

Chinese Views of Korean History in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

Kirk W. Larsen

In July 2014, Ambassador Qiu Guohong in preparation for Xi Jinping’s visit to Seoul stated that the “relationship between South Korea and China couldn’t be any better.”¹ Among the many reasons for this—economic, geostrategic, cultural—was a shared sense of history. China and Korea, officials and commentators in both nations claimed, were close because of their agreement regarding the significance of their experiences as victims of foreign, particularly Japanese, imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries.

History, that constellation of memories, stories, and notions about the past, has often been deployed to reinforce conceptions of identity, to support certain courses of action, and to demarcate between the in-group and the other. But history is ever malleable and protean. Not only do individuals, institutions, and ideas change but so does the understanding of them. When one draws on the past, one inevitably focuses on a limited set of events or narratives that best serve one’s interests—to the exclusion of potentially equally valid candidates. Their utility can vary over time; one need only think of how figures such as Zheng He or Confucius have been imagined and re-imagined over the last century.

This has been the case with the history of relations between China and Korea from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. For many Chinese, Korea has served first as a subject of contestation as China’s position in Korea was challenged by both Western and Japanese powers. Then, when it became increasingly clear that China (or the Qing Empire) was losing this contest, Korea became an omen of China’s own fate absent significant course changes. As Japan’s growing empire engulfed Korea and subsequently threatened parts of China, resistance served to bring China and Korea closer; many in China celebrated what they saw as courageous resistance to Japan—such as when An Chunggun assassinated Ito Hirobumi in 1909. Shared status as victims of Japanese imperialism in an age of “humiliation” brought the two closer, and the mutually shared memory of “humiliation” has been deployed by contemporary Chinese and South Korean leaders—Xi Jinping and Park Geun-hye—to foster greater levels of cooperation.

However, past conceptions of China, Korea, and the Sino-Korean relationship have sometimes ranged far afield from the cherished tropes of humiliation and the struggle for independence. Even seemingly universally agreed upon symbols, such as An’s heroic 1909 assassination, find themselves subject to changing interpretations such as recent emphasis by some on his pan-Asian vision of Sino-Korean-Japanese cooperation rather than his bold anti-Japanese act. As interests and priorities change, so does the utility of any particular historical narrative.

From a Peaceful “Tribute System” to “Humiliation”

Several broad concepts thought to have been present in China’s past have animated China’s sense of itself and its perception of its relations with others. The first is a general sense of China and the Chinese as a peace-loving people. While other cultures may have glorified violence, war, and conquest, China, largely by virtue of its “Confucian” culture, is thought to have been different. This perception of traditional culture goes back at least to Confucius’s refusal to even discuss military formations with Duke Ling of Wei² and Mencius’s denunciation of claiming military expertise as a “grave crime.”³ Sun Yat-sen echoed these sentiments, stating “China has never attempted by economic weapons to oppress other races...China’s aspirations for peace were fully evolved even at the time of the Han Dynasty.” Chiang Kai-shek concurred, “We do not oppress the weak and we do not bow before tyranny.”⁴

These sentiments have been echoed by contemporary Chinese leaders such as Wen Jiabao, who declared that “peace loving has been a time-honored quality of the Chinese nation.”⁵ While the notion of Chinese or Confucian pacifism has not been without its critics,⁶ recent PRC rhetoric has more or less accepted the idea—everything from Hu Jintao’s idea of “China’s peaceful rise” to Xi Jinping’s extensive references to “peaceful development,” e.g., in Xi’s declaration, “The Chinese nation loves peace. To abolish war and achieve peace has been the most pressing and profound aspiration of the Chinese people since the advent of modern times. Pursuing peaceful development is what the fine traditional Chinese culture calls for...”⁷

The idea of China as exceptionally, if not uniquely, peace-loving has also influenced perceptions of interactions with its neighbors. It is assumed that China has eschewed policies of coercion or aggression, using these to expand the size of the realm, in favor of allowing the persuasive power of Chinese culture and the benevolence of Chinese rulers to structure peaceful relations with neighbors. Mencius had nothing but praise for King Wu who “marched on Yin,” but proclaimed “Do not be afraid. I come to bring you peace, not to wage war on the people.”⁸ China was thought to have interacted with its neighbors through the peaceful mechanism of “tribute,” with neighbors voluntarily approaching China seeking amicable relations in response to the power of China’s culture (or the lure of trade). Chinese officials have accepted this conception of Chinese foreign policy. “China has never had the tradition of expanding abroad,” declared Qian Qichen in 1997.⁹ Liu Mengfu, author of the influential 2010 book *The China Dream* expresses similar sentiments when he declares,

“The Chinese Empire, at its peak, could have looked at the world in disdain, because there was no other nation strong enough to challenge it, and if China had had the desire to expand, no other nation could have resisted. However, the Chinese Empire made the choice not to impose its central authority on the ethnicities or territory of other nations. As we can see, China is a nation that does not invade smaller or weaker nations and does not threaten neighboring countries...China was a major power for thousands of years, but the small countries bordering it, like Annam (Vietnam), Burma, Goryeo (Korea), and Siam, all maintained their independence.”¹⁰

Xi Jinping concurred with his 2013 statement that “we have made a solemn pledge to the whole world that we will never seek hegemony or commit any act of expansion...Looking back on history, we can see that those who launched aggression or sought expansion by force all ended in failure. This is a law of history.”¹¹

Thought to have demonstrated these characteristics of Chinese political and cultural identity and foreign policy most clearly has been the relationship with Korea, which is seen as having eagerly imported and adopted a wide range of Chinese practices—everything from statecraft to major belief systems to written language—and the attendant Korean respect for China made Korea the tributary *par excellence*. Korea topped the list of tribute nations and peoples in the Ming and Qing and was renowned for the consistent dispatch of tribute missions, which reinforced the core principles of the relationship: Chinese superiority in a hierarchical structure but also the lack of coercion in the relationship. Liu Mingfu provides a summary of the conventional wisdom in China regarding the nature of the “tribute system” when he declares “The universal spread of China’s civilization and the variety of nations that sent emissaries to China were simply a reflection of the attractiveness of the central nation, and the admiration that neighboring countries had for China’s civilization.”¹² Hence,

the confusing (given Westphalian conceptions of sovereignty and international relations) 19th-century Qing Chinese declarations that Korea was simultaneously a Chinese vassal and an autonomous state.

