

Shared History, Divided
Consciousness: The Origins of
the Sino-ROK Cultural Clash
amid the Pandemic

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Since 1992, bilateral relations between China and South Korea have sustained a state of positive development, although there have naturally been some moments of friction and contradictions. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, a number of disputes arose between netizens in China and South Korea over such things as the origin of pickled vegetables (paocai in Chinese, kimchi in Korean) and the Van Fleet award acceptance speech of South Korea's BTS singing group. Different interpretations of a few thousand years of bilateral interactions—cultural, political, military, historical, and other topics mutually entangling the two—have led to some sharply vitriolic disputes between netizens in the two neighboring countries. Today's tensions over national identity issues are rooted in how history is understood in the two countries and the enduring salience of cultural symbols of identity tied to history.

Nobody could have anticipated that pickled vegetables would, ultimately, become a focus of the 2020 dispute between netizens of China and South Korea. Since over a decade ago when the Gangneung Danoje (端午祭) was granted UNESCO recognition and other developments occurred, all the way up to today's pickles, it seems that almost all ongoing Sino-South Korean identity disputes are connected to the entangled histories of the two sides. Seen from the history of cultural exchanges from long ago, is traditional medicine, after all, your Chinese medicine or my Korean medicine? Is traditional dress our Han Chinese clothing or your Korean clothing? Is the May 5 festival our Duanwujie (端午節, Dragon Boat Festival) or your Danoje? Are vegetables marinated by pickling, our "paocai" or your "kimchi"? A thousand-year cultural legacy should be a factor to strengthen shared identity and tighten cultural connections in Sino-South Korea relations. However, against the current geopolitical and geo-economical background, shared cultural connections unexpectedly became the focus of contention between the two neighbors.

Geopolitically, China and South Korea have been involved in different political camps since World War II. During the decades of Cold War, these two countries unfortunately fell into hot war although they were not each other's main enemy. Each country describes the war and justifies its actions through its own lens. Was the war, after all, our "War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea" or your "Korean War"? Different memories of the war led to widespread, fervent protest from Chinese fans against South Korea's popular singing group BTS's acceptance speech in receiving the Van Fleet Award by the Korea Society. Sensitivity toward remarks about the war some 70 years ago has unexpectedly heightened recently.

Geo-economically, China and South Korea have been interdependent over the past three decades. China has been the biggest trade partner of South Korea for many years. The Chinese market is bigger than the U.S. and Japanese ones combined for Korean products. The market matters. The Samsung Group and Hyundai Group have had to react to the voices of customers and stop showing an advertisement performed by BTS. Also, when Seoul and Washington decided to deploy THAAD in South Korea, Seoul had to face the negative economic consequences of its deteriorating bilateral relationship with China. Both geopolitical differences and historical memories are now capable of arousing economic retaliation.

This chapter analyzes from the angle of how history and the present are linked the current identity conflicts between China and South Korea. It recognizes that using today's concepts to evaluate history leads clearly to tearing asunder Sino-South Korean mutual historical recognition. At the same time, the influence of values, geopolitics, differences in level of development, and other factors, along with cultural clashes between China and South Korea intersecting with political and security topics mutually arouse and even worsen relations between the two peoples. Security confrontations and ideological divergence have severely worsened public relations between the Chinese and South Koreans. These disputes, such as the Korean War and THAAD, have become important backdrops for the emergence and exacerbation of cultural rifts.

Cultural Heritage: Yours or Mine?

Pickled vegetables are just one of many traditional foods in China. As early as 3,000 years ago, in *The Book of Songs* (詩經 小雅 信南山), there is a poem that reads: "There are residential houses in the middle of the field, with fruits and vegetables on the ridge. Peel, cut and pickle into pickles to present to our great ancestors. It is by the blessing of Heaven that their descendants live long and well." A work from the Northern Wei Dynasty, more than 1,000 years ago, describes in detail the various methods ancient Chinese people used to make pickles with raw materials, such as cabbage, in the hope of extending the preservation period of the vegetable. According to materials online, pickles were introduced to the Korean Peninsula during the Three Kingdoms Period.¹

Chili originated in South America and was introduced to Europe and even Asia after the great geographical discovery of the "New World." In China, red chili had been introduced to inland areas such as Sichuan and Hunan provinces through coastal areas, and was adapted to the unique cultural and climatic conditions in inland areas, making the food known for its spicy flavor. As a traditional producing area, Meishan City of Sichuan began to compile international standards for pickle specifications and test methods in 2017. In November 2020, the international standard ISO24220 was released. Meishan municipal government believes that the successful formulation and release of the standard is a direct reflection of China's pickle industry's substantive participation in international standardization work, and will play a huge role in promoting the development of China's pickle industry to a better and stronger direction.²

In today's South Korea, kimchi is a must-have side dish on every table. It has become something of a Korean food cultural icon. If you ask Chinese people to list the typical Korean diet, it would be kimchi, roast meat, bibimbap, cold noodles, and a few other dishes. So, it is not surprising that people around the world, including the Chinese, regard kimchi as a symbol of the Korean diet. However, it does not mean the Chinese believe kimchi originated in Korea, or that they do not include it in China's diverse and traditional diet. The reaction of the South Korean government toward the China-initiated international standard for pickled vegetables was to claim that the standard system does not apply to Korea's kimchi.

