

Hoping and anticipating changes in Koryo-saram youth policy

Today, I heard a very happy and thankful story. It is the news that three of the graduates of the “1st Koryo-saram Youth Bakery and Patisserie Education” that the Asia Development Foundation (ADF) enthusiastically implemented last year have been hired by famous domestic bakeries. This is due to the passion and dedication of the ADF, which for the past 10 years has provided scholarships to Joseon and Koryo compatriots and children from multicultural families, which is beginning to bear small fruit. Above all, I think the great significance of this project is that it has greatly expanded the scope of interest in Koryo-saram, which has been already growing in Korean society.

So far, our society has primarily focused on Koryo workers who are facing difficult working conditions. However, there is something that our society is missing in the Koryoin issue. That is, the Koryo youth who have failed to keep up with Korean public education and have dropped out. They are not fluent in Korean and have no special job skills. Even if they want to develop their skills through job training, their economic conditions are not sufficient, making it difficult for them to have learning opportunities. They cannot receive the Tomorrow Learning Card, which provides up to 5 million won for five years to all Koreans, including students from multicultural backgrounds. It is a sad and frustrating reality.

Our society's understanding of Koryo-saram is still very lacking. About 160 years ago, our compatriots were driven to the harsh land of the unfamiliar Primorsky Krai, and they devoted themselves to the independence of their helpless homeland that could not protect, raise or care for them even in the midst of their difficult lives. This is a fact we are all familiar with through the stories of Choi Jae-hyung and An Jung-geun, the godfathers of the Primorsky Krai independence movement. If we add to this the story of their forcible relocation from the Primorsky Krai to the wilderness of Central Asia by Stalin in 1937, our society's ignorance of Koryo-saram is shameful. If we say that the Republic of Korea is a world-class economic powerhouse and cultural powerhouse, we cannot help but ask a more fundamental question of what exactly makes up a nation.

Since the implementation of the Ministry of Justice's “Regional Specialization Visa System” in 2022, the number of local governments that are trying to provide jobs, accommodations and



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even educational spaces for children for our Koryo compatriots as a means of resolving the population decline problem has been increasing. This is welcome and appreciated. However, as I watch this process, I feel somewhat regretful. This is because it is not right to view our Koryo compatriots as beings who only solve the labor problem in an era of population decline. Who are the Koryoin? They are the unfortunate ones who practiced love for their country with devotion and affection despite their suffering and being abandoned by a weak and incompetent motherland in the late Joseon Dynasty, and who were forcibly relocated from Primorsky Krai, where they had finally settled down, to various Central Asian countries, enduring the pain of our modern history with their whole bodies.

At this point, I would like to mention Israel's policy toward its compatriots. Israel has a special background in that it was founded as a state for the Jewish people, but it grants Jews the “right of return” to come and live in Israel from anywhere in the world. Furthermore, it recognizes immigrant Jews as valuable human assets in various fields and provides support tailored to the characteristics of immigrant groups so that they can adapt well to Israeli society while maintaining the dignity of their identity and cultural heritage. This has great implications for our own compatriot policy, especially our policy toward Koryo compatriots. It is a time when our society and country need greater interest and support for our Koryo compatriots around us. 🇵🇰