South Koreans Are Rethinking What China Means to Their Nation

New Study Illuminates Potential Effects of Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Korea

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In South Korea, many have recently expressed anger at the depiction of a woman in *hanbok* as representing one of China’s 56 ethnic minorities during the opening ceremony for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Korean politicians and activists also criticized the act, stating that China intended to introduce Korean culture as part of its own. This controversy is the latest amid mounting cultural conflict between the two nations, over the origins not only of *hanbok* but also of *kimchi*, and even historical claims to the ancient kingdom of Goguryeo.

These tensions have already brought tangible results. In March 2021, South Korean historical drama *Joseon Exorcist* was canceled after two episodes due to a widespread boycott among Koreans for its use of Chinese-style props, which was said to distort Korean history. The following month, protests over the proposed construction of a “Chinatown” in Gangwon province resulted in the project’s cancellation. Now, as our latest study shows, anti-Chinese sentiment in Korea has the potential to further extend to the political and national security arenas.

Korean views of China have become so negative that as of 2021, according to a survey by SisalN, they have sunk lower than views of Japan, likely for the first time since Korea and China normalized relations in 1992. Ahead of the Beijing Olympics (January 2022), we conducted a survey of over 1,000 South Koreans and, similarly, found that their feelings towards China averaged just 26.5 on a scale of 0 (very negative) to 100 (very positive), compared to 30.7 for Japan and 69.1 for the United States. Moreover, 42% of our respondents

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2 In the past few days, Koreans have mounted more criticism of China in the Olympics, over disqualifications of two Korean short-track speed skaters that enabled Chinese athletes to medal.

3 Between January 17 and 30, 2022, we conducted a survey of 1,017 respondents in South Korea using the survey service Lucid.
supported Korea engaging in a diplomatic boycott of the Olympic Games, in line with many Koreans’ complaints that Seoul is too soft on Beijing. These results suggest that anti-Chinese sentiment increasingly has the potential to spill over into the Republic of Korea’s policy and politics.

**Korea Is Not Alone**

Koreans are not alone in their feelings towards China. Indeed, this trend comes amid a rising tide of anti-Chinese sentiment worldwide. A [2021 survey](https://www.pewresearch.org) conducted by Pew Research Center found that unfavorable views of China had reached near historic highs in 17 advanced economies, including Japan (88%), Australia (78%), and the United States (76%), as well as Korea (77%). Our survey also found that 84% of Koreans viewed China unfavourably, demonstrating an increasing prevalence of anti-Chinese sentiments in Korea.

As in many societies, Koreans are very critical of China’s political system and its handling of COVID-19: according to Pew (2021), 92% of Koreans thought that the Chinese government does not respect the personal freedoms of its people, and 71% disapproved of China’s COVID-19 response.⁴ In line with the Pew study’s findings, our survey found that 84% of Koreans believe that the Chinese government does not respect its peoples’ personal freedoms, and of respondents who reported negative feelings towards China, 66% cited the pandemic outbreak as a contributing factor.

**Still, Korea Differs**

Yet, Koreans also express negativity towards China over unique issues that are not shared with other peer countries. Foremost among these is Korea’s air pollution: namely, fine dust and yellow dust, which many believe comes from China. Also cause for negativity are China’s coercive actions towards Korea, such as economic retaliation for the deployment of the THAAD missile defense system.⁵

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⁴ These are compared to a 17-country median of 88% and 43%, respectively.
⁵ Korean opinions of China plummeted following THAAD deployment, from an average of 60 out of 100 in 2016 to 37.3 in 2018 (East Asia Institute; Hankook Research).
In particular, Korea is distinctive from its peers for two notable reasons. The first is Koreans’ reaction to China’s perceived cultural imperialism. Over half (55%) of our respondents who had an unfavorable view of China selected cultural conflicts between the two countries (China’s claims to *kimchi* and *hanbok*, for example) as well as China’s perceived lack of respect for Korea (62%) as contributing to their negative feelings. Historical issues also loom large for Koreans: 52% of respondents with negative sentiments say they disapprove of China due to disputes between the two countries over history (such as the Northeast Project, which claims that the ancient kingdom of Goguryeo is part of China).