On December 30, 2017, Chinese web celebrity Li Ziqi, who has more than 10 million followers, posted a video of herself making kimchi entitled “Sour and sweet, a delicacy to warm your wintry days—spicy Chinese cabbage” on YouTube. The video description read, “Mist after the frost swallows the landscape, and refuses to disperse all day long! The Chinese cabbage that withstands the ice and frost is exceptionally fresh and sweet. The same as usual, I shred some to make spicy Chinese cabbage. It’s a traditional dish for Yanbian Chinese of Korean Nationality, but the recipe varies from family to family.” South Korean netizens immediately kicked up a storm, accusing China of stealing South Korea’s cultural heritage, making comments of an extremely vulgar nature. They left comments below the video and argued that “Kimchi is Korean, COVID-19 is Chinese.” Some even asked: “Do you have a kimchi refrigerator? You don’t even have a kimchi fridge and how can you say kimchi is from China?!”³ These netizens are extremely condescending and illogical.

On the disputes between some Chinese and South Korean netizens and public figures over “ownership” of kimchi, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has issued a formal response: “I am not an expert in food,” the spokesperson Hua Chunying said in response to a request at a regular press briefing on January 20, 2021. Hua said,

In my opinion, kimchi, as a kind of pickled and fermented food, does not exist only in a few countries or regions. There are ‘paocai’ in China, and ‘kimchi’ in Korea and the Korean ethnic group in China. There are similarities between them, but they have their own differences in materials, flavors and preparation methods. There should still be beneficial and friendly exchanges on academic issues related to kimchi from the perspective of food. But prejudice should not be brought in to avoid antagonism.”⁴

In recent years, beside pickles, Chinese and South Korean netizens have had heated debates about traditional festivals, medicines, clothing, etc. The two countries have a long history of communication, and almost all identity conflicts between China and South Korea originate from 3,000 years of entangled history, beginning with Jizi Gojoseon in the late Zhou Dynasty. Chinese culture spread to the Korean Peninsula, the Japanese archipelago, Southeast Asia, and beyond, and had a profound political, economic, social, and cultural impact on the surrounding areas, especially for the Korean Peninsula. From Chinese characters to printing, from Confucianism to family values, the cultural influence was so extensive and profound that Koreans consider it part of their own culture.

While absorbing Chinese culture, South Korea also carried out localization of culture and formed its own culture. After the dynasty changed from Ming, the Koreans believed that the Qing Dynasty was inferior to Korea in civilization and was a “barbarian nation,” even that “after the Ming Dynasty, there was no China” and regarded itself as “Little China.” In our survey ten years ago, on the influence of Chinese traditional culture, most of the South Korean respondents thought that Chinese culture had a huge impact on Korea in history (77.2 percent), at the same time, 63.5 percent of respondents said that it was South Korea rather than China that preserved Confucian culture better. Only 34.6 percent of the South Korean respondents believed that the Mid-Autumn Festival and the Spring Festival originated in China, while 47.8 percent of respondents denied this.⁵ There should be no surprise for those aware of South Korean perceptions of bilateral cultural relations when disputes over traditional festivals, traditional food, traditional medicine, traditional clothing, and other issues arise between China and South Korea.

Chinese consider the kind of center-periphery structure that prevailed under the premodern state system to have not been derogatory; even South Korea had a certain sense of superiority by being in the “semi-periphery” between China, the Korean Peninsula, and the Japanese archipelago. Korean explanations for the origins of the country have evolved. Sun Weiguo pointed out that since the Joseon Dynasty, the Korean Peninsula has changed from a strong advocate of Jizi Gojoseon worship to solely Dangun Gojoseon, and shifting identity is the key to this change. As a vassal state of the Ming Dynasty, the Jizi Gojoseon was in the Chinese world system. Jizi, as a civilizing prince from the Zhou Dynasty, promoted Joseon to the status of “Little China” and was the key figure to realize the “transition from non-Han tribes in the east to part of Chinese culturally (由夷入華)” in Joseon, and was highly respected. Meanwhile, Dangun was in an inferior position. In modern times, with the forced opening by Western forces and annexation by Japanese colonial forces, the Chinese world system disintegrated. Jizi was abandoned, and Dangun’s status as the nation’s ancestor was established and strengthened, becoming the focus for strengthening the national cohesion of Korea. Therefore, the needs of national identity drove the evolution of the interpretation of Korea’s history.⁶

In modern times, South Koreans have embraced the concepts of independence and equality, denied the legitimacy of Jizi Gojoseon, legitimized the legend, myth, and orthodoxy of Dangun’s founding, and attacked the unequal state relations under the ancient tributary system. Not only on the origin of the country, but also on the achievements of cultural exchanges between China and South Korea, such as clothing, medical skills, diet culture and so on, these two countries have different interpretations.

As the British historian Edward Carr argues, history is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, a never-ending question-and-answer conversation between the present and the past.⁷ People with today’s concept of country, territory, sovereignty, intellectual property rights, and so on, try to explain history. Unfortunately, people tend to interpret history in a way that benefits their self-esteem and self-confidence, and some scholars are willing to cater to this nationalistic demand.

Fan Culture under the Impact of War Memory: Your “Korean War” or my “War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea?”

