

# CHINESE VIEWS OF KOREAN HISTORY

The way Chinese officials and writers view the history of Korea—from ancient times to the post- Cold War developments in South Korea—matters for at least three reasons. It is a commentary on Chinese national identity since Korea bears importantly on multiple dimensions of how that identity has recently been constructed. It is likewise a window on how Chinese view the order they seek to forge in East Asia, linking it to the earlier Sinocentric order. Finally, Chinese views of Korea’s history offer valuable insight into China’s vision of the future of the Korean Peninsula and its relationship to China. It is commonplace to regard historical narrative as a lens on views of the present and plans for future policies, but this is even more the case for a country with the tradition of Confucian historiography with its extraordinary stress on correct thinking about the past, and communist historiography redolent with socialist realism insistent on a zero-sum understanding of the past. We read in Chinese historical writings on Korea a morality tale with undoubted relevance to how China constructs both its identity and its international relations.

The Korean Peninsula has significance for Chinese national identity beyond that of any foreign country except Russia and the United States with the possible exception of Japan. It is where ideology was honed as China sent the PLA to prevent the fall of North Korea after Mao had given his blessing along with Stalin to the North’s attack on the South. As ideology has grown again in importance, the significance of North Korea’s socialist pedigree and shared origins in the crucible of revolution against imperialism has risen. In the historical dimension of national identity, China’s leaders in the 1990s weighed allowing candor about the origins of the Korean War at a time when de-ideologization was fitfully taking place and there was no established narrative on history. Some saw sensitivity to North Korean reactions as the key to why China did not go further, but the resistance inside China proved more tenacious than they assumed. Historical purity toward Japan intensified apart from a short-lived interval with “new thinking” in 2003. With South Korea on the frontlines in China’s quest for demonization of Japan over history, its own history became a test case for the national identity gap between it and China. The history of Korea is so interwoven with that of China and it can reveal much about recent views.

As the country that even recently took pride in being the most Confucian of all, South Korea also spurred Chinese demands to show loyalty to the civilizational aspects of identity being constructed along with support for an increasing sense of a common economic space and of political restraint in siding with the United States without accepting balance with China. The meaning of civilizational deference was inseparable from historical memory, i.e., to recognize the benevolence of China’s past regional order as a source of harmony and stability, which should not be challenged, as in the “cultural wars” on the Internet between Chinese and South Koreans around 2007-10 or in hosting the Dalai Lama with obvious invocations of a shared past in dealing with China’s centrality. South Korean dramas attracted a wide audience in China, but they were carefully screened to avoid historically sensitive themes, revealing the wide gap in thinking about history—not only about Koguryo, as took center stage from 2004, but about any indication of a “superiority complex” unwilling to credit the Chinese order for its great merits.

The four chapters that follow cover Chinese publications on Korea’s past chronologically. The first chapter by me ranges from the ancient period with an emphasis on the 7th century, when three states vied for control in Korea and drew Japan and China into their wars, to the 16th and 17th centuries, when Japan’s invasion of Korea drew Chinese troops back

but also Korea's role in the Ming-Qing transition that garnered Chinese writers' attention, to the 19th century, when a third period of instability and international rivalry rocked the peninsula. In each of the three cases, China is seen as virtuous, Japan as evil, and Korea as vacillating—falling short of what was expected of it. Some of the same shortcomings found in Japan's conduct were visible on the Korean side too: pursuing autonomous diplomacy in contradiction to the norms of the China-led order; aspiring to a micro-order of its own in relations with neighbors such as the Jurchens, the Ryukyus, and Tsushima, and lacking gratitude for the benevolence of China in sustaining its harmonious regional order. In each instance, Korean intrigues did not bode well for peace and stability, Koreans suffered, Japan capitalized on Korean moves, and finally only China coming to the rescue saved Korea, although in the last case, that is still a work in progress as China recovers from a period of weakness and is only beginning to offer a "community of common destiny" as a way forward for Seoul as well as a better solution for North Korea's future in the context of the nuclear crisis and uncertainty over how reunification can ensue.

## Gilbert Rozman, "Chinese Views of Korean History to the Late 19th Century"

The premodern era seemingly presented a promising opportunity for China to find common ground with South Korea. Both see Japan's aggressive moves in the three critical periods noted above in a similar light. Both have a benign outlook on Confucianism, at least in comparison to other countries' thinking. China could have concentrated on the commonalities and proceeded to nudge Koreans to accept a positive attitude toward revival of an East Asian community. Yet, the historical writings in China eschew common ground for insistence on demonization of Japan with spillover to guilt by association for Korea, for glorification of Confucianism interpreted in so narrow a manner that a hierarchical, authoritarian element stands out, and for making full support for a China-led community a *sine qua non*. As the Koguryo dispute made crystal clear, historical issues related to Korea are too important to leave room for seeking understanding.

