unloaded them, and arranged small batch sales (Hanson 1964; Karcz 1964; Whitman 1956).

Because they were prohibited from selling products other than in legal markets, *kolkhoz* members, including *gobonji* Koreans, sometimes violated

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6. Fieldwork by the authors in Almaty, 2006.

the regulations. The risk was great: their goods could be confiscated, and a heavy fine could be imposed. Still stricter were measures and fines that could be levied when products were transported from the fields to the city because the transport police, who checked loads and their accompanying documents, controlled all roads. In the absence of proper documentation, punishment was not a fine but penal sanctions for stealing *kolkhoz* property.

Before Gorbachev's Perestroika, when *gobonji* was only semilegal, transportation of agricultural products entailed numerous problems and difficulties that only increased with distance. First, loading watermelons or onions in the fields was not easy. The *Kolkhoz* chairman demanded that nothing be taken from the fields until payment for the land had been made. Payment could be delayed; however, the harvest had to be sold as quickly as possible. Therefore, Koreans often removed their vegetables secretly at night. Sometimes, sales authorization documents, which were usually issued by *kolkhoz* authorities, also had problems.

## **Gobonji as a Kind of Ethnic Entrepreneurship in the Soviet Economy**

### *The Ethnic Indications of Gobonji*

#### 1) Historical Learning-by-Doing and the Cultural Features of an Ethnic Group

The remarks of some Russian authors in the late nineteenth century who observed and studied the lives of Korean peasant settlers in the Russian Far East illustrate the specificity of the ethnic and cultural features of Koreans. D. I. Shreider, in his book *Nash Dal'nii Vostok* (Our Far East), describes the village of Tizinkhe, one of the oldest and largest settlements of Koreans in Maritime province (Primorsky Krai) at that time.

Two or three *verst*<sup>7</sup> before it we had to pass well-cultivated fields without the least sign of weeds. The appearance of the village was different from

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7. An old Russian unit of distance equal to approximately 1.6 km.

villages of the European type. . . . Judging by descriptions of the other village of Yanchikhe, other Korean settlements in the region looked much the same. (Shreider 1897, 153)

Descriptions of the methods of land cultivation used by Korean peasants are also interesting:

Crops were made in rows with the distance between seedbeds being from 12 *vershok* to 1 *arshin* [from 56 to 70 cm].<sup>8</sup> Every year, rows themselves and spaces between rows were alternated. . . . Sowing was performed with the help of a special device—a small cylinder with holes in it, through which one or two seeds got directly into a furrow. Simple and economical. The evenness of sowing was nearly ideal. Every year, the sorts of crops were changed, and it was compulsory to alternate them with legumes. Spaces between rows were thoroughly worked . . . crop capacity was high though the fields were mostly small as the majority of Korean peasants did not possess livestock, and labor was mainly manual. (Nasekin 1904, 13-14)

Shreider writes further, “Russian settlers stuck to a different crop rotation and did not work the land so thoroughly. As a result, they need more seeds, and their crop is at least four times worse” (1897, 172).

More than a century later, a journalist named Sel’khozcoreitsy was assigned the task of writing an article about the food (vegetable) supply in Orsk oblast in the Urals. After meetings and talks with Russian hired workers and heads of the local *sovkhos* and city market, the author asks a logical question:

I wonder why our *sovkhos* are unprofitable, but Koreans on the same land can make a profit without any agricultural equipment and state assistance? Why cannot a Russian man work the land himself but is willing to become a hired labor? So, he would be fed, given shelter, but not himself, not using his own brains and without any personal respon-

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8. *Vershok* and *arshin* are old Russian linear measurement units used before the introduction of metric units. One *vershok* is equal to approximately 4.4 cm, and 16 *vershok* make 1 *arshin*.

sibility. (Sel'khozcoreitsy, n.d.)

Since Koreans had been practicing irrigated farming and had acquired great experience in vegetable cultivation, *gobonji* was not a matter of chance but of logic. According to the state plan, the Korean *kolkhoz* cultivated rice, wheat, rye, and barley, as well as industrial crops, such as sugarcane, kenaf, cotton, and potato. However, all Korean families grew vegetables and other plants in their home gardens in addition to the collective fields. Koreans were especially skilled in cultivating onions and watermelons, which were the main produces of *gobonji*. The hard work, intensive agricultural methods, and knowhow of Korean brigades led to harvests three to five times greater than the fixed state plan. Therefore, *gobonji* has long remained a unique form of Korean entrepreneurship in that no other ethnic groups were able to compete successfully.