In October 2020, on receiving the Van Fleet Award, BTS said: “this year’s award is very significant because it marks the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War. We will always remember the history of suffering shared by our two countries, and the sacrifice of countless men and women. 70 years later... BTS will always remind itself of the significance of the Van Fleet Award.” Given South Korean education in Korean history, this understanding of the Korean War is not surprising. However, from Chinese netizens’ perspective, it is not an “entertainment award,” but a “political one,” mixing entertainment with politics. The award commemorates the American general Van Fleet, the commander of the famous battle “Shangganling” (Sangganmyong in Korean), in which the heavy artillery fire of the U.S. and South Korean troops caused huge casualties to the Chinese volunteer troops. The movie “Battle of Shangganling” is widely known in China, and the episode “My Motherland” has been sung by generations in China. BTS’s speech made its Chinese

fans aware of the antagonism between China and South Korea during the war and their different interpretations of that painful period of history. Those fans decided that they could either continue to follow their idols or stay true to their country's history and find fault with another country's idols. Considering the possible negative effect on its products, Samsung has removed BTS smartphones and headsets from its official store on e-commerce platform JD.com, Alibaba's Tmall, and its own website in light of the controversy that BTS testimonies caused among Chinese netizens. Korean car maker Hyundai's Chinese social media accounts have also been cleared of BTS related contents, according to search results. In this way, clashing views of history have led to economic retribution against the other side.

This chapter borrows the concept of "superficial friends" to analyze Sino-Korean relations, from Yan Xuetong, who argues that the structural contradiction between the rise of China and the unipolar hegemony of the United States determines that in the process of catching up with the United States, strategic competition between them is inevitable, and it is difficult for the two countries to establish a real strategic friendly relationship. Good will to improve the strategic relationship becomes the basis of the superficial friend strategy. The two sides have repeatedly temporarily alleviated conflicts of interest by using false sweet words to describe the bilateral relationship, but this "superficial friend" strategy has also led to frequent ups and downs in relations because the two countries lack an objective basis for common interests.⁸ Without a shared identity and broad common interests, not just agreement on geopolitics, China and South Korea face a similar barrier to becoming more than "superficial friends."

What is the relationship between China and South Korea? They fought each other on the battlefield from 1950 to 1953 and endured decades of Cold War confrontation, during which relations were clearly hostile. It was not until 1992 that they established diplomatic relations. Subjectively, they bid farewell to the status of "true enemies" and tried to develop friendly relations. According to the 1992 Joint Communique on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations, the two governments agreed to develop lasting good-neighborly and cooperative relations on the basis of the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence in accordance with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations. In a diplomatic communique, the two reached consensus on language to manage the issues of greatest concern (China's attention to the One China principle, Korea's concern for the unification of the Korean Peninsula). The South Korean government recognizes the government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China, and respects the Chinese position that there is only one China and Taiwan is part of China. The Chinese government respects the desire of the Korean nation to realize the peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula at an early date and supports the realization of peaceful reunification by the Korean nation itself. The two governments believed that the establishment of diplomatic ties would contribute to the relaxation and stability of the situation on the Korean Peninsula as well as peace and stability in Asia.

The end of hostilities does not mean the establishment of true friendship, although both sides are trying to maintain the good momentum of bilateral relations. Only one month after the normalization of the bilateral relationship, South Korean President Roh Tae-woo visited China, the first visit by a Korean president since the foundation of the ROK. In 1998, President Kim Dae-jung visited China, during which the two sides announced the establishment of the Sino-ROK Cooperative Partnership Oriented toward the 21st Century. In 2003, President Roh Moo-hyun visited China and the two sides announced the establishment of the Sino-ROK Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership. In 2008, when President Lee Myung-bak visited China, the two sides announced the start of the Sino-ROK Strategic Cooperative Partnership. Judging from the words of the two sides, bilateral official relations reach a new level every five years or so. In addition to official political relations, bilateral economic, trade, and personnel exchanges have also grown rapidly. In July 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a visit to the ROK, during which the two sides announced that China and the ROK will strive to become partners for common development, regional peace, revitalization of Asia, and the prosperity of the world. In 2015, President Park Geun-hye went to Beijing to attend the parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of the victory of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. Park and Vladimir Putin accompanied Xi Jinping at Tiananmen, indicating that the official relations between the two countries were at the highest level since the establishment of diplomatic ties. Arguably, such actions and official statements indicate that both sides are playing up the relationship between “partners” and “friends.” The problem is that if external threats arise, South Korea would find that China is not a true partner it can count on. China has also found that its own security concerns have not been considered enough and have even been seriously infringed by the joint actions of South Korea and the U.S. Geopolitical divides undermine claims of friendship and fuel national identity gaps when historical issues are brought to the surface.