This “harmonious and mutually beneficial” relationship was challenged by the arrival of Western and Japanese imperialists. Juxtaposed against the Chinese self-conception of pacifism and benevolent foreign relations is a narrative of “national humiliation” that China endured from the first Opium War (1839-1842) to the establishment of the PRC in 1949. While those doing the humiliation were initially Westerners, Imperial Japan occupied an increasingly prominent place among those who sharply reduced China’s power and sphere of influence in Asia and ultimately threatened its very survival. Invocations of “national humiliation” as well as admonitions to “never forget” this period of China’s history are legion.¹⁴ Xi Jinping summarized them aptly in 2014:

“In the 100 years from the Opium War in 1840 to the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, China was ravaged by wars, turmoil and foreign aggression. To the average Chinese, it was a period of ordeal too bitter to recall. The war of aggression against China waged by Japanese militarism alone inflicted over 35 million Chinese military and civilian casualties. These atrocities remain fresh in our memory.”¹⁵

Korea plays a prominent role in this conventional narrative, first as an object of contestation among the various powers in Asia, then as a cautionary tale for what might befall China itself (absent significant awakening and reform), then as a mutual victim of Japanese depredations and a comrade in the anti-Japanese struggle. It is perhaps this last element that occupies the most attention in contemporary Chinese (and Korean) declarations about the period in which Korea fell into Japanese colonial rule.

While the suffering of both Koreans and Chinese under Japanese imperialism should not be neglected, other elements of the Sino-Korean relationship do not fit easily into the straightforward narrative of Chinese peace and benevolence supplanted by Japanese aggression finally overcome with a presumed return to peace and benevolence.

The Late Nineteenth Century

The arrival of Western and, later, Japanese powers in and around the Korean Peninsula in the mid-to-late nineteenth century challenged long-held mutual assumptions about Sino-Korean relations. For two centuries, relations between the Qing Empire and Korea had more or less followed a pattern described as “tributary relations.” But both this pattern, which reinforced the idea of Qing/Chinese superiority and Korea’s acceptance of its inferior position in the East Asian hierarchy, and the very idea of an East Asian hierarchy were challenged by Western powers that had forcefully changed the Qing Empire’s relations with the West via military force. The ensuing struggle for power saw Japan “open” Korea in 1876, compete with the Qing Empire, Russia, and other Western powers for preeminence in Korea, and annex Korea in 1910.

The Qing Empire’s claimed suzerainty over Korea was challenged first by Westerners, who sought to explain the relationship in ways that accorded with Westphalian norms and who sought to force Asian powers to accede to these norms by signing and abiding by treaties. It was then challenged by more aggressive imperialism, which often gave little heed to the

very treaties that Western powers had imposed upon China, Japan, and Korea or to the notions of sovereignty that the treaties supposedly guaranteed. Insult was added to injury as Meiji Japan quickly Westernized and joined the game of “high imperialism.” Japan’s defeat of the Qing in the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese War brought the annexation of Taiwan. The 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War paved the way for the establishment of Korea as a Japanese protectorate (1905) and ultimately for the annexation of Korea in 1910.

Chinese observed these developments with increasing alarm. Not only did the loss of Taiwan and Korea highlight a growing sense of weakness, it also provided a stark example of the fate that China itself would suffer, absent significant reform and self-strengthening. “Our ‘Colossal Empire’ is about to be divided into about ten Koreas,” lamented one commentator in 1909.¹⁶ Works such as *A Mirror of Fallen Countries* and its supplement, a “Record of National Shame” listed Korea among the “fallen countries,” serving as a warning to China about what was to come.¹⁷

As foreign, particularly Japanese, imperial encroachment upon China itself only increased in the early 20th century, Korea and Koreans functioned both as victims of foreign/Japanese imperialism and as allies in the anti-imperialist struggle. For example, in 1945 Chiang Kai-shek declared that “for fifty years, the National Revolution of the Kuomintang—overthrowing the Manchu government and resisting Japan—has not only been a movement for China’s own freedom and equality, but also for the liberation and independence of Korea.”¹⁸ Looking back on this period of mutual suffering and struggle, Xi Jinping concluded, “China and the ROK represent important force [sic] in promoting regional and world peace. People from the two countries stood by and helped each other in opposing the Japanese colonial invasion and fighting for national liberation, making important contributions to the victory of the World Anti-Fascist War.”¹⁹

The sense of mutually-shared victimization at the hands of the Japanese has been utilized by leaders in both Beijing and Seoul (and to some extent Pyongyang) in order to cement closer ties. While there is much in the historical record to support the notion that an important story for both China and Korea is one of victimization and resistance, exclusive focus on the tropes of “humiliation” masks other ways of understanding the relationship in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Re-imagining Korea not as a Chinese vassal but as an independent nation-state according to Western, Westphalian principles was only one way that Chinese conceptualized the relationship. Many also focused on a Korea that was much more thoroughly integrated into China in ways that complicate the full-throated defense of Korean independence.

