Anti-Chinese Sentiment Continues in South Korea

We have mentioned more than once how anti-Chinese sentiments are nurtured in today's South Korea, and although according to conservative circles, Moon Jae-in's administration pursues a pro-Beijing course, an incitement of hatred towards China comes not only from below but also from above.

According to a joint survey conducted in June 2021 by the daily newspaper Kukmin Ilbo and Global Research, 51.7% of respondents between the ages of 18 and 39 put China at the top of their list of countries they view negatively. This figure is significantly higher than Japan (31.2%) and North Korea (12.6%).

The favorable attitude towards China was only 10.7%, the lowest since 2013.

The confrontation with China is on several fronts, which will be examined below.

Combating Chinese dominance in real estate

In the first half of 2020, foreign nationals owned 251.6 square kilometers of land. Their total value exceeded 31 trillion won. Also in 2020, Chinese nationals accounted for 51.3% of transactions, up 79% from 2016.

The public believes the government needs to regulate the purchase of real estate by foreign nationals because it has increased dramatically, fueling an already overheated real estate market. Some of these properties were acquired due to financial irregularities, which increased fears of foreign capital inflows.

Korean financial institutions apply a wide range of restrictions on home loans for Koreans wishing to buy apartments, especially in and around Seoul. Still, foreigners can bypass them by using foreign banks. Koreans are
highly taxed if they own more than one home. But foreigners can avoid such taxes if they own several houses abroad. This, in the view of patriotic NGOs, is reverse discrimination.

A manifestation of the same trend was the March 29, 2021, online petition on the Blue House website demanding an end to the large-scale Chinese-themed tourist complex project in Gangwon Province, and as of April 26, more than 660,000 people had signed it. As a result, the project was canceled even though the complex should have been operational by 2022.

**Fighting for the right to take the right to vote away from the Chinese**

Under the Election of Public Officials Act, all permanent residents of foreign origin aged 19 or older may vote in local elections after three years as permanent residents. They can vote for municipal representatives and mayors, but not in the National Assembly or Presidential elections.

According to the Ministry of Justice, as of March 31, the number of foreign voters eligible to vote stood at 121,806. Among them, the number of Chinese citizens was 95,385, accounting for 78.3%.

On April 28, a Korean national, who identified himself as a former professor at Korea National University of Welfare, posted a petition on the Blue House website, stating that granting such foreigners the right to vote violated the Constitution and should be revoked. About 80 percent of foreign residents eligible to vote in that country are Chinese and allowing them to vote amounts to enabling them to meddle in Korea's elections.

Even more negative public reaction and growing anti-Chinese sentiment result from the government's plan to relax the rules for acquiring Korean citizenship for foreign minors. Under the upcoming scheme, if a resident foreigner with close ties to Korea gives birth to a child there, the child can get citizenship simply by applying to the ministry. Under current law, they can apply for citizenship at age 18, including a written test and an interview, unless their parents have already naturalized.

According to the ministry, the legislation aims to help such children form a Korean identity and better adapt to life there and provide human resources to address the country's low birth rate and aging population.

Some 3,930 people are currently entitled to apply for citizenship, 95% of them are Chinese nationals. That's why a petition appeared on the Blue House website on April 28, gathering more than 300,000 signatures. The bottom line is that the Chinese living in the country already enjoy many rights, including voting in local elections. The ROK should preserve its identity based on the principle of racial homogeneity. The government shouldn't simply grant citizenship to permanent residents, most of whom are Chinese living in Korea, and in general, granting citizenship to hundreds of foreigners every year as a way to address the country's low birth rate and aging population is unacceptable!

But how many people in South Korea are citizens of China? The Korea National Statistical Office showed that their number exceeded 894,900 in 2020, about 44% of all foreign nationals residing in the country. In addition, according to the Korean Education Development Institute, as of 2019, there were more than 71,000 Chinese students enrolled in higher and secondary education in Korea, accounting for 44% of all foreign students. Meanwhile, the country's population for 2020 was about 51.7 million.

**Fighting Confucius institutes as agents of Chinese Communist Party influence**

A separate topic that occasionally pops up in the mainstream conservative media is the activities of the patriotic organization Citizens for Closing Confucius Institutes, led by Han Min Ho, 59, a former official of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. He was fired two years ago after publicly speaking several times about the failures of Moon Jae-in's government policies. Firing civil servants is however officially not recommended.

It’s worth noting that the mentioned structure is in the niche of German Goethe Institutes or South Korean cultural centers, which are opened at educational institutions. Universities where a Confucius Institute emerges receive $100,000 in start-up costs provided by the China International Education Fund and another $100,000 annually. Teachers and textbooks are provided by the same organization, along with various paid trips and exchange programs.