The 2010 attack on the Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island led to a marked shift in Sino-South Korean relations. South Korea’s level of dissatisfaction toward China was very high. However, the Chinese side did not understand such strong sentiment. South Koreans believe that, as a “strategic partner,” China should stand by its side in condemning North Korea’s military provocations, rather than “shielding” the North. China perceived that the North did not admit that the Cheonan incident was planned by the North, and the shelling incident of Yeonpyeong Island was closely related to South Korea’s military exercises in the disputed waters despite the North’s warnings. South Korea’s view of China began to deteriorate after 2010. From South Korea’s point of view, no matter how high the trade volume between China and South Korea, no matter how “strategic” the bilateral relationship, it cannot match the traditional “blood alliance” relationship between China and North Korea. Some American and Korean scholars concluded that these two events led to a cognitive gap between China and South Korea.⁹

One of the worst drawbacks of a “superficial friend” relationship is having unrealistic expectations of the counterpart, and when those expectations fail, it can lead to disappointment, dissatisfaction, and even anger. This is especially seen in 2016. On January 6, the DPRK conducted its fourth nuclear test. In February, the ROK announced that it was discussing the deployment of THAAD with the U.S. In July, the U.S. and the ROK announced the deployment of the THAAD missile defense system in the ROK. “[We are] discussing various cooperation plans with China, including the phone call with President Xi,” Jeong Yeon-guk, spokesman for the Blue House, was quoted by South Korean media as saying in an interview. The ROK expects that leaders of the ROK and China will soon have a phone call to coordinate their response to the DPRK nuclear issue and discuss joint pressure on the DPRK after its nuclear test. The report singled out Park Geun-hye’s “Tiananmen Diplomacy” in September 2015 as having cemented ties.¹⁰ The truth is that the Chinese and South Korean leaders did not speak on the phone until February 5th. After North Korea’s nuclear test, “Park expects President Xi to show a positive attitude on the issue of sanctions against the North,” a senior official in South Korea’s ruling circle said, according to *Chosun Ilbo*. “However, she couldn’t even get through by phone. She was very disappointed.” It is reported that in this process, Park showed a sense of frustration bordering on “anger.” Immediately after the missile launches, she decided to begin negotiations on the deployment of THAAD, which China strongly opposes. Diplomatic circles have said that behind the decision lies Park’s “anger” at China.” She said, ‘How could China act like this while I attended China’s ceremony despite domestic and foreign opposition?’¹¹ Lee Dong-ryul said that in the 25 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, South Korea has been trying to cooperate with China to solve the North Korean nuclear issue in the context of China’s expectation of its role, but in the end, the goal was not denuclearization, but the escalation of North Korea’s nuclear weapons development. The cooperation between South Korea and China on the Korean nuclear issue has not worked, and the expectation of “China’s role” has not been realized.¹² This ignores that China has condemned the North’s nuclear test and supported the adoption of sanctions against the North at the United Nations Security Council. South Korea still believes that China’s actions fall far short of South Korea’s expectations.

Speaking to reporters after South Korea announced the THAAD deployment, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, “The deployment of the THAAD system goes far beyond the defense needs of the peninsula. We have every reason and right to question the real design behind this move. We urge the US side not to base its own security on the insecurity of other countries, still less to undermine the legitimate security interests of other countries under the pretext of so-called security threats. We also hope that South Korean friends calmly ponder whether the deployment of the THAAD system is truly conducive to the security of the ROK, peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and the solution of the nuclear issue on the Peninsula. The relevant parties must be careful to avoid making a big mistake.”¹³ At this point, China still expected its “South Korean friends” to consider China’s strategic security concerns and not deploy THAAD. Such expectations were soon dashed. Acting President Hwang Kyo-ahn accelerated the deployment of the THAAD system as Park Geun-hye faced impeachment over allegations of political interference by a close friend.

The U.S.-ROK THAAD project has seriously damaged China's strategic security interests and greatly damaged China-ROK relations, raising tensions between China and the U.S. It also shows that South Korea has ignored China's security concerns and sided with the U.S. in the China-U.S. standoff. South Korea sees itself as defending against threats from the North and is reluctant to admit the damage THAAD has done to China's strategic security interests. It sees China's countermeasures against South Korea as damaging its relationship with China. Relations deteriorated sharply since THAAD. After taking office, President Moon Jae-in made many diplomatic efforts to mend bilateral ties by reaching consensus on THAAD with China. During his visit to China in December 2017, the two sides had an in-depth exchange of views and reached consensus on promoting the improvement of China-ROK relations and strengthening communication and cooperation on the Korean Peninsula and other international and regional issues.¹⁴ However, "China-South Korea relations have yet to emerge from the shadow of THAAD."

According to a poll of 14 developed countries released by the U.S. Pew Research Center on October 6, 2020, the percentage of South Korean people holding negative attitudes towards China has continued to expand since 2002, rising from 31 percent to 75 percent in 2020.¹⁵

According to the Gallup survey in South Korea, September 8, 2013, 50 percent of the South Korean respondents had a favorable view of Xi Jinping, a figure that rose to 59 percent after his visit to Korea in July 2014. However, along with the deterioration of bilateral relations due to deployment of THAAD, the favorability rate toward China's top leader dropped to 25 percent in May 2017. China's constitutional amendment was also a negative event for South Koreans. In a March 2018 survey, the figure had dropped to a low of 19 percent—the lowest in the six surveys—with 66 percent saying they "dislike" him.¹⁶ According to Gallup Korea's 2019 favorable ratings, 29 percent of respondents from 50 countries have a favorable view of Xi Jinping, while 41 percent have a negative view. In South Korea, only 15 percent said they liked him, and a whopping 82 percent said they did not.¹⁷

The impact of the BTS speech on China-South Korea relations is minor if we compare it to that of THAAD in 2016, which became important background for the occurrence of cultural clashes. The BTS case is a symbolic event that highlights the fragility of bilateral public relations under the smokescreen of "superficial friends." The year 2020 marks the 70th anniversary of the Korean War. China has held a grand ceremony to commemorate the volunteer soldiers who died in the war. The BTS speech is not strange when seen from the point of view of South Koreans, but for some Chinese netizens, it is very difficult to accept. When talking about "sacrifice," BTS think of the civilian South Koreans and soldiers of the ROK and U.S. While for the Chinese netizens, they think of thousands of volunteer Chinese soldiers sacrificed in the war. Different war memories remind Chinese netizens that South Korea's security interests are closely tied with the U.S, the most important strategic rival of China. When it comes to the essence of the relationship, it becomes clear that South Korea is an imaginary friend.