## Kirk Larsen, "Chinese Views of Korean History in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries"

Kirk Larsen makes clear in his chapter that Chinese officials identify a shared understanding of history with Korea as one of the pillars of the Sino-ROK relationship, emphasizing the response to imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Yet, whereas Chinese insist that their country was uniquely peace-loving and benevolent to neighbors, Koreans recall aggressive and overbearing Chinese historical behavior. Chinese make no apology for China's unassailable position of political superiority and civilizational arbiter, while Koreans find this incompatible with the principles of equality between states and respect for autonomy—a relic for which no pride should be taken.

Larsen finds not only that a sense of mutually-shared victimization at the hands of the Japanese has been utilized by leaders in both Beijing and Seoul to seek to cement closer ties, but that this is manipulated by Chinese to drown out other narratives on the Korean side: a Korea struggling for separation from China to establish a modern national identity and to clarify its sovereignty. What he views as Chinese moves to assert greater control by

an empire—contrary to both the notion of “national humiliation” and the idea of China as an exceptional, non-aggressive, and peace-loving power—are perceived differently in Chinese publications, which show no sympathy with neighbors fearful of China’s intentions as they draw on different memories of its past deeds.

After Japan had annexed Korea, Larson finds Chinese contemporaries as well as recent writings longing for Korean liberation 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 or, at least, a subordinate in a China-led hierarchical order. He writes that 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, opening 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. Capitalizing on the popularity in South Korea of An Chunggun, the assassin of Ito Hirobumi, Chinese have made him a central feature of the narrative they seek to share about the history of this period and its significance for Sino-ROK cooperation against Japan’s current policies and aspirations. The high-water mark of such historical comradery was 2015, but doubts were building over: 1) the tension between the lionization of An’s heroic act of violence and the general tendency today to condemn violence in general and acts that can be described as “terrorism” in particular; 2) An’s vision of Sino-Korean-Japanese cooperation is ignored in China as is its inspiration for regional cooperation on an equal basis; and 3) Park’s late 2015 breakthrough with Abe on the “comfort women” issue threatened to derail the “maximum pressure” campaign against Japan centered on history. Recent Chinese heavy-handedness toward South Korea has put Chinese writings on the past in a more unfavorable light, serving as warnings to Koreans about being dragged into any “history war” with a partner whose intentions may be sharply at variance with Seoul’s interests.

## Jin Linbo, “Chinese Views of Korean History in the Cold War Era”

The singular event shaping Chinese views of the Korean Peninsula in the Cold War era and to the present was the Korean War. Jin Linbo examines its impact on writings on history during the height of the Cold War and even in the 1980s, while assessing changes in the 1990s and 2000s. In 2016 he argues that the THAAD deployment rekindled attitudes lingering from the Cold War period, which had been deeply embedded in historical memory. The engrained interpretations were that the capitalist enemy, not the socialist friend, started the Korean War with a view to overthrowing not only the socialist government in Pyongyang but also the similar one in Beijing. Against this background China’s attitudes and policies toward the two Koreas in the post-Korean War era were doomed to be ideology-driven and DPRK sympathetic, completely fixed within the Cold War framework of friend and foe until the end of the 1970s and only partially modified after normalization to convey an “objective description” of the origin of the Korean War without accusing South Korea of provoking it. As China’s national image of the ROK has generally transformed into a much more positive one in comparison to the image of the DPRK, the insuperable differences between mainstream Chinese and South Korean views of Korean history have endured with significant implications for relations in the post-Cold War era. Perceptions of the Korean

War formulated right after the start of the war and partially reshaped four decades later when diplomatic normalization was realized and the relevant dossiers of the former Soviet Union were released from the middle of the 1990s have remained influential in shaping China's attitudes and policies toward the Korean Peninsula at the present time.

The sudden deterioration of Sino-South Korean relations caused by the deployment of THAAD in 2016 explicitly revealed the limits of the economic cooperation centered redefinition in China-ROK ties since the end of the Cold War, Jin explains. After more than two decades of the redefinition efforts, the mainstream Chinese view of Korean history in the Cold War era remains largely unchanged. In 2014-15 China's expectations for Sino-South Korean relations rose to an unrealistic level, as the South Korean political will for broadening shared interest in history issues against Japan raised expectations, the potential for a sharp letdown was obvious in the historical understanding conveyed in China, that went far beyond the era of Japanese imperialism.

If some Chinese authors started making arguments against North Korea with regard to the origin of the Korean War and questioned the legitimacy of China's participation in it, including its negative impact on the resolution of the Taiwan issue and on China's economy at that time, those academic arguments had only resonated weakly and were far from embraced by the mainstream. In Chinese eyes the situation created by the THAAD deployment was something quite similar to the situation in the 1950s-60s when China and the DPRK fiercely condemned the U.S.-Japan-South Korean military alliance relations. China's disapproval of the ROK-U.S. alliance and the trilateral military cooperation remains unchanged from what it was during the Cold War years.

