

Empire and Righteous Nation: 600 Years of China-Korea Relations

By Odd Arne Westad. 205 pp. Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021.

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It is indisputable that China is rising and the United States declining in twenty-first century global politics. In the early years of Chinese economic reform, South Korean businesses and politicians, like those from many other countries, including the United States and Japan, saw the development of the Chinese economy and market as an enormous opportunity. As Western leaders started to see the rise of China as a grave threat to geopolitical stability in the early twenty-first century, some South Korean political leaders, including the former Korean president Roh Moo-hyun, wanted to make South Korea a reliable mediator between China and hegemonic Western powers. Yet China's aggressive gestures toward its neighbours, conflicts over the storage of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence) missiles in American military bases in South Korea, and subsequent Chinese economic retaliation against South Korea since the mid-2010s all made maintaining a South Korean diplomatic balance between China and the United States untenable. Consequently, the South Korean public joined the rising anti-China sentiment across the globe, particularly in the United States and Japan. The fast-shifting and turbulent relationship between South Korea and China, however, requires deep historical understanding as it has evolved over centuries of intensive cultural, political, and economic interactions. In this regard, the publication of *Empire and Righteous Nation* is timely and deserves the utmost welcome from historians and political scientists who study East Asia.

For many observers of East Asian history and politics, the relationship between China and South Korea, or the Korean Peninsula, has been auxiliary to other major themes such as the Chinese tributary system, Japanese imperial expansion, or the Cold War. Korea has been frequently described as merely a member of the Chinese cultural sphere or as prey for competition among strong powers. Therefore, the historical, political, or security relationship between Korea and China has occupied at most a chapter in more generally themed books. *Empire and Righteous Nation* is probably the first comprehensive work from a major press that focuses exclusively on the largely overlooked bilateral relations between Korea and China, with many important implications for the future of East Asian international relations.

This monograph is extremely readable, with several significant innovations in perspectives on East Asian history. To begin, the first chapter skilfully contextualises three key concepts—empire, nation, and righteousness—that traverse the centuries-long interactions between the two historical states. It persuasively discusses the distinctive natures of Chinese empires and Korean nations. In contrast with the Roman empire, the author explains, Chinese empires were historically less militaristic and more ideological or cultural (p. 16). The discussion on the Korean nation is also highly informative in that it properly distinguishes the European concept of nation from the unique cultural and linguistic identity that had been maintained in the Korean Peninsula (pp. 19–21). With righteousness (*yi* in Chinese and *ui* in Korean) as a central concept, the author suggests that the essential term that combines Chinese and Korean histories is neo-Confucianism,

which deeply penetrated the Ming/Qing empires and the Chosŏn dynasty since the fourteenth century. Chosŏn's strict adherence to Confucian rituals, *sadae* or 'serving the great', in its relations with China derived not only from cultural and ideological doctrines but also from economic and security concerns. By performing strict Confucian rituals domestically and internationally—certainly more strictly than did Chinese emperors—Korean kings enjoyed both their status as exemplary members of the Sino-centric ethical universe as well as exclusive political and economic rights on the peninsula (p. 40).

The second major innovation of this book, which might be somewhat unnoticeable to non-Korea specialists, is the novel and convincing periodisation. In his depiction of changing relations between Korea and China due to Western encroachments on East Asian states in the nineteenth century, the author marks 1866 as the year when the tributary system started to decline and the 'internationalisation' of East Asian international relations began (p. 71). Students of East Asian history may be familiar with critical years such as 1839 (the beginning of the Opium War between China and Great Britain), 1854 (the Convention of Kanagawa between Japan and the United States), and 1874 (the Kanghwa Treaty between Korea and Japan). The year 1866, when Chosŏn first encountered a Western military power—France—is hardly known as a decisive year among East Asia specialists, let alone general readers. Yet, I fully support the author's keen sense of historicisation. It would be entirely legitimate to state that Korea's first physical encounter with a Western imperial power was the beginning of the decade-long process of the dismantling of the tributary relationship between Korea and China that was made official when they entered into modern diplomatic relations in 1899.