According to our survey in 2009, 81.5 percent of South Korean respondents did not believe that China supported Korean reunification, and 73.1 percent believed that China posed a military threat to South Korea. When asked how South Korea would respond if a military conflict broke out between China and the United States, 65.7 percent of respondents chose to be neutral, while 30.1 percent chose to support the United States, far outpacing the 2.5 percent who chose to support China. Respondents from South Korea believe that the most important factors hindering friendly relations between China and South Korea are: the China-DPRK alliance (27.9 percent), differences in views on historical issues (25.9 percent), differences in social systems between China and South Korea (17.4 percent), the ROK-U.S. alliance (10.7 percent), and economic frictions between China and South Korea (10.7 percent).¹⁸ More than twice as many respondents believe that the China-DPRK alliance hinders the relationship between China and the ROK as the ROK-U.S. alliance. Political and social systems, historical issues, and security alliance rank at the top, factors which can hardly be changed in a short time. This indicates that the development of bilateral relations needs to overcome great obstacles.

China and South Korea had something of a “true friendship” during the Roh Moo-hyun administration. At that time, the South Korean government pursued a relatively independent foreign policy, tried to reduce the influence of the United States, and valued the importance of cooperation with China, which did not mean that the South Korean government was pro-China, but objectively created the “illusion” of a consensus despite their different interests. China and South Korea, both vehemently opposed to American military action against North Korea, had a tacit cooperation. With the United States embroiled in Iraq, South Korea felt less pressure to go to war and was less eager to cooperate with China, ignoring offers to resume the Six-Party Talks in 2008. Given the pro-American and pro-Japanese Lee Myung-bak administration in 2008, the short “true friendship” between China and South Korea came to an end.

Since the establishment of diplomatic ties more than 20 years ago, China and the ROK have had very close cultural exchanges. The “Han style” in the ROK and the “Korean wave” in China complement each other, which is the mainstream of the cultural exchanges between the two countries. Many K-pop stars have a strong fan base and influence in China. If K-pop stars care about these fans and potential consumers, they have to consider the “audience cost” of their speech. Judging from the statements made by the Chinese and South Korean governments, the two sides still hope to maintain overall bilateral relations and do not want to let such incidents harm them. On October 12, 2020, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian said in response to a question from Yonhap News Agency: “I have noted relevant reports and Chinese netizens’ reaction to this incident. What I want to say is that taking history as a mirror, looking into the future, cherishing peace, and promoting friendship should be our common pursuit and deserve our joint efforts.”¹⁹ On October 13, 2020, the ROK Foreign Ministry deputy spokesperson said at a regular press conference: “In order not to affect the mutual understanding and bond between the people of the two countries, the government is paying close attention to the relevant situation. In the future, the ROK will continue to make efforts to develop bilateral relations and promote bilateral friendship.”²⁰

In its history, China had experienced a similar situation to South Korea's gratitude to the United States due to the joint military efforts of the Ming Dynasty and Joseon Dynasty against Japan's invasion from 1592 to 1598. The military intervention then was essentially assistance to protect Korea and a defensive measure to safeguard the security of itself under the threat of Japan. As a Korean pointed out,

From the perspective of the China-centered East Asia pattern at that time, Korea is China's neighbor, while Japan faces China across the sea and is located at the eastern end of East Asia, that is, the outer profile. The basic cultural attitude of the foreign country (Japan) towards the central country (China) is identity and compatibility, but Japan is not willing to continue this China-centered East Asian pattern for a long time ... Toyotomi Hideyoshi dreams of ruling China, so as to break the China-centered East Asian order and establish a new Japan-centered East Asian pattern—to promote the so-called 'Japanese-style tributary consciousness.'²¹

The war, which lasted intermittently from 1592 to the end of 1598, ended with the death of Hideyoshi and victory of Ming China and Joseon and the defeat of Japan. Emperor Wanli rewarded the armies for "the triumph of the East and the great achievement of the world." This consolidated the vassal relationship between Joseon and Ming, which had no territorial ambitions toward Korea. After the war, the Ming Dynasty ordered the manager to supervise the country's princes and ministers in Korea, and take advantage of this wintertime to train for defense, supervising its combat skills, making clear his army made the country capable of self-defense. Hong Daeyong (洪大容), the Joseon envoy during the reign of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty, said in his Yanxing Record (燕行錄): "During the Wanli Period, Japanese thieves entered the East, and the eight provinces of Joseon were invaded. The emperor of the Ming Dynasty sent soldiers and spent money helping the Joseon. Seven years later, it was finished. By now, 200 years later, the happiness and benefit of the people were all due to Emperor Wanli. It might be due to the big burden of the war, Ming Dynasty came to an end, so our Joseon keeps mourning for today." China's assistance to Korea's security in history is not mentioned much nowadays. In today's Korean national education, the "Japanese Invasion of Korea in 1592" is mainly used to depict the greatness of people's efforts, General Yi Sun-sin's brave actions, and the advancement of his inventive turtle boat. The role of the Ming Dynasty during the war is marginalized.