The focus on loss and humiliation masks a countervailing narrative, one that took root at the time and has been noted more by scholars than by politicians or the general public, not of Chinese weakness and humiliation but of Chinese dynamism and strength. Some have found unexpected strength and resiliency even in moments of defeat like the 1894-1895 Sino-Japanese War.²⁰ Others have noted a dramatic increase in state capacity—fiscal, strategic, and even military—in the last decades of the Qing Empire.²¹

Korea presents a dramatic example of events where one can envision both weakness and strength, failure and dynamism. When the Qing Empire’s position in Korea as well as the sovereignty and security of Korea itself were challenged by Western nations and by Japan, the Qing Empire’s response was to engage in a series of unprecedented acts designed to

protect and promote China's interests in Korea. Qing officials negotiated Korea's first treaties with the United States, Great Britain, and Germany. Qing troops went several times to the peninsula to protect Chinese interests, at one point kidnapping King Kojong's father and holding him prisoner in China for three years. Chinese merchants, supported and protected by new Sino-Korean treaties and by a multilateral infrastructure often labeled the treaty port system, did a growing and successful business in Korea. Indeed, it is remarkable how many of the tactics described by Liang Qichao as being used by the "new" (foreign) imperialists were actually utilized by the Qing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. "Some use trade to destroy the nation...Some use debts. Some use military training. Some use consultants. Some use (rail)road-building. Some take advantage of factionalism. Some use the excuse of quelling domestic disturbances. Some use the excuse of assisting revolution."²² With the possible exception of "assisting revolution," all of these tactics were considered or used by the Qing in Korea.

These actions were understood by some observers of the time as at least somewhat effective assertion of greater control by an empire that was far from dead. In 1887, Zeng Jize described that in response to "the loss of some of the most important of her possessions, China, to save the rest, has decided on exercising a more effective supervision on the acts of her vassal princes, and of accepting a larger responsibility for them than heretofore."²³ Zeng called for the "colonization of these immense outlying territories" mentioning Manchuria, Mongolia, and Chinese Turkestan by name" for both "economical" and "military reasons." In an age of "high imperialism" the Qing Empire proved to be a worthier competitor and participant than many in China recognized.

The idea of a "China" that actually behaved like many other imperialist powers runs contrary to both the notion of "national humiliation" and the idea of China as an exceptional, non-aggressive, and peace-loving power. Acknowledging the reality that the Qing Empire forced an unequal treaty upon Choson Korea which granted many of the same privileges—extraterritoriality, self-governing concessions in treaty ports, favorable tariff rates, etc.—to Chinese in Korea that were resented when imposed on Chinese in China is inconvenient to the narrative of innocent victimhood and humiliation.

The PRC has forgotten these narratives of China as a successful imperialist or colonial power, choosing instead to characterize the doubling of Chinese territory under the Qing (nearly all of which is either controlled or claimed by the PRC today) as "national unification" or "border affairs" rather than as conquest or colonization. Moreover, non-Chinese scholars who choose to view the history of the Qing through the lens of empire and imperialism are sometimes castigated in China as "academically absurd" with one Chinese calling upon "all scholars with a sense of righteousness to fiercely oppose it [the so-called New Qing History]."²⁴ This collective forgetting is understandable—few are the major world powers that do not regard themselves as exceptional—and somewhat astonishing. Early Republic of China maps of Asia sometimes labeled Korea as "originally our vassal, now a vassal of Japan" or listed Korea among China's "lost territories." But as William Callahan aptly observes, "spaces marked as 'lost territories' on twentieth-century maps were conventionally marked as 'gained territories' on Qing dynasty's eighteenth-century maps."²⁵

The implications of which narrative—China as benign, peace-loving power or China as an imperialist power akin to other powers—is predominant in the minds of actors in East Asia (and beyond) are significant. China’s refusal to acknowledge the imperialist parts of its own past results in an inability to sympathize with the fears of China’s neighbors.

Re-imagining Korea in the Early 20th Century

The notion of “liberation” is predicated on acceptance of the Westphalian norms of the modern international order in which sovereign, independent nation-states interact with each other on the basis of equality as expressed by treaties and international law. While the Qing Empire was thought to have resisted accepting these new international norms, preferring its own traditions of hierarchical relations with its neighbors and a relative absence of diplomatic representation or exchange (to say nothing of treaties or embassies), once the new international order was forced upon East Asia, largely at gunpoint, there were influential statesmen—everyone from Li Hongzhang to Sun Yat-sen—who embraced the new norms. They were often critical of the myriad cases in which Western powers and Japan failed to live up to the ideals of the “family of nations.”

In the first half of the twentieth century, Chinese opinion on both the actual and the ideal status of Korea was much more varied. The straightforward narrative of transformation from willing vassal of China (dramatically different from other forms of imperialism) to independent nation-state to Japanese colony belies the fact that as Chinese grappled with the implications of both a Westphalian system of international relations and the age of high imperialism, they imagined Korea’s relations with China—both past and present—in a variety of ways, some not conducive to the idea of Korean independence.

Many Chinese assumed that, in the words of Gwen Guo, “‘Chinese’ empires had exhibited more grace or benevolence to other countries than modern Western and Japanese colonial empires have.”²⁶ However, some wondered whether Korea’s status was something more akin to an actual Chinese possession than a tributary vassal. Wei Yuan wrote in 1842 that Korea should be regarded as part of China’s “inner realm.”²⁷ Similar declarations can be found in the 1883 *Twenty-four Rules for the Traffic on the Frontier between Liaodong and Korea*²⁸ and in Choson King Kojong’s 1887 expression of thanks to the Qing for negotiating an end to the Komundo (Port Hamilton) Affair.²⁹ The fact that, in the 1880s and early 1890s, the trade reports of the Korean Maritime Customs Service, which had been established at the behest of the Qing Empire, were simply included in the reports of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service, “in the same manner as though Korea were but a province of China,” caught the attention of some foreign observers as well.³⁰ Jiang Dengyun, while maintaining some distinction between inner and outer domains, argued that Korea (along with Vietnam and Ryukyu) were “no different than Chinese territory” because they were such good tributaries.³¹