## 2) Farming Management and Agrotechniques

Analysis of the data received from informants engaged in *gobonji* for many years as well as our personal observations reveal other specific peculiarities of Korean management and agrotechnical methods. When growing main crops, such as watermelons and onions, and other vegetables, the decisive factor is thorough weeding and watering. Koreans used these two agrotechnical methods on their own plots of land more often than were used in *kolkhoz* fields. However, regular watering of each *gobon* was not a simple matter because irrigation water was limited and allotted using a priority system. Thus, the issue of irrigation was often on the agenda of general brigade meetings.

To effectively irrigate plots, labor-intensive operations were necessary, some of which were performed collectively by a brigade, and some of which were performed individually on each *gobon*. First, the brigade worked collectively with machinery to make a common plot of land even and create a small irrigation system. *Aryk* (small irrigation ditches) passed along the perimeter of the plot and across its center. Then, each family divided its individual *gobon* into small parts (*chek*) with earth cushions, and the *chek* were thoroughly leveled by moving a layer of soil from higher places onto



lower places to allow their quick and even filling with water. This method was transferred to onion and watermelon growing from the practice of rice cultivation. In places where natural irrigation was impossible, water pumps had to be used. In practice, Koreans usually watered their fields once every ten days and leave the water for one or two days to soak the soil. Furthermore, the specificity of *gobonji* did not allow farmers to use their irrigation system a second time; they had to construct it anew on every new plot of land. Thus, the process of leveling and dividing a plot into *chek* had to be repeated every season.<sup>9</sup>

Weeding was even more difficult and labor intensive than irrigation and of special importance when growing onions because weeds hamper their growth. Shortages and high cost practically excluded pesticides as possible methods for fighting weeds. In fact, in the middle of summer when the fields were full of grass, families, relatives, and even friends came to help brigade members with weeding.

When plots of *gobon* were small, Koreans managed to weed them with their family members, but as *gobon* became larger, they had to turn to hired day laborers from the local population for help. Local women and school-children came in the morning and returned home in the evening. In some cases, hired labor came from a town nearby and then lived in the fields and were given meals in addition to cash payments. Agricultural workers were hired mainly during harvesting for cutting onions, packaging them into sacks, and loading them onto trucks. Often for such work, Korean brigades had to hire people who had problems, for example, alcoholics, the homeless, or former criminals released from prison.

In view of Soviet standards, the amount of money needed for *gobonji* was considerable. Correspondingly, as expenses increased, profits decreased. Even obtaining a large sum of money at the end of the season did not necessarily mean high profits. However, profits could be very high, provided the *gobonji* had good luck, hard work, and correct management. Frequently, people with university diplomas and good professions joined *gobonji* to earn money because they knew that they could earn the equivalent of their five-

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9. Fieldwork by the authors in Ushtobe, 2005; Almaty, 2006; and Ushtobe-Almaty, 2007.

year salary in only one season.

The chances for failure were also numerous. The dangers included climatic conditions, financial problems, and low selling prices. Koreans also had to bear considerable losses through theft of their products during harvest time. According to informants, in some regions groups of locals seized the *gobonji* crops by force and threats. Often, people driving by the fields stopped to pilfer watermelons or onions and load them into their trunks. Therefore, Koreans used to guard their fields during harvest time. Sometimes, they had to hire local watchmen, but usually to no avail.

### 3) Mobility and Temporary Dwellings

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of *gobonji* is that its practitioners spent a certain period each year (typically from March to October) at a production site away from their place of permanent residence, i.e., living and working in the fields. They built temporary camps where they ate, lived, and slept for the larger part of the year, and indeed, they conducted all their day-to-day family affairs in the middle of desolate farming fields and solved all problems that arose in the course of their activities.

The type and character of the temporary dwellings or seasonal *gobonji* shelters depended on many factors and circumstances—above all, the nature and climate of a region. *Gobonji* was practiced in a vast territory from the Baltic republics to the Far East, from the severe north to the hot south. In colder regions, brigade members built dwellings with either heat insulation, like semi-dugouts, or small houses with thick walls that could be heated in cold weather by the traditional hypocaust heating system called *kuduri*. In the warm climate of Central Asia, brigade members built light constructions using reed mats, roofing felt, vinyl film, tarpaulins, wood, and slate.