The Transformation of Sino-South Korean Economic Relations and the New Tensions in Bilateral Relations

In recent decades, South Koreans showed a strong sense of superiority because their economic development level was ahead of China. In our survey of 1,000 South Koreans a decade ago, 82.2 percent of respondents did not know or mention any Chinese brands, 11.5 percent knew about "Haier," and SAIC Motor gained 1.9 percent recognition because of its relationship with South Korea's Ssangyong Motor. 29.2 percent of the respondents thought the quality of Chinese goods was average, 49.1 percent that the quality of Chinese goods was low, and 18.8 percent that it was very low. 86.8 percent of respondents in South Korea believed that the technical level of Chinese goods was average, low, or very low.²²

When China's economy was behind Korea, many South Koreans had a low opinion of Chinese products, feeling a sense of superiority, and even formed the stereotype that Chinese products were "fake and shoddy." During the pandemic in early 2020, China's Weihai City donated a large number of face masks to the South Korean city of Incheon. South Korean media even spread rumors that these face masks were "fake and inferior" products, which triggered strong dissatisfaction from China. On March 5, *MoneyToday* in a report entitled "We donate KF94 to China, but China donated to us...?" questioned whether the masks donated were substandard and had no effect on pandemic prevention. As soon as this report came out, it led to heated discussion among South Korean netizens and was once ranked third on the list of social news posts in South Korea. "Thank you for making South Korea the world's best country to bully, so proud," garnered nearly 14,000 thumbs up. On the same day, the Incheon Municipal Government issued an urgent announcement to clarify that the masks donated by Weihai City are qualified, "The medical disposable masks provided by Weihai City have been tested by the Incheon Health and Environmental Research Institute and found to be qualified." South Korea's KBS devoted a special report to dispel the rumor. *MoneyToday* finally issued a public apology for the incident on March 7, saying, "The news about Chinese masks reported by our news agency is untrue and has been deleted. We apologize for any inconvenience caused to our readers and the city of Incheon due to our inaccurate report."²³ However, this dispute intentionally motivated by some South Koreans had a negative impact on the bilateral relationship, and it seems to be irreversible. The rumor has cast a shadow over China-South Korea cooperation in fighting the pandemic.

As China's economic level has caught up with South Korea, South Koreans have felt huge competitive pressure, which generated a sense of crisis and unfriendly feelings towards China. With the rise of China's economy, the economic relationship is shifting from one based on complementarity to one based on competition, which will bring new tensions to the relationship.

On January 21, 2021, the author forwarded a piece of news from South Korea's *Asia Economic Report* on her social media account "Dong Xiangrong Asia Pacific Observation": the sales volume of Hyundai Kia in China last year was 660,000 units, a sharp decline of 26.9 percent over the same period last year, indicating a negative growth for two consecutive years. This is a 62.9 percent drop over four years from the record 1.79 million units sold in 2016, and the market share has shrunk to 3.4 percent from 10 percent in 2010. Since entering the Chinese market in 2002, Hyundai Kia's sales had increased year by year. In 2008, Toyota recalled a large number of products in China due to the "Pedal Gate," and Hyundai Motor seized the market. Its sales volume soared to 1.03 million units in 2010 and continued until 2016. Since then, there has been a significant decline. I asked readers, "Why?" The message was read by 78,000 people and got 1,410 comments. The most popular comment to receive a thumb up was very short: "THAAD," with 389 thumbs up. The second most thumbs up was: "It's better to buy domestic products than Korean products," with 222. Third was: "I really don't understand the people who buy Korean cars, The Korean auto industry is not ahead of China, it is better to buy domestic cars," with 134. Another comment said:

“It’s actually quite easy to explain. Hyundai Kia is well known for its price performance on the international market. Because most countries have no auto industry at all, South Korean cars are cheap and good quality, and they occupy the market as cheap as they do in developed countries. But the Chinese mainland has its own brand, which is more cost-effective than any other country in the world, cheaper, and better than modern Kia. So, Hyundai Kia has suffered in China. The brands in developed countries, which tend to be much more expensive than Hyundai, are not the same as those in China.”

It had 42 thumbs up.²⁴

The rapid growth of Hyundai Motors in the Chinese market from 2008 to 2016 was not so much due to “Pedal Gate,” as described in the Asian Economic Report, but the more important reason may be that Japanese cars in the Chinese market went through a period of decline due to consumer boycotts caused by the Diaoyu Islands dispute, and South Korean cars filled the market. The report’s emphasis on “Pedal Gate” may be because it does not want readers to make a connection with THAAD. After the THAAD deployment in 2016, Chinese-made cars and some Japanese cars replaced South Korean cars. Whether South Korean cars can recover depends on their cost performance and the trend of China-South Korea relations and China-Japan relations. Japanese cars in China have experienced decline and recovery since the Diaoyu Islands issue. Will Korean cars experience the same wave? Instead of efforts to improve the quality of products, South Korea is still simply blaming China’s countermeasures on THAAD. Friction is likely to increase in the future as competition between China and South Korea intensifies in key industries.