After more than two decades of redefinition efforts, mainstream Chinese views of Korean history in the Cold War era remain largely unchanged, especially when it comes to the confrontational relations between China, South Korea, and the United States, concludes Jin, who refers to a congenital deficiency—the mutual security distrust caused by the remaining Cold War legacy. China's disapproval of the continued military alliance relations among the United States, Japan, and South Korea has clearly revealed the limitations in the redefinition of perceptions towards South Korea in the post-Cold War era. As long as the assessments of the history of the Cold War era remain rooted in arguments long familiar to the Chinese people, there will be a disposition to find continuities and doubt that the post-Cold War decades and the history of China's relations with South Korea have brought fundamental change on matters of geopolitics or national identity.

## Yun Sun, “The Chinese Perception of the U.S.-Japan-ROK Triangle”

In writing about the post-Cold War period with an emphasis on geopolitics, Chinese authors do not often treat South Korean policy or Sino-ROK relations as autonomous. Because of the weight given to the U.S. role, it is important to take a triangular approach in assessing these writings centered on South Korea. There are primarily three angles that the Chinese policy community adopts in its discussion of relations with South Korea. First is the bilateral angle between China and South Korea, of which the Chinese assessment has been largely positive. This lens concentrates on what authors regard as the state of evolving relations

between Beijing and Seoul, but it does not escape the shadow of triangularity since Seoul gains credit by boosting bilateral ties with strategic implications while losing credit when it makes strategic decisions that ignore Beijing's concerns and demonstrate greater U.S. significance. The second lens is the regional one. For China, South Korea has an important regional role and could become a key supportive force in China's desired regional order as a critical "ally" in battling Japanese historical revisionism and militarism and jointly keeping Japan's political and regional ambitions in check. A test of this lens is whether Seoul subscribes to either U.S.-Japan-ROK triangularity, deemed to be aimed at containment of China, or the Indo-Pacific framework touted by both Abe Shinzo and Donald Trump in late 2017. The third lens is the U.S. angle. All the damage and/or burdens that South Korea has imposed on China originates from the U.S.-ROK military alliance. Because of the existence of the military alliance, South Korea is not believed to have the authority to pursue completely independent national security policies, authors argue.

Chinese have identified growing indications of South Korea subtly recalibrating its relations with China and the United States. Although the U.S.-ROK military alliance remains dominant, the hope of strategic realignment has always been on the horizon. Under Kim Young-sam, South Korea's relations with the United States endured some major turbulence, primarily because of different policies toward North Korea, showing the possibility of a closer relationship with South Korea even as a U.S. ally. In the 1995 rift between South Korea and the United States, as well as the negative changes in South Korea-Japan relations, the Chinese saw an opening. Under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun the rifts between South Korea and the United States over the North Korea issue and South Korea's pursuit of equality with the United States undermined, to some degree, the military alliance. The emerging anti-Americanism and South Korea's growing nationalism were also affecting ties with China. Chinese experts found a list of issues that South Korean nationalists exploited that damaged bilateral relations. Under Lee Myung-bak, the decision by Obama and Lee to regionalize and globalize their strategic alliance during Lee's 2009 visit to the United States proved very alarming. Chinese saw this as an extension of the U.S.-ROK strategic alliance beyond its original focus on the Korean Peninsula. In 2010 China blamed the North Korean provocations and the cooling of inter-Korea relations almost entirely on Lee's abandonment of the Sunshine Policy.

With Park Geun-hye in charge, Xi Jinping raised his hopes to improve China's strategic position, planning to turn South Korea into China's "pivotal" state in Northeast Asia, thus undermining the U.S. alliance system. This was the boldest attempt during the entire quarter century to fundamentally alter the shape of the triangle, although it came at a time of conservative leadership in Seoul and of intensified South Korean alarm about the direction of North Korea's actions. One might have assumed that expectations would not have risen so high in such inauspicious circumstances. Xi Jinping seized the opportunity of Park's early overtures to intensify contacts and boost ties, while Chinese narratives extolled the significance of these improved relations. Xi's diplomacy was more a sign of taking Pak's straddling for granted than of wooing her in a sustainable manner. Chinese writings obscured the essence of the challenge and fueled the far-reaching letdown that followed.

China sees the THAAD deployment as a threat to strategic stability with the United States and an obstacle to its desired regional blueprint. Simply aiming to improve ties with South Korea and undermine the U.S.-ROK alliance without answering the critical question of China's relationship with North Korea is unlikely to succeed. To the Chinese, Moon appears more interested in a balanced approach toward the United States and China than did Park at the end of her time in office. He did not withdraw the decision to deploy THAAD but tried to appease China with the "three noes." Hopes for driving a wedge in the alliance are again on the upswing.