Even after the complete loss of Chinese influence in Korea and the Japanese annexation, many in China longed for Korean liberation but not so much because they envisioned an independent Korea but rather because it would allow Korea to return to its proper status

as a Chinese possession. Li Zhipu mourned the loss of Korea but concluded that “in the last 2,000 years, [Korea] has never had a day of independence. Historically, it does not have the qualifications to be a nation.” Another wrote “Korea originally was our China’s subject country’ but with the Sino-Japanese War ‘Korea first broke away from its shackles to our motherland and became independent for a short while.’ This ‘independence’ was a beautiful name, he commented, but true political power had been in the hands of the Japanese all along.”³³ In 1933, Zhang Binglin and Ma Xiangbo described Japanese territorial encroachment into Rehe as moving like a “rubber band” and concluded that “the aforementioned rubber band not only should not be extended to our Rehe; it should also retract to beyond Korea, in accordance with universally accepted truths.”³⁴ A 1935 map highlighted by the geographer Ge Suicheng listed both Korea and Taiwan as “Japanese-held territory that came from our country.”³⁵ In an extensive review of the voluminous and diverse literature on Korea in early 20th century China, Gwen Guo finds a “hardening of boundaries” to have taken place in the 1920s and 1930s: “boundaries were hardened in the historical imagination, or re-invention of the past, that took place in the minds of writers of the time. Boundaries that once held ambiguity now yielded a single interpretation: Korea had belonged to China.”³⁶

The adoption of Westphalian norms and the increasing acceptance of Western notions of the nation-state would appear to have left little room for tributary relations. Chinese would be forced to choose between territories and peoples that were “Chinese” (even if now lost) and were, therefore, suitable for recovery and those that were other peoples and, therefore, allies in the anti-imperialist struggle but with the ultimate aim being independence rather than incorporation into China. Most would readily conclude that some cases such as Xinjiang and Taiwan would fall into the former category while Korea (and perhaps Mongolia) would fall into the latter—the official position of the PRC today. However, running through the discourse in the first half of the twentieth century is the strong sense that things were not so clear. Often, Korea would be included in a list of “lost” places with little to no distinction between Korea and other putatively Chinese possessions. The 1919 *Textbook of Chinese Language for Elementary School* includes the following: “Japan is an island nation developed after the Meiji Restoration. It placed Okinawa prefecture on our Ryukyu, forced us to cede our Taiwan, leased our Luda [an industrial port in northeastern China], annexed Korea, colonized our Manchuria.”³⁷

Similar ambiguity can be found in the declarations of Chiang Kai-shek. The need to reclaim China’s full sovereignty in the face of the unequal treaties forced upon China was an abiding concern of his. So, too, was maintaining the territorial integrity of nearly all (if not all) of the territory once controlled by the Qing as part of the new and modern China. However, the rhetoric concerning lands and peoples that had been lost and needed to be regained often did not make a clear distinction between areas that remain firmly claimed by China and those that have managed to stake out an independent existence (Mongolia and Korea). In one breath, Chiang would speak of his goals of regaining the Northeast (Manchuria), recovering Formosa (Taiwan), and restoring Korea to freedom.³⁸ And while one might see a meaningful distinction between, say, the Northeast (Chinese territory) and Korea (ally to be liberated), Chiang declares that the Nationalist government has never regarded “Outer Mongolia as colonials” and calls for continued “friendly relations “not only with the Outer Mongolians but also with the Tibetans” in the name of “the spirit of our National Revolution,”

“our entire program of national reconstruction,” and “world peace and security.”³⁹ Chiang strongly implied that support for independence in either Tibet or Korea was somewhat conditional: “I solemnly declare that if the Tibetans should at this time express a wish for self-government, our Government would, in conformity with our sincere tradition, accord it a very high degree of autonomy. If in the future they fulfill the economic requirement for independence, the National Government will, as in the case of Outer Mongolia, help them to gain that status. But Tibet must give proof that it can consolidate its independent position and protect its continuity so as not to become another Korea.”⁴⁰

After 1945, all of the indeterminacy found in the writings when China was actively resisting Japanese imperialism would seem to be water under the bridge. The PRC recognized the independence of Korea and went to war to help defend the independence of North Korea. Not only did it accept the Westphalian system of nation-states, it elevated non-interference into to the affairs of other sovereign nations as one of the most important principles of its foreign policy, especially during the Maoist era. However, one can imagine a future in which Xi Jinping’s attacks on Western values might be expanded to include an attack on the Westphalian system itself. Such an outcome might open up space for China to re-imagine and re-structure its relations with its neighbors in ways that might be consistent with a new tributary order or perhaps even include the more ambitious and aggressive designs of some Chinese in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

An Chunggun in China

The case of An Chunggun illustrates many of the themes already established including the overarching Chinese emphasis on peace and overcoming “humiliation,” the use of history to support current political and diplomatic initiatives, but also of how the protean nature of history sometimes supports and sometimes subverts these aims. On October 26, 1909, An shot and killed Ito Hirobumi at the Harbin Railway Station. An was quickly captured, put on trial by Japanese authorities, and executed. But his fame and notoriety quickly spread. Worried about the growing Japanese presence in Korea, Manchuria, and beyond, as well as about the seeming inability of the Chinese state to successfully resist Japanese imperialism, many looked to An’s example for motivation.⁴¹

As is the case with nearly any historical event, the reasons why Chinese commented on and commemorated An’s assassination of Ito varied. Some, while acknowledging An’s courage, noted that his deed did little to slow the expansion of the Japanese empire and may have actually accelerated the Japanese annexation of Korea. Others questioned An’s choice of target, arguing that he should have focused on “national traitors” among the Korean population (such as Yi Wan-yong) and called on Chinese to do likewise.⁴²