According to Han Min-ho, the citizens claim that ‘despite its name, there are no Confucian ideas in the Institute. What’s inside there is the ghost of Mao Zedong. Mao is wandering around out there trying to paint young Koreans red.’
Conservative MP Jun Hee-kyung also expresses concern about the language centers funded by the Chinese government. In her view, the Institutes are a propaganda arm of the Chinese Communist Party to infiltrate South Korean Universities, and, ironically, they offer no Confucius. But the Korean War of 1950-53 is positioned as a war of resistance to US aggression and aid to Korea.

The conservative media often quote Western experts to keep up the pressure. According to Terry Russell, Senior Scholar in the Asian Studies Center at the University of Manitoba, many universities in the United States, Canada, and Australia have decided to terminate contracts with Confucius Institutes. Those terminations are due to fears of stifling academic freedom and imposing censorship on topics the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) opposes, causing the number of Confucius Institutes in the United States to drop dramatically from 103 in 2017 to 47 as of May 2021. He believes this decision is the right one and encourages all universities worldwide with existing Confucius Institutes to consider closing them. Canada's intelligence agency warned of espionage as another threat to academic exchange programs with China in its 2020 annual report. It turns out that Chinese talent development and academic exchange programs have been used to leverage Canadian expertise in science and technology. Reason? China’s Thousand Talents Plan, created in 2008 to encourage Chinese scientists abroad to conduct their research in China, is currently under investigation by the US Department of Justice. While the US Justice Department has reached no conclusions, the media has already stated it as Canadian intelligence proving Chinese espionage.

"Chinese students are a threat to the world"

Talk of this type began to circulate heavily after November 2019, when, amid the Pro-democracy Movement in Hong Kong, there were several cases of conflicts between Korean and Chinese students on campuses. Although there have been no further such conflicts, the South Korean English-language media often reminds us that the clash between South Koreans and Chinese students took place almost a decade after the country was shaken by the brutal attack of Chinese students on Korean human rights defenders. During the 2008 Olympic torch relay in Seoul, hundreds of Chinese, primarily students, ‘took to the streets throughout the city and attacked small groups of pro-Tibetan protesters defending Tibet’s right to independence from Chinese invasion and annexing the border country.’ These protesters tried to beat the torchbearers and put out the Olympic flame but this fact has been forgotten.

Instead, on the pages of the Korea Times, Australian author Clive Hamilton is now expressing his opinion. He is the author of the bestseller Hidden Hand: Exposing How The Chinese Communist Party Is Reshaping The World, or Silent Invasion describing how the Chinese Communist Party uses the Chinese community abroad to spread propaganda and lobby politicians.

As for the Chinese students in South Korea, while they accounted for approximately 76% of all foreign students in 2010, they dropped to 44% in 2019 and 34% in 2020.

Pedaling Scandals Involving the Chinese

In this context, it is not surprising that any scandal involving a "person of Chinese ethnicity" makes the front pages, even if they are not citizens of China. There was long-running press coverage of the April 2021 incident. Xiang Xueqiu, the spouse of Peter Lescouhier, Ambassador of Belgium to South Korea, got into a fight with employees at a clothing store who accused her of stealing. Although the Belgian government eventually ordered Ambassador Peter Lescouhier to leave his post and partially waived his diplomatic immunity, the couple and the Embassy faced public criticism from ‘patriots.’ Because the Ambassador and his wife did not apologize in person, and since the language used in the apology appeared improper for a formal statement from a foreign government official expressing regret.

A parallel story unfolds with the consul at the Chinese Consulate General in Gwangju, who was ‘caught driving while intoxicated but claimed diplomatic immunity.’ The consul's blood alcohol content was 0.119%, enough to revoke his driver's license, the allowable limit in Korea is 0.03%. Following his arrest, the consul claimed diplomatic immunity, declaring that his DUI (driving under the influence) was related to official duties as he was returning from a meeting. However, the police, after discussing the matter with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, concluded that the consul's driving under the influence was unrelated to his official activities and referred the case to the prosecutor's office on the same day as a violation of the Highway Traffic Act. Nevertheless diplomatic immunity protects diplomats and their families from prosecution under the host country's laws, whether or not misconduct has occurred while performing their duties.

In comparison, a less-publicized November 2021 incident involved a US diplomat who allegedly smashed the rear bumper of a taxi while trying to change lanes but drove away without attempting to settle the incident or apologizing. Unlike the Chinese, the American diplomat declined all police requests, including a breathalyzer test.
Three other US citizens were also in the vehicle, and they also refused to cooperate with the police.

Miscellaneous or anti-Chinese themes in the Korea Times and beyond

As a conclusion to this summery of events, a series of articles should be pointed out in a moderately conservative major newspaper to clarify the general tone in which the South Korean media usually write about China.