The second major consideration for dwellings and shelters was whether a particular plot of land was to be leased only once or repeatedly. If a brigade leader was unsure whether they would return to a place the following year, no one took serious measures to improve the settlement. If they knew that they would return there, they equipped their site with utilities and constructed more solid dwellings. However, according to the informants, in

setting up their settlements, they had to start practically from the very beginning, regardless of whether they had been to a place before.

Third, temporary settlements varied depending on the size and composition of a brigade. The larger the brigade, the more dwellings it needed, although blood relatives could live together as one household. Thus, the number of dwellings was inversely proportional to the number of direct relatives among brigade members. If a brigade was large and rented a considerable plot of land, its members hired laborers at the height of the season who often lived together with them in the settlement (Kim 2005, 47–49).

Fourth, some brigade members had their own approach to the choice of dwelling. Some younger members preferred to live in caravans on the settlement territory. Thus, they brought caravans to the territory and sold them or left them in the custody of *kolkhoz* garages after the season. In fact, in south Kazakhstan, some brigade members or their hired labor sometimes lived in *yurta*<sup>10</sup> or military tents.

Accordingly, temporary settlements of Koreans that sprang up on the edges of the fields in early spring and disappeared in late autumn were places of residence for many people extending to more than six months of every year. Nevertheless, the people there had neither registration papers nor an address, both of which were obligatory in the Soviet Union. According to Soviet regulations, everyone needed to register with the local militia, and those liable for call-up had to register in local military commissariats. But local authorities did not pay much attention to such rules. The settlements regularly committed other violations as well. For instance, they used electricity without restriction, and meeting fire-prevention measures and hygiene and sanitary norms was out of the question.

Despite their seasonal character, semi-dugouts or *balagan*<sup>11</sup> were real homes for Koreans, and a settlement was a kind of a village community with its own peculiar customs, rules, holidays, and sorrows. Such temporary settlements were places where ethnic and family-clan solidarity grew stronger, continuity was preserved, their native language was used, and ethnic culture

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10. A *yurta* is a mobile dwelling of nomadic peoples in Central Asia.

11. A *balagan* is a seasonal dwelling for one family on the edge of a field.

and self-consciousness were preserved.

### *The Entrepreneurship and Competitiveness of Gobonji*

*Gobonji* is a kind of mobile lease farming. In connection with *gobonji* mobility, one might wonder whether the Koryo-saram really needed to leave their area of residence to engage in agriculture. This particular feature of *gobonji* is closely tied to the socioeconomic structure and actual production and marketing conditions of the age. The clear economic logic of *gobonji* has always been in trying to maximize private profit. Of course, that *gobonji* would be conditioned by the socioeconomic structure of the period in question is inevitable, but the practitioners themselves sought out those regions most conducive and favorable to the maximization of profit and went there to practice *gobonji*. The locations most conducive and favorable for *gobonji* were those most advantageous to production and marketing, and the prerequisites were the richness of the soil, the presence of irrigation facilities, and the existence of market outlets. Once an area was targeted in this way and a lease contract concluded, *gobonji* activity took place there over a considerable period.

Significantly, *gobonji* differed from the *kolkhoz* economy in its innovations and quick decision-making, which in the long run led to its success. *Gobonji* was concerned with determining a region and place of production, the choice of crops and seeds, the fieldwork cycle, the speed and quality of agrotechnical work, and the forms of realization of the final produce.

Initially, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the main crop of *gobonji* was rice. Gradually, the area of *kolkhoz* rice plantations increased, and agricultural machinery was introduced, which reduced the profits of *gobonji* rice brigades. Therefore, by the mid-1960s, Korean brigades started to grow vegetables, such as onions, cucumbers, tomatoes, and eggplants, as well as melons. Growing vegetables in large areas using agricultural machinery was a weak point of *kolkhoz* in field crop cultivation. Also, Koreans could enjoy crop yields two to three times higher than the average indices of *kolkhoz* by using their ethnic agro technical methods. Fortunately, vegetables were in great demand and could be sold quickly both at state purchase markets and

among the local population. As a result, specific agricultural technologies, hard work, the possibility of investing their own money, and a determination to face risks led to a result where Koreans continued to occupy the niche of onion and watermelon growing in the former Soviet Union.