But the majority of Chinese public opinion and commentary celebrated An’s heroism, saw it as inspiration for China’s own struggle against foreign imperialists, and looked forward to the day when a Chinese An Chunggun might arise. When one surveys the commentary on An, one is struck by how frequent and widespread it was and how many luminaries in 20th century China participated. Sun Yat-sen praised An whose name was known “through myriad countries.”⁴³ Li Dazhao wrote a shadow puppet play entitled “An Chunggun Assassinate Ito Hirobumi” which was performed by Sun Zhaoxiang.⁴⁴ A young Zhou Enlai

directed a play celebrating An at the First Women's Normal School of Zhili and would later marry the actress who played An in the play, Deng Yingchao.⁴⁵ Liang Qichao composed a well-known poem "The autumn wind cuts down wisteria" (with "wisteria" being a pun for Ito); there is strong evidence to support the conclusion that Liang traveled from Japan to Lüshun to personally witness An's trial.⁴⁶ On May 4, 1919, Chen Zhidu, a leader of the student demonstrations that now bear the name May 4th Movement, severed his finger in imitation of An and as an indication of his commitment to his country.⁴⁷ It is probably not an exaggeration to conclude that An Chunggun was the most well-known Korean in China in the first half of the twentieth century.

An Chunggun continued to be commemorated in post 1949 China. 1950s elementary school textbooks recounted his story. Reputed scholars such as Yang Shaoquan and An Qingkui wrote academic studies of An. In a meeting with a North Korean scholar in 1963, Zhou Enlai declared "The common struggle of our two countries' peoples against Japanese imperialism began with An Chunggun's assassination of Ito Hirobumi."⁴⁸

However, as the decades passed and as the CCP developed and promoted its own pantheon of heroes (Long March veterans, Lei Feng, etc.), it is not surprising to find that knowledge and celebration of An in China declined. But he was to experience something of a resurgence in the early 21st century. This was largely due to the continued promotion of An in South Korea and was particularly manifest in the public diplomacy of South Korean President Park Geun-hye. In 2013, Park visited China and gave a well-received speech (part of it in Chinese) at Qinghua University. Also in 2013 she suggested to Xi Jinping that An's assassination of Ito should be commemorated by the establishment of a memorial at the Harbin Railway Station. In something of a reciprocal speech to South Korean college students at Seoul National University in 2014, Xi Jinping quoted the "righteous martyr An Chunggun," albeit only giving rather anodyne advice on not wasting one's irreplaceable youth.⁴⁹ In the same speech, Xi declared that "China will always be a country that maintains peace," and characterized PRC-ROK ties as "their best in history."⁵⁰

Xi and local authorities in Harbin responded with enthusiasm to Park's 2013 request and the "Ahn Jung-geun Memorial Hall" was created and opened to the public on January 19, 2014. The Hall introduced visitors to An's life and shows the exact spot where the assassination took place (the clock on the outside of the hall is permanently stuck at 9:30 am, the moment when the shooting took place, and markers on the ground indicate where both An and Ito were standing at the time).⁵¹ Writing of the memorial to a Korean on Chinese soil, Lü Chao, a researcher at the Liaoning Academy of Social Sciences, noted "Previously there have been almost no sculptures or memorials for foreigners in Chinese territory...So this thing is out of the ordinary."⁵² Chinese media reported on the Hall, some noting that memorials to An had been established in North Korea, South Korea, China, Russia, and even Japan.⁵³

Since then, growing numbers of Korean tourists have joined local Chinese in visiting the Memorial Hall which was praised for stimulating the local economy in Harbin and increasing interest in joint cultural activities.⁵⁴ Some Chinese visitors expressed only a dim awareness of An and his deed before visiting the Hall. But as one visitor, Ms. Gao, noted, "I'm indignant at Japan, and this man is a hero...The things Japan has done lately has forced China and South Korea to launch an anti-Japanese campaign. This shows heroism has no borders."⁵⁵ The South Korean musical "Hero" which lionizes An and his deeds has toured in China both in Harbin and beyond.⁵⁶ A group of prominent Chinese and South Korean filmmakers have also announced their intention to produce a feature film that will re-tell An's story.⁵⁷

The new-found cooperation and admiration for An Chunggun was part of a broader effort to bring the PRC and the ROK closer together in their mutual acknowledgment of their suffering at the hands of imperial Japan and their shared determination to hold Japan accountable. In 2015, the PRC and the ROK joined forces to seek UNESCO acknowledgment of Japanese atrocities.⁵⁸ Both sides also expressed appreciation for progress in the repatriation of Chinese Korean War remains and the establishment of a memorial in Xi'an honoring Korean independence fighters. In the same year Park Geun-hye attended a parade in China that celebrated the victory over Japan in World War II, standing alongside Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and former Chinese leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Park's presence made her perhaps the second-most prominent foreign head of state (second only to Putin) to attend the parade (the United States by contrast sent only its ambassador Max Baucus) and was surely appreciated by Xi and the PRC government.

This public display of shared identity and aims demonstrated, according to Yang Xiyu, an analyst at the China Institute of International Studies, that "cooperation between the two countries has moved from non-sensitive fields to traditionally sensitive ones." Qu Xing, head of the same institute declared that "China-ROK relations are now at their best in history."⁵⁹ Some analysts noted that this newfound amity threatened to transform the ROK-US relationship; for example, Beijing University's Jin Jingyi declared, "Since South Korea had joined China in opposing Japan's regression on history and had appeared to be distancing itself from its alliance with the US, China pulled South Korea closer..."⁶⁰

After this high point, a series of developments, some related to the ways in which An Chunggun has been deployed, some related to broader security and cultural issues, threatened to complicate and fray relations between China and South Korea.