The virtue of this book is not limited to the innovations suggested above. Albeit concentrating on culture and civilisation, the author is consistently concerned with how geopolitics has played out between Korea and China since the fourteenth century. From China's involvement in the defence of Chosŏn from Japan's invasion in the sixteenth century to the Korean War in the twentieth century, and further, to the problems of North Korean nuclearisation and the strong presence of American troops in present-day South Korea, Chinese concerns on the geopolitics of the Korean Peninsula have changed little for centuries, as represented in a nice quotation from a newspaper article in the late Qing period: 'given its geographical location, it has always been clear that Chosŏn would be at the centre of the struggle between countries to become the hegemonic power in East Asia' (pp. 87–88).

The last, but not the least, strength of *Empire and Righteous Nation* is its deft storytelling that does not sacrifice detail, richly depicting events and individuals while holding key concepts and perspectives at the centre of its historical narrative. The book also skilfully delineates how domestic politics and international relations have been mutually shaped throughout history for both Korea and China. Neither a dry nor narrowly focused history of international relations, nor an alarmist study of the security implications of the relationship between Korea and China, few other works are as readable as *Empire and Righteous Nation*.

The rich and colourful description of the historical relationship between Korea and China in this monograph, however, could have been strengthened with the addition of two pivotal aspects that determined the bilateral relations in modern times. One is the significance of the nationalisation of the political entities of Korea and China. China has transformed from a premodern empire to a modern nation-state, Korea from a tributary state to a modern sovereign nation. Some scholars, both Chinese and Western, who overlook this irreversible process of nationalisation often invite irrelevant political imaginations that reproduce the Sinocentric empire or tributary system as a viable option in the age of declining American hegemony. The second is a fuller analysis of the relationship between the domestic (in)stability of China and the Korea-China relationship.

Whenever power shifted on the Chinese continent, the Korean Peninsula had to pay the price, usually with devastating invasions from China or Japan. As this book well indicates, the stability of the Korean Peninsula is one of the many vital security interests of China. Yet, the stability of China has often been the life-and-death issue of the Korean Peninsula.

Empire and Righteous Nation is not simply a welcome addition to existing literature on East Asian history or international relations; it is a genre-creating work that explores an important but under-investigated theme. Its merits and contributions to our understanding of East Asian international relations is unquestionable. Further, it is evident that this innovative work initiates lively discussions on the evolution of contemporary East Asian geopolitics by reinterpreting the past, present, and future of Korea-China relations.

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Preußen-Deutschland und China 1842–1911. Eine kommentierte Quellenedition

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In 1868, the Prussian geographer and explorer Ferdinand von Richthofen felt ‘overwhelmed and anxious standing at the gate of an immense Empire whose research by an individual was more than a daring enterprise’ (Ferdinand von Richthofen, *China: Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründeter Studien*. Vol. I (Berlin, 1877), p. xxix.). This source collection and commentary on the entangled histories of Prussia-Germany and the late Qing empire is such a daring enterprise. It is the product of a collaborative research project financed by the German Research Fund (DFG) and has been conducted by the German sinologist Cord Eberspächer in collaboration with other German and Chinese colleagues. The publication is entirely in German and brings together expertise and unpublished sources from the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin and the First Historical Archives in Beijing. It publishes many archival documents from both archives as well as the German Federal Archives [Bundesarchiv] for the first time. All Chinese documents have been translated into very readable German.

The source edition is divided into five main parts that represent, to some extent, the uneven state of research and research gaps on Sino-German relations before 1911 and the challenges of an entangled history through 150 selected archival documents. The first section on ‘proto-colonial relations’ until 1859 opens up new perspectives on Prussian interests and ambitions in China before Prussia’s entry into the treaty system as part of a treaty power in 1861. The early relations between Prussia and Germany and the Qing empire, with the concluding of the formal trade treaty in line with the Treaty of Tientsin, constitute the second section of the source and commentary presentation,