While Koreans were well known in Soviet Central Asia as rice producers, onions became their priority from the 1960s onward (Kim 1989, 22–23). The reason why Koreans grew onions, despite that crop's high labor intensiveness, lies in the considerable return of investment. The technology for onion growing remained practically the same for many years. Except for sowing, all operations were done manually: weeding, fertilizing, harvesting, cutting the upper parts, packaging into sacks, and loading. Onion sowing starts at the end of March or beginning of April, and harvesting is in September. During this five to six month period, it is necessary to fertilize the soil two or three times, treat it with chemicals two to five times, weed it about five times, and water it 10 or 15 times. Moreover, Koreans regularly experimented with the selection of new varieties of onions.<sup>12</sup>

Koreans also started to grow watermelons in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and they learned a lot from the local population there. Gradually, watermelons became the main crop for some Korean brigades engaged in *gobonji* in the southern regions of the Soviet Union. Later, having studied the peculiarities of local soils and climatic conditions, Koreans also started to grow watermelons in the western and eastern regions of the USSR.

Besides the main crops of onions and watermelons, *gobonji* Koreans also grew other vegetables for both cooking and sale at local markets. Potatoes, tomatoes, soybeans, peas, corn, cabbage, radishes, garlic, and dill were grown in different places: on small plots of land near dwelling places, on the edges of fields, and in between rows of main crops. In this simple way, brigade members solved many problems: providing a supply of food for themselves, maximizing their use of resources because field edges were weeded

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12. An experimental farm near the city of Ushtobe produced *karatal'skii*, a new sort of high-quality onion. Because of its qualities, this sort of onion was cultivated not only throughout the entire Soviet Union but also outside its borders. Its taste, size, long period of preservation, and most importantly, high capacity for harvesting were remarkable (Hwan 1959, 81–82).

and watered anyway, and growing between rows to produce additional uncounted products that could be sold at markets as another source of revenue for everyday expenses. Such an efficient use of land plots is a distinctive feature of *gobonji* as compared to *kolkhoz* vegetable growing and private gardening practiced by Russian and other peoples.<sup>13</sup>

One of the main reasons for the success of *gobonji* was the rationality of production, which embraced various components. First, *gobonji* was in demand because it was more advantageous for the state to grow necessary products in different regions of the country instead of transporting them from one place to another. Korean brigades traveled at their own expense to different locations throughout the huge country to grow vegetables and onions. Second, Koreans invested their own money in production, from buying seeds to selling agricultural products, and they arranged their temporary accommodations and other everyday issues by themselves. Third, *kolkhoz* did not have to pay pension allocations for Koreans and did not grant other social benefits or social security to them as they did for *kolkhoz* members.

In addition, a *gobonji* brigade contained no superfluous supervision, unlike other labor collectives that often had people regulating and controlling positions. The size, gender-age composition, and number of workers in a brigade were always optimal for the demands of the moment. In fact, local *kolkhoz* members were happy to earn some additional money as day laborers on the *gobonji* and were hired by Koreans for a few weeks in the summer, usually for weeding the fields, and then again during the autumn harvest season. Day laborers, mostly women and high school students, were paid in cash at a rate higher than the average Soviet monthly wage in the factories. Therefore, local people did not consider the Koreans *exploiters* because they worked side by side with them in the fields. This experience of earning money by an alternate means and in a way unconnected to Soviet enterprises was meaningful; the school students were able to support their parents with additional income or buy for themselves costly

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13. Fieldwork by the authors in Ushtobe, 2005. Informants are Yun Sergei Grigoryevich, Chen Moisei Danilovich, and Pak Nikolay Alexandrovich.

goods, like tape recorders, bicycles, and motorbikes.

Notably, all brigade members worked for the final profit of the brigade as a whole, not for monthly wages as farm workers. As a rule, brigade members received cash only when the season was over. Also, a brigade was not tied to one particular *kolkhoz*; it was free to go to another more favorable location the following year.

Hence, *gobonji* was based on the efficiency of the market economy, namely a maximum reduction in the cost of production, the well-timed production of high-quality goods, and profitable selling. Each brigade member calculated his or her own costs, expenses, and potential profit and was also free to leave their plot of land, return home, and start the entire process anew the following year.