First was the ever-present tension between the lionization of An's heroic act of violence and the general tendency among many in the world today to condemn violence in general and acts that can be described as "terrorism" in particular. Unsurprisingly, it was Japanese officials and commentators who first raised this issue in connection to the recent celebrations of An. For example, in January of 2014, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide declared, "The Japanese opinion of Ahn Jung-geun...is that he is a terrorist who was sentenced to death for murdering Ito Hirobumi, our first prime minister."⁶¹ This direct challenge was forcefully met by Chinese officials such as PRC Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang who replied that "Ahn Jung Geun was a renowned anti-Japanese activist" and quipped that "If Ahn Jung Geun was a terrorist, then how should we define the 14 Japanese Class-A World War II criminals enshrined in the Yasukuni Shrine?"⁶² Moreover, "Ahn Jung Geun was not a terrorist but one who confronted colonists bravely," said Da Zhigang, director of the Institute of Northeast Asian Studies of the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences.⁶³ Nevertheless, there likely remains at least some cognitive dissonance generated by the fact that the same regime that was openly celebrating An's use of violence to resist unwelcome imperial encroachment also freely utilizes the term "terrorist" when referring to Uighurs or others who arguably are engaged in a similar struggle against the PRC itself.⁶⁴ Interestingly, this cognitive dissonance may have recently manifested itself in South Korea when the Inch'on police used the famous handprint of An Chunggun (recognizable in part because of the missing portion of An's ring finger—An had severed his finger as a testament to his determination to kill Ito) in an anti-terrorism campaign.⁶⁵

A second manifestation of tension or divergence is found in the fact that a growing minority of those who focus on An Chunggun, his life, and his writings, increasingly emphasize his unfinished treatise *On Peace in the East*. A collection of An's observations on the current state of Korea and East Asia as well as recommendations for future action, *On Peace in the East* stands in contradistinction to An's famous act of violence in that it not only calls for peace, but it also articulates a vision of a future East Asia in which Korea, China, and Japan cooperate in a pan-Asian unity. Although the existence of *On Peace in the East* was known immediately after An's execution, few in China (or Korea) paid its contents much attention. Wang Yuanzhou is surely correct when he concludes that "An's *On Peace in the East* would have had difficulty earning the acceptance of a Chinese audience."⁶⁶ However, after the full contents of An's treatise were discovered in 1979, some have argued that An's vision of Sino-Korean-Japanese cooperation might provide inspiration for regional cooperation and even the creation of a European Union-like apparatus in East Asia. While an inclusive vision of a future East Asia that actually includes Japan as a full partner seems unlikely to take hold in today's climate of competition and hostility, perhaps some future thinkers and opinion-makers might draw on both An's vision as well as that of Sun Yat-sen (as per his famous 1924 speech on "Greater Asianism") to deploy An Chunggun in a very different fashion.

Finally, it bears noting that a shared veneration for An Chunggun was not, in and of itself, sufficient to bind South Korea and China together in the face of other centrifugal forces. For example, while Park Geun-hye and Xi Jinping's mutual focus on shared suffering at the hands of Japan may have served to bring the PRC and the ROK closer together, Park's decision to pursue a breakthrough with Japan regarding another thorny historical issue—the "comfort women"—threatened to see the ROK veer off of its anti-Japanese course. Hailed as Park's "main diplomatic achievement," the December 2015 agreement between Park and Japanese prime minister Abe Shinzo promised to resolve the issue in a "final and irreversible" way and to restore a "veneer of normalcy to the Japan-South Korean relationship."⁶⁷ Some noted that this bold South Korean move more or less constituted "deserting China in their joint front on historical issues."⁶⁸ And even though Moon Jae-in, the successor to the impeached Park, has expressed criticism of the terms of the December 2015 agreement, he has also declared his intent to continue to abide by it (at least for the time being). Clearly, geopolitical and economic concerns can and do trump shared historical consciousness or even historical enmity.⁶⁹

This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the case of the recent dispute over the ROK's 2016 decision to allow the deployment of American Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile batteries on South Korean soil. Ostensibly aimed at defending against a North Korean missile strike, the move was vigorously criticized by the PRC, which engaged in a campaign of ratcheting up pressure on Korea by denying K-Pop groups the right to tour in China, banning the sale of some South Korean products citing safety concerns (grassroots boycotts of Korean goods also meant that Chinese purchases of Korean food products and automobiles dropped sharply in 2016-2017), and ordering Chinese travel agencies to stop selling package tours to South Korea. Some estimates indicate that the resulting decline in

Chinese tourism in Korea cost South Korea nearly \$7 billion dollars in revenue in 2017.⁷⁰ These latest conflicts are only the most intense of a series of disputes—the “garlic wars” and the “kimchi wars” (among others) of the 1990s and early 2000s—that characterize what many Koreans see as a heavy-handed Beijing wielding its power and influence in ways that belie the rhetoric of cooperation and mutual affection. South Korea, it seems to some, is allowed to be “independent” only when such independence leads to decisions and actions that comport with Chinese interests.

In this heated atmosphere, the number of South Koreans traveling to Harbin dwindled and South Korean media observed that when the An Chunggun shrine was removed from the Harbin Railway Station (ostensibly to allow for renovation of the station), “many people have doubt that the memorial will be reopened at the railway station after the remodeling, given the strained relations between Seoul and Beijing.”⁷¹

However, An continues to be deployed as a potential symbol of PRC-ROK comity as when a Chinese think tank, the Charhar Institute, donated a statue of An to the South Korean city of Uijongbu in mid-2017 in order to “promote friendship between the two countries.”⁷² Despite official denials, some in Korea speculated that the statue was sent under the direction of Xi Jinping and hoped that it augured better relations between China and South Korea.⁷³

In his 2014 speech to South Korean students at Seoul National University, Xi Jinping noted that “as China is a country with over 5,000 years’ history of civilization, it is a matter of concern to many people that facing the future, what kind of country China will choose to be.”⁷⁴ Xi’s consistent message to the world is that China will continue to be what it has always been: a peace-loving, friendly neighbor. These themes were on full display in a speech Xi gave the following year at the parade marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, where he was visibly flanked by Park Geun-hye. The themes of peace, “humiliation,” and regional cooperation were repeatedly mentioned with Xi declaring:

“In the interest of peace, China will remain committed to peaceful development. We Chinese love peace. No matter how much stronger it may become, China will never seek hegemony or expansion. It will never inflict its past suffering on any other nation.”⁷⁵

Of course, also on display at this event was in impressive array of modern battle tanks, artillery, and missiles (with helicopters and fighter jets overhead). Given its protean nature, history is unlikely to be dispositive in shaping “what kind of country will choose to be.” China could very well draw on its long tradition of loving peace and respecting the sovereignty and independence of its neighbors. But it could also draw on strands of history in which China is understood to have behaved as a “normal” nation, or, indeed, a great world empire subject to the same dictates of realpolitik as other great powers. Should decision-makers in China opt for the latter, it is unlikely that a dozen or even a hundred shrines to An Chunggun will be able to stem the tide.

Endnotes

- ¹ Han Woo-duk and Sarah Kim, "Ahead of Xi visit, envoy talks ties," *Joongang Daily*, July 2, 2014.
- ² *Analects*, XV.1.
- ³ *Mencius*, VII.B.4.
- ⁴ Chiang Kai-shek, "China cannot be conquered," *The Collected Wartime Messages of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, 1937-1945* (New York: John Day, 1946), 169.
- ⁵ Wang Yuan-kang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 2.
- ⁶ See, for example, Wang, *Harmony and War*; Alastair Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Feng Zhang, "Confucian Foreign Policy Traditions in Chinese History," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 8, no. 2 (June 2015): 197-218. For a response to some of these criticisms, see Shaohua Hu, "Revisiting Chinese Pacifism," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 32, no. 4 (2006), 256-278.
- ⁷ Xi Jinping, "Strengthen the Foundation for Pursuing Peaceful Development," *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2014), 271; see also, Xi Jinping, "China's Commitment to Peaceful Development," *The Governance of China*, 291.
- ⁸ *Mencius*, VII.B.4.
- ⁹ Wang, *Harmony and War*, 2.
- ¹⁰ Howard W. French, *Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power* (New York: Knopf, 2017), 244.
- ¹¹ Xi Jinping, "Strengthen the Foundation for Pursuing Peaceful Development," *The Governance of China*, 272.
- ¹² French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 244.
- ¹³ "Choson is a tributary of China; but as for said country's autonomy in its own politics, religion, prohibitions, and orders, China has never interfered with it" Academia Sinica, Institute of Modern History, ed. *Qingji Zhong-Ri-Han Guanxi Shiliao*. (Taipei: Academia Sinica, Institute of Modern History, 1972), 96.
- ¹⁴ Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
- ¹⁵ Xi Jinping, "China's Commitment to Peaceful Development," March 28, 2014, *Governance of China*, 292.

- ¹⁶ “Ai Hanguo” in *Minhu Ribao*, November 9, 1909; cited in Gwen Raymond Guo, “China’s Korea? Chinese views of nation and region, 1882-1952” (Ph.D. diss. University of Toronto, 2003), 60.
- ¹⁷ Guo, “China’s Korea,” 110.
- ¹⁸ Chiang Kai-shek, “National Independence and Racial Equality” *The Collected Wartime Messages of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, 1937-1945*, 857.
- ¹⁹ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on September 2, 2015,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*. September 3, 2015.
- ²⁰ Allen Fung, “Testing the Self-Strengthening: The Chinese Army in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895,” *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 4 (October 1996): 1007-1031.
- ²¹ Stephen R. Halsey, *Quest for Power. European Imperialism and the Making of Chinese Statecraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- ²² Tseng [Zeng] Jize, “China: The sleep and the awakening,” *China Recorder and Missionary Journal* 18, (1887): 152; see also Kirk Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Choson Korea, 1850-1910* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008); and Halsey, *Quest for Power*.
- ²³ Tseng [Zeng] Jize, “China: The sleep and the awakening,” 149.
- ²⁴ Bandurski, David, “A righteous view of history,” *China Media Project*, April 22, 2015.
- ²⁵ William Callahan, “The Cartography of National Humiliation and the Emergence of China’s Geobody,” *Public Culture* 21, no. 1 (2009): 159.
- ²⁶ Guo, “China’s Korea,” 17.
- ²⁷ Wei Yuan, “Zhengfu Chaoxian ji,” 67, cited in Guo, “China’s Korea,” 44.
- ²⁸ China, Imperial Maritime Customs, *Treaties, Conventions, etc. between China and Foreign States II*, (Shanghai, 1908): 1534.
- ²⁹ Kojong Sillok, May 9, 1887 (KJ 24.4.17).
- ³⁰ “Fouk to U.S. Secretary of State, April 23, 1886,” in *Korean-American Relations: Documents Pertaining to the Far Eastern Diplomacy of the United States*. Vol. 1, ed. George McCune (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 148.
- ³¹ Guo, “China’s Korea,” 44.
- ³² Guo, “China’s Korea,” 100, fn160; citing Li Zhipu, *Chaoxian wang guo shi*, 1-2, irregular pagination.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 59; citing “Ai Hanguo,” 43.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 190.

³⁵ Ibid., 239.

³⁶ Ibid., 218.

³⁷ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 70.

³⁸ Examples include Chiang Kai-shek, "One half of the world's people," *The Collected Wartime Messages of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek*, 1937-1945, 667; Chiang Kai-shek, "A solid foundation for victory," *The Collected Wartime Messages of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek*, 1937-1945, 778. In his diary, Chiang focused on his efforts to xuechi (wipe clean humiliation), including "Recover Taiwan and Korea. Recover the land that was originally part of the Han and the Tang dynasty. Then, as descendants of the Yellow Emperor, we will have no shame." French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, 249.