The second factor that makes anti-Chinese sentiment in Korea unique is its demographic underpinnings: namely, the outspokenness of younger generations. Out of 14 countries polled by Pew in 2020, Korea was the only country in which youth (ages 18-29) had a more unfavorable view of China than those ages 50 and older. 80% of youth viewed China unfavorably, compared to 68% of the oldest cohort. The 2021 SisaIN study confirmed that younger Koreans did indeed have the most negative feelings towards China, with those in their 20s holding views nearly two times more negative than those in their 50s and 60s. It is no surprise that, according to our survey, younger Koreans ages 18 through 39 were more likely to support a diplomatic boycott of the Olympics than older cohorts (45% compared to 40%). We interpret these findings as suggesting that younger Koreans who grew up with liberal, democratic values may be more critical of authoritarian, communist China than the older activists of “Generation 586,” who instead grew up amid anti-American sentiments that fostered greater sympathy towards China.

In this regard, anti-Chinese sentiment in Korea differs from the country’s past anti-American sentiment and enduring anti-Japanese sentiment. The former, especially prominent in the 1980s, represented backlash against U.S. policy and U.S. support of the Korean authoritarian dictatorship. It was not a critique of American people, culture, or institutions, which were still largely respected. Anti-Japanese sentiment is tied to the historical memory of

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6 Other countries polled, in order from largest to smallest oldest-youngest difference, were the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Belgium, France, Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, and Japan.

7 Koreans who are in their 50s, attended university in the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s.
colonial rule and strongly influenced by Korean nationalism. Despite public movements in recent years to boycott Japan and Japanese products, Koreans still import and enjoy Japanese culture, food, and fashion. In contrast, anti-Chinese sentiment is a critique of Chinese cultural imperialism and illiberalism: few Koreans view China’s institutions as exemplary or say that their country should learn from China.

Spillover to Politics and Policy
Negative views towards China have the potential to affect Korean politics. Our survey found that a large majority of respondents, 78%, indicated that among other issues both domestic and international (including housing prices, North Korea, and unemployment), ROK-China relations will be an important consideration when deciding which presidential candidate to vote for. For almost a quarter (22.4%) of respondents, this was a “very important” consideration. It is no surprise, then, that presidential candidates joined the public in expressing anger at the Olympics’ hanbok incident. Given that younger Koreans are expected to be the deciding factor in this election, it is particularly significant that 82% of respondents in their 20s said that ROK-China relations would be an important issue when voting. This atmosphere recalls that of 2002, when anti-American sentiments³ swept the Korean presidential election between Roh Moo Hyun and Lee Hoi Chang, tipping the vote in favor of Roh. This time, however, the anti-Chinese sentiment may play out in favor of the conservatives, who tend to be tougher on China and emphasize the U.S.-ROK alliance.

It is worth noting that in the midst of the ongoing U.S.-China rivalry, Koreans increasingly favor the United States over China. A 2019 survey by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies shows waning support for China and increasing support for the United States: in 2014, nearly 25% of Koreans supported strengthening ties with China over the United States, compared to almost 60% who favored the United States. By 2019, support for China had dropped to 18.9%, and for the United States had increased to 75%.⁹ In the past, Korea has

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³ In particular, these increased following a June 2002 accident in which two Korean schoolgirls were struck and killed by U.S. troops driving back to their military base.

⁹ Findings from Pew (2021) show that in Korea, contrary to most other countries, younger individuals are less likely than older cohorts to say that they prefer China to the United States for economic ties.
regarded China as an economic opportunity, while leaning closer to the United States for security reasons; a paradigm called “an-mi-gyung-jung” (“United States for security, China for the economy”). Now, most Koreans believe that this balancing act has run its course: we found that only 43% of Koreans agree with this paradigm to some degree, with younger Koreans showing the lowest proportion of agreement (38%).

Once regarded as a place of economic opportunities for Korea, China is increasingly losing favor as Koreans, led by young people, begin to rethink what China means to their nation – a trend akin to Koreans’ questioning of their relationship with the United States in the 1980s. This will pose a major foreign policy challenge for the new administration in Seoul, which will have to manage the bilateral relation with China in the midst of rising public sentiment against the country. At the same time, the increase in positive attitude among Koreans towards the United States could offer an excellent opportunity for the U.S.-ROK alliance, which faced stress under the Trump and Moon administrations. The Biden administration should move quickly to fill the U.S. ambassador position in Seoul, meet with the next Korean president as soon as s/he is sworn in, and work closely with the future ROK administration to strengthen ties. Washington should not waste time, especially as a more strongly pro-alliance cohort of young Koreans grows into a political force that will shape their country’s future.