Such success was achieved despite the fact that Soviet savings banks did not grant any loans to this population, providing only inconsiderable allowances for families in need from the so-called mutual-aid funds at enterprises. At times, a brigade member might be in need of money to purchase fertilizer and pay day laborers. Delay in payment could lead to a reduction in profit and even a loss of investment. Therefore, mutual aid in *gobonji* was a common practice, and money, as a rule, was lent interest free. Such interest-free loans are uncharacteristic of market relations but remain inherent in ethnic entrepreneurship, even in economically developed countries.<sup>14</sup>

In the brigades, permanent ethnic consolidation took place, as brigades remained the only ethno-homogeneous social units after the mass resettlement of Korean *kolkhoz* workers to the cities. Members of brigades spoke Korean among themselves; they cooked traditional Korean food and preserved ethnic specificity in their relations. Often, brigade members who found themselves in a difficult financial situation during the height of fieldwork were given interest-free loans from their kinsmen without any loan certificates or documents. Frequently, such assistance had the form of working collectively on the *gobon* (plot of land) of one of the brigade members.

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14. Fieldwork by the authors in Ushtobe-Almaty, 2007. Informants are Yun Sergei Grigoryevich, Chen Moisei Danilovich, and Pak Nikolay Alexandrovich.

## Conclusion

Legalization of *gobonji* occurred during Gorbachev's perestroika, along with wide introduction of *brigade contracts* and self-financing. In this way, the legal status of Koreans engaged in *gobonji* was strengthened, and conditions for better relations with *kolkhoz* were created. Nonetheless, according to our informants, the incomes of brigade members were not significantly affected. But regarding the reduction of overhead expenses, some positive effects did result from the legalization of *gobonji*.

However, the basic difference between modern land-lease relations and those in Soviet *gobonji* brigades is that the party providing a plot of land is a private landowner, not a *kolkhoz* (state). Therefore, all legal and economic conditions can be envisaged without any restrictions imposed by existing laws, unlike during the Soviet period. But the essence of relations between the landholder and tenant remains the same; the first party (the landholder) initially enjoys more rights and tries to increase the amount of payment for the land, whereas the second party (the brigade) tries to reduce it.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic crises that followed, it became nearly impossible to engage in *gobonji* because going a long distance meant traveling from one newly independent country to another, and the chances of failure were critical. In the first half of the 1990s, thousands of Koreans from post-Soviet Central Asia, mainly from Uzbekistan, moved to the Primorsky Krai, and at the end of the 1990s, around 30,000 of them arrived in the South Russian regions. This movement has been both at the individual as well as family clan scale and received some financial support from South Korean NGOs and churches. Korean migrants as reliable farmers and loyal citizens obtained support from provincial administrations that released the decree entitled "On the Allocation of Land to Russian Koreans," which facilitated a simplified procedure of registration of land lease for agricultural production (Bugai 2008, 135–136).

In addition, Koreans who went from Central Asia to Russia or the Ukraine tried to stay and adapt to the new locations. They did not return after the end of field season and instead became engaged in selling vegeta-



bles and making different Korean salads at home that came to be in great demand at local city markets. At present, long-distance *gobonji* has practically disappeared.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the planned socialist economy, all products are sold under free market conditions. Fixed state prices have become a thing of the past. Now, the laws of supply and demand regulate all exchange. Thus, every family engaged in *gobonji* tries to sell their produce at a maximum price. Free wholesale and small batch sales have become possible not only in marketplaces but also along busy highways and in uncontrolled street markets. Vegetables can be supplied directly to consumers through cafés and restaurants. As before, Koreans are very much concerned about the best way to quickly and most profitably sell their produce.

In effect, Koreans acquired their first skills in entrepreneurship through *gobonji*, which created the initial material and financial basis for active integration into the market economy of the post-Soviet period. During perestroika, and later the transition from the planned socialist system to the market economy, privatization of the state sector and reforms of the socio-political system created new possibilities for private entrepreneurship, and *gobonji* lost its rational basis for continuation.

With the establishment of diplomatic relations, business cooperation commenced between South Koreans and ethnic Koreans in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. South Korean agricultural equipment, innovative technologies, and rational management can raise the production of vegetables and horticulture in these countries, but cooperation in this sector of the economy is still in its initial stage.

It should be noted that *gobonji* has also played a role in preserving the ethnic specificity of the Koryo-saram, such as elements of their traditional culture and native tongue. It is no exaggeration to say that *gobonji* was a specific kind of ethnic entrepreneurship as well as *a specific way and style of life* among a numerically significant group of Soviet Koreans. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of sovereignty to the former Soviet republics, these Koreans began practicing *gobonji* within their countries of residence. The market economy presupposes changes in the organi-

zational and production system of *gobonji*, particularly regarding land ownership laws. The private farmers' economy, which has become the basis of the agrarian sector, no longer attracts Koreans, and the number of those engaged in *gobonji* is steadily declining.

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