³⁹ Chiang Kai-shek, "National Independence and Racial Equality," *The Collected Wartime Messages of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek*, 1937-1945, 854-856.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 857.

⁴¹ See Yi Tae-jin, Eugene Y. Park, and Kirk W. Larsen, eds. *Peace in the East: An Chunggun's Vision for Asia in the Age of Japanese Imperialism* (Lexington, 2017).

⁴² Wang Yuanzhou, "Three Images of An Chunggun in Chinese Narratives," in *Peace in the East*, 131-160.

⁴³ Ibid., 145.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁶ Yi, Tae-jin, "An Chunggun and Liang Qichao: Two Lights of Modern East Asia," in *Peace in the East*, 161-176.

⁴⁷ Wang Yuanzhou, "Three Images of An Chunggun in Chinese Narratives," 140.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 139.

⁴⁹ "Xi Zongshuji de qingnian guan: Shijie yu Zhongguo de shijiao" *Xinwen pindao* (news.cctv.cn) February 13, 2016.

⁵⁰ Yoo Seungki, "South Koreans impressed by Chinese president's personal charm" *en.people.cn*, July 18, 2014; PRC MOFA, "President Xi Jinping Delivers an Important Speech in ROK's Seoul National University...," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, July 4, 2014.

⁵¹ Emily Rauhala, "104 Years Later, a Chinese Train Station Platform is Still the Site of Anti-Japanese Rancor," *Time*, January 30, 2014.

- ⁵² Perlez, "China Exhibit, Part of an Anti-Japan Campaign, Reflects and Escalating Feud," *New York Times*, February 9, 2014. Interestingly, some reports indicate that ROK President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) had previously requested that a commemoration of An be placed at the Harbin Railway Station but his request was rebuffed. However, a small exhibition on An Chung-gun was reportedly established in a nearby museum in 2006. Marcus Noland, "Terrorists, Freedom Fighters, Diplomacy, and Memory," *North Korea: Witness to Transformation*, Peterson Institute for International Economics, July 8, 2014.
- ⁵³ "An Zhonggen cisha Yiteng Bowen shimo: Xingdong qian yong hanwen xie te mingzhi." *Lishi pindao yangshi wang (history.cntv.cn)*, January 26, 2014.
- ⁵⁴ "China's memorial for Korean patriot to be rebuilt," *Xinhua*, April 12, 2016.
- ⁵⁵ Perlez, "China Exhibit, Part of an Anti-Japan Campaign, Reflects and Escalating Feud," *New York Times*, February 9, 2014.
- ⁵⁶ Kwon Mee-yoo, "Ahn Jung-geun musical 'Hero' invited to China," *Korea Times*, November 9, 2014.
- ⁵⁷ "Zhong-Han dianying luntan zai jing juban 'Yishi An Zhonggen' cheng shoubu hepai pian," *Zongyi (CCTV)*, January 13, 2016.
- ⁵⁸ Yi Whan-woo, "Battle for UNESCO listing in full swing," *Korea Times*, October 10, 2015.
- ⁵⁹ "China-ROK relations their 'best in history,'" *ChinaDaily*, July 3, 2014; Zhang Dan, "China-ROK relations their 'best in history'" *CCTV News*, July 2, 2014.
- ⁶⁰ Seong Yeon-cheol, "The brief honeymoon between S. Korea and China is over," *Hankyoreh*, Feb 22, 2016.
- ⁶¹ "Japanese government voices disapproval of Ahn Jung-gun memorial," *Hankyoreh*, January 21, 2014.
- ⁶² "China refutes Japanese criticism of Korean activist's commemoration" *CCTV*, January 22, 2014.
- ⁶³ Memorial for Korean who fought Japanese colonization," *Xinhua*, January 20, 2014.
- ⁶⁴ For example, in 2014, the PRC described its efforts to quash Uighur activism and separatism as a "year-long campaign against terrorism." "Why is there tension between China and the Uighurs?" *BBC News*, September 26, 2014.
- ⁶⁵ In reaction to the public criticism of the posters, the Inch'on police stated "We had no intention of bringing disgrace on Ahn Jung-guen...It was a mistake made while looking for a hand image that signifies stop." "Incheon police under fire for using patriotism symbol on anti-terrorism posters," *Korea Times*, February 13, 2017.

⁶⁶ Wang Yuanzhou, "Three Images of An Chunggun in Chinese Narratives," 147.

⁶⁷ Scott Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*, 190.

⁶⁸ Seong Yeon-cheol, "The brief honeymoon between S. Korea and China is over" *Hankyoreh*, Feb 22, 2016.

⁶⁹ See also Lily Kuo, "China-South Korea relations may be better than ever, but they'll never be that great," *Quartz*, July 3, 2014.

⁷⁰ Xu Wei, "China's Anti-THAAD Campaign Cost South Korea Almost USD7 Billion in Lost Tourism Revenue," *YicaiGlobal*, December 4, 2017. See also Troy Stangarone, "South Korean Losses from China's THAAD Retaliation Continue to Grow" *The Peninsula*, Korea Economic Institute of America, January 16, 2018.

⁷¹ "China relocates Ahn Jung-geun Memorial Hall," *KBS World Radio*, March 22, 2017.

⁷² "China-donated statue of Korean national hero unveiled in S. Korean city," *Korea News Gazette*, October 20, 2017.

⁷³ Pak Kyong-man, "Si Chinp'ing chisiro An Chung-gun uisa tongsang iradoni..." *Hangyoreh*, August 10, 2017.

⁷⁴ PRC MOFA, "President Xi Jinping Delivers an Important Speech in ROK's Seoul National University..." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, July 4, 2014.

⁷⁵ "Full text: Xi Jinping in military parade speech vows China will 'never seek hegemony, expansion'" *Xinhua/SCMP*, September 3, 2015.