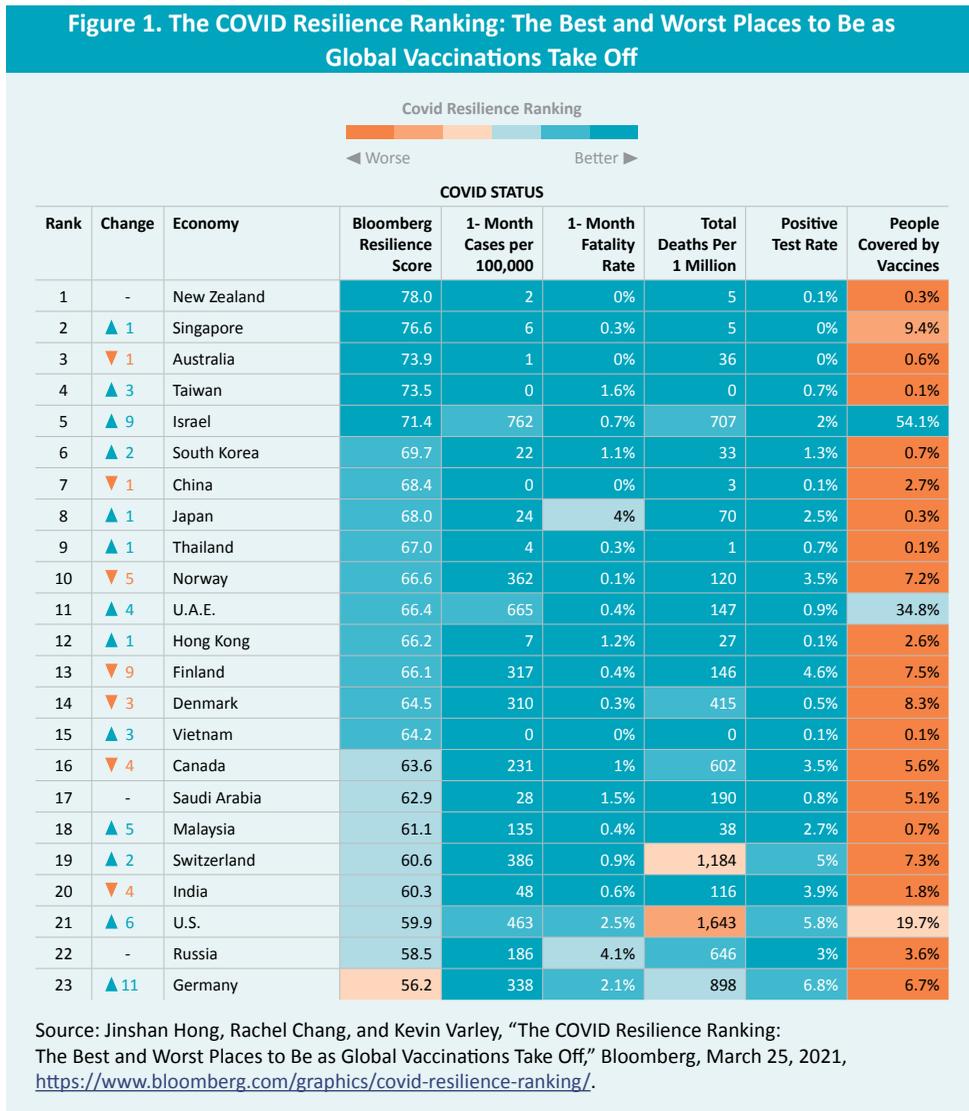
The COVID-19 Pandemic and Sino-South Korea Identity Clash²⁵

