

Ephemeral Homelands: Korean Diasporas and the Quest for Belonging

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The current issue of *Asian Studies* explores the Korean diaspora across Japan, Europe, and North America. Given the journal's primary focus on East Asian cultures and discourses, this is not the first special issue devoted to Korean studies. Such repeated attention is far from coincidental, as South Korea is an increasingly influential player in international relations between Asia and the Euro-American regions.

A decade ago, we published a special issue of *Asian Studies* titled "Korean Tradition in Modern Eastern Asia: Ideas, Myths, and Realities", guest-edited by Chikako Shigemori Bučar (see Shigemori Bučar 2014, 1–3). The issue featured a range of diverse articles, covering topics from Korean national heritage (Ryu 2014; Kingston 2014) and the country's complex relations with Japan (Mecsi 2014; Visočnik 2014), to themes in Korean metaphysics and political philosophy (Rošker 2014; Yoo 2014; Greif and Rošker 2014).

That volume, published in 2014, marked the first step in the Slovenian exploration of Korea, a country previously marginalized and largely overlooked in our studies of East Asian languages and cultures. Today, it is increasingly evident how unfortunate this oversight was, and we now recognize Korea as a hidden gem within the vibrant mosaic of Sinic regions, and have come to appreciate its uniquely rich culture, especially evident in its literature, music, and other arts. This global appreciation reached a milestone a few months ago with the Nobel Prize in Literature being awarded to a Korean author for the first time, highlighting the significance of this nation's cultural contributions on a global scale.

As a notable Korean intellectual, Han Kang explores questions of profound human concern that resonate universally, while illuminating the unique contours of contemporary Korean society. Her position as a female writer further accentuates the overdue recognition of Asian literature and arts, which have long been marginalized—much like the female perspective itself. Through her work, Han Kang bridges these intersecting forms of marginalization, challenging both gendered and cultural biases to reveal the depth, wisdom, beauty and diversity of underrepresented voices.

The present issue includes multiple articles on Korean literature and literary criticism. With its focus on migration and diaspora literature, it offers unique insights into the internal struggles and external challenges faced by Koreans forming new, transculturally shaped identities in unfamiliar environments. These individuals navigate the tensions between adaptation and loyalty to their cultural heritage, between societal norms and feelings of alienation, and between old routines and new aspirations.

In this context, diaspora emerges as a very special place, one situated in the borderlands of uncertainty, neither here nor there. Life in diaspora creates a distinct “in-between” space, blending elements of both the origin and host cultures, languages, and societies.

This unique positioning becomes a fertile ground for exploring human experiences, often defined by the tension between stability and change. Individuals in diaspora navigate complex challenges: reconciling past and present identities, managing feelings of belonging and estrangement, and balancing adaptation with a sense of cultural continuity. This mixed environment brings about a dynamic human experience, simultaneously filled with moments of joy and hardship, anxiety and connection. This duality highlights the resilience required in diaspora life, as people engage deeply with the cultural negotiation and personal transformation inherent in their unique social landscapes.

In other words, diaspora is a unique and very specific place that can serve as a realm where the delicate balance between the universal need for human connection and the assertion of individual identity becomes heightened. This space invites constant negotiation, as individuals are often compelled to both integrate into new social fabrics and maintain unique cultural ties.

The tensions within diaspora life amplify a universal struggle familiar to us all: the drive to belong to a larger community while preserving one’s unique identity and individuality. For those in diaspora, this challenge often becomes more pronounced. Their ongoing negotiation between the two poles at the edges of their “in-between” space not only defines their diasporic experiences of profound social, and often personal, alienation, it also continuously shapes their evolving characters, thereby enriching them.

On the other hand, diasporic life often involves loss and a sense of longing, as people leave behind familiar places, relatives, friends, and cultural practices. This separation introduces grief and nostalgia, feelings rooted in memories of what once was but no longer is part of everyday life. The sorrow of displacement and the yearning for the past co-exist alongside adaptation and growth. These complex emotions resonate in the complex duality of diasporic existence.

The sense of home—this ultimate place of intimate security, warmth, and protection, where we feel safe, nourished, and free from anxiety—is often a stable, immovable source of comfort. But in diaspora, it transforms into a fluid, internal landscape rather than a fixed location. Here, home may not reside in any specific place but rather in a sense of belonging that one creates, adapts, and carries. Many experience home as an inner space where their sense of self, history, and community are recognized, however fragmented or dispersed that may be.

Such an existence and such experiences are profoundly transcultural in their very nature. They show how human beings are able to transcend their original culture, how they are transformed into new, different persons, and how they remain themselves at the same time. This is about a transition from one mode of being to another.

And since our journal *Asian Studies* embraces a transcultural approach, continually exploring these “in-between” spaces of intercultural interaction and the search for new knowledge, this special issue holds unique significance for us. We hope it will resonate with the curious, reflective spirits of our readers, offering them fresh insights into the intrinsic relationship between the universal aspects of our common human experience and the culturally conditioned dimensions of our lives.

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