- “The CCP's move to elevate Xi’s authority does not necessarily mean China’s securing of a status and prestige as a respectable leading global power. This means China should make more effort to meet the international community's requirements and history. It should take steps to cherish the values of democracy and human rights and embrace other countries as reliable members of global society with a sense of responsibility that matches its military strength and economic power.”
- On how Beijing’s policy on the Cantonese dialect can be compared to the Japanese policy of ethnocide.
- “With the shocking shutdown Thursday of Apple Daily, a leading pro-democracy newspaper, freedom of the press has died in Hong Kong.”
- On how employees of Chinese companies are systematically dying through overwork as part of the so-called 996 schedules, 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week or longer, and how this schedule is maintained by people like Alibaba Group holding company founder Jack Ma.
- On how, according to the author, in retaliation for the Canadian house arrest of Huawei CEO Meng Wanzhou, businessman Michael Spavor, a former South Korean resident who moved to China where he could conduct various cultural exchanges with North Korea, was detained for no reason.
- It gets to the point of absurdity: when Chinese police captured a North Korean escapee convicted of illegally entering China, robbery, and attempted murder, the South Korean media wrote of him with regret. The unfortunate criminal allegedly escaped because he would have been deported to the North after serving his sentence in China. He ‘could have been subjected to torture and other human rights violations.’

Reasons, real and imaginary

When trying to explain the reasons for this phenomenon, the South Korean media usually put forward the following set of themes:

- After China imposed informal sanctions and restrictions on South Korean businesses and cultural content, including a ban on the K-POP stars, against Korea in 2017 in response to Seoul's US THAAD missile defense system deployment, the ROK suffered economic losses of $7.5 billion. An image of China as an intimidating superpower has then developed in the mass consciousness.
- “Koreans, who have strongly embraced democratic values after suffering decades of harsh military rule, have also been offended by China’s security crackdown on Hong Kong and the treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang as part of the aggressive nationalism of President Xi Jinping.”
- The fact that the coronavirus originated in China has not helped matters.
- A separate topic is ‘China's attempts to appropriate responsibility for creating such iconic Korean cultural values as kimchi and hanbok.’
- In ‘China's series of rude nationalist actions’ is ‘China's denial of its role in the pollution of the peninsula with fine dust.; However, it is increasingly caused by Moon's policy of abandoning nuclear power, for which the thermal power plant had to be turned on, or ‘illegal fishing in the Yellow Sea.’ However, the parties are actively working on this issue. In the meantime, the Seoul smog, which appeared under Moon, has become a serious environmental problem and the cause of various respiratory diseases.
- Recently, topics for "historical controversy" have also emerged amidst the PRC's emphasis on the country's contribution to the Korean War. This point was dealt with separately, but after BTS, a leading K-pop group, got involved in the process, China's social media attacked it for thanking the USA for its support during the Korean War and the fan community “woke up as patriots.” As a result, some authors argue that the younger generation has even more anti-Chinese feelings than the older generation.

It should be added what lies behind. Since, for example, what is considered cultural appropriation in South Korea has been carried out in China since the mid-aughts, where Chinese does not equal Han within the framework of building the concept of state patriotism. Yet, Han Chinese are the overwhelming majority of the population. The national and cultural characteristics of other peoples inhabiting China (and the Korean diaspora have only recently fallen to second place there, after the American population) are considered part of China's shared cultural heritage.

It's about the growing confrontation between the USA and China, in which South Korea must choose sides. The populists, no less than the conservatives, are focused on the United States. Still, they believe that the people should
be prepared for the consequences, which could be far more extensive and painful than the reaction to the deployment of THAAD. Public opinion should be aware that they started it.

In addition, the standard way of shifting attention from economic and domestic political problems to the fact that the Japanese have not apologized is no longer working because it has been used too often, and a new bugbear is needed.

South Koreans in their 20s and 30s can be characterized as the Rage Generation, as Joo Jang Yoon, a professor of communications and media at Seoul Women's University, points out. “Faced with a tight job market and high youth unemployment, they see themselves victims of the ongoing economic downturn. Feelings of frustration and deprivation have caused them to be much more sensitive to specific issues that they see as a threat to their identity and well-being.” Nationalism is an excellent way to shift this rage in a safe direction for the authorities. And if the hatred of Japan is stirred up by reviving the past and faded issues like Dokdo (where the chance of a serious conflict is nonexistent), fears related to the rise of China are felt stronger in the daily lives of young Koreans.

Finally, suppose we recall the methods of influence and lobbying typical of ROK patriots, promoting the “correct understanding of things” through educational structures, using the diaspora, etc. In that case, it turns out that China dared to use the same weapon against South Korea, which is utterly unacceptable from the point of view of double standard principles.

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