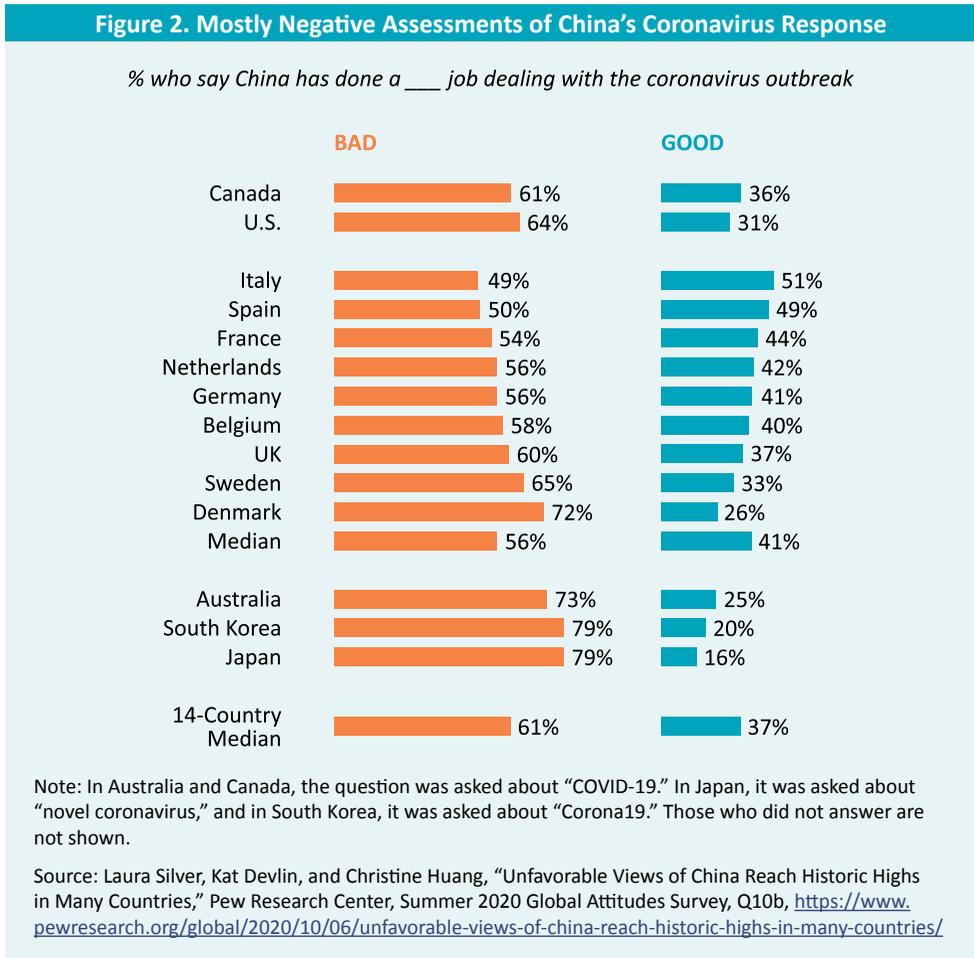
China and South Korea have each done a relatively good job in COVID-19 prevention and control. Active cooperation between the two governments in communications and medical materials improved bilateral relations. On January 3, 2020, the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDC) sent clear information to its South Korean counterpart, the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC), that pneumonia of an unknown etiology had happened in Wuhan. Accordingly, KCDC took immediate action equivalent to setting a blue level alert for controlling a new infectious disease without any wasting of time. Before the first case was found in South Korea, the KCDC acted professionally while some other countries were politicizing the pandemic. The South Korean government did not ban Chinese visitors, despite attacks by the conservative political parties and some netizens. According to data from the KDCA, as of April 8, 2021, South Korea had a total of 7,762 imported cases from overseas, including 44 cases from China (0.6 percent) of the total versus from Asia outside of China, 44.9 percent; 2467 cases from the Americas 31.8 percent, and from Europe, 17.4 percent. This shows that China has done a very good job in preventing the spread of the pandemic.

There is an obvious cognitive mismatch in public opinion. Chinese highly appraise South Korea’s prevention and control of the pandemic and are grateful for its assistance to China with materials after the outbreak, while South Korean sentiment toward China is complicated, and their assessment of China’s response to the pandemic is seen in China as unreasonably negative.

In some lists of pandemic prevention and control, China has performed relatively well. In the list of “The Best and Worst Places to Be as Global Vaccinations Take Off” among 53 economies published by Bloomberg on March 25, 2021, South Korea ranked 6th and China ranked 7th (Figure 1).²⁶

In the process of fighting the pandemic, China and the ROK took the lead in establishing a “fast passage” to facilitate businesspeople in urgent need of visiting the country, maintaining the stability of bilateral economic relations, and winning recognition of the effectiveness for the fight against the pandemic at the government level. However, according to an October 2020 Pew survey, 79 percent of respondents in South Korea gave China a negative rating, much higher than the average of the surveyed developed countries (61 percent) (Figure 2). In the same survey, only 14 percent of South Koreans rated their country’s resistance to the pandemic negatively. It is obvious that the unfavorable impression toward China leads to significant undervaluation of China’s anti-pandemic efforts.





Conclusion

In the premodern period, China and South Korea had close contacts. At least within the historical background at that time, South Korea positively affirmed the influence of Chinese culture on the Korean Peninsula. Major changes have taken place in the international landscape in modern history. The Korean Peninsula broke away from the traditional tributary system and was subjected to Japanese influence and even colonial rule and then the capitalist camp led by the United States in the Cold War. China belonged to the socialist camp.

In 1992, two former rivals established formal diplomatic relations, and thousands of years of cultural links were renewed. Chinese and Korean cultures are inseparable because of their long history of communication. Economically, the relationship between China and South Korea is shifting from one dominated by complementarity to one of complementarity and competition. In terms of military security, due to the existence of the alliance between South Korea and the United States and the actual alliance between China and the DPRK, although China and South Korea have said goodbye to hostilities, there are still many differences. In terms of political relations, the two governments have made great efforts to maintain friendly relations, as “superficial friends,” the advantage of which is that it can

promote the goodwill of both sides, subjectively emphasize the consistency of interests of both sides, and ignore or weaken the conflict of interests of both sides. The disadvantage is that it creates unrealistic expectations of the other side, and when those expectations are not met, it can lead to anger, which can cause huge fluctuations in the relationship. The way out is to expand common interests, give up unrealistic expectations of each other, face the nature and reality of bilateral relations, and promote the development of bilateral relations in a solid way.

At present, South Korea is highly vigilant against China. On the one hand, it wants to continue to share China's economic growth; on the other hand, it is deeply dependent on the alliance with the U.S. If China continues to approach or surpass the United States in power, South Korea's diplomacy will face a crossroads. Its playbook of choosing the strong side has played out repeatedly in the power shift in Northeast Asia. Only till then would the historical cultural legacy dramatically change to accentuating elements of common identity.

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