Olympic Hanbok Scandal, or Two Types of Nationalism

In his previous material about the tricky relations between China and South Korea this author already mentioned how a demonstration of the traditional Korean clothes was viewed in South Korea. However, this is worth telling in greater detail as this story illustrates the conceptual difference between the two countries’ national policies.

So, South Koreans took offence at what in their opinion constituted China’s claim at hanbok, a traditional Korean clothing, on February 4, during the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games. At the beginning of the ceremony, people representing 56 ethnic groups from all over China carried the Chinese national flag into the stadium. One woman, representing ethnic Koreans in China, wore a hanbok. Moreover, she was an ethnic Korean (Chaoxianzu, Kor. - Joseonjok).

The depiction of a hanbok-clad woman angered many South Koreans, who argued that China was trying to promote hanbok as its own cultural product., which supposedly is in line with China’s vast claims to the Korean culture and history as a part of their own ones.

On the next day, the South Korean Culture Minister Hwang Hee (who was also dressed in a hanbok), representing the Republic of Korea at the Olympic Games, said that the depiction of ethnic Koreans as a minority group could create mutual misunderstanding in the two countries. “When you refer to people as a minority, it often means they haven’t evolved into a sovereign country. “We are among the 10 or so largest economies in the world located right next to China.” When Hwang was asked if he had any intention to lodge an official diplomatic protest with the Chinese government, he said he “does not deem it necessary,” adding, however, that he may deliver Korea’s domestic sentiment to his Chinese counterparts.

On the same day, a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea emphasized that
“[t]here is no room for dispute in the fact that hanbok is one of our representative cultures that are recognized by the entire world,” and the Government would continue their efforts to “publicize” hanbok. South Korea has kept delivering its position to China that it needs to respect other countries’ cultures and enhance its understanding based on “cultural diversity,” the official added.

Later on, the Foreign Ministry published a statement saying that “we have submitted to the Chinese party our position that they need to respect cultural uniqueness and diversity to facilitate mutual understanding.”

Both political camps snatched this opportunity to speculate on the pressing issue. Lee Jae-myung, the presidential candidate for the ruling Democratic Party of Korea, wrote on Facebook that he was opposed to China’s “cultural appropriation” of elements of Korean culture.

A representative of the campaign headquarters, Park Chan-dae, was more straightforward: “We express our regret over the practice of depicting hanbok as if it were Chinese traditional attire during the opening ceremony, and demand that China stop its cultural claims on Korea”.

The People’s Party candidate Ahn Cheol-soo said, “The hanbok is Korean culture. To the authorities in China, I say this: it is ‘hanbok,’ not ‘hanfu’.

PPP presidential campaign spokesman Hwang Gyu-hwan called the incident a clear cultural pillaging of a sovereign country, and a disrespectful practice that undermines the Beijing Games’ slogan of “Together for a Shared Future.” Of course, the Moon Jae-in government was criticized for an insufficiently vigorous protest. And the head of a Conservative non-government organization Lee Jong-bae even lodged a complaint with the Seoul Central District Prosecutors’ Office against Hwang Hee, for his remark that the Korean government does not need to lodge an official protest against China.

Seo Kyoung-duk, a professor at Sungshin Women’s University and an activist promoting South Korean culture, also got his 15 minutes of glory, “South Korea should do a better job letting the rest of the world know that hanbok is traditional Korean attire. China has already made too many claims to hanbok as its own to count, notwithstanding the fact that hanbok is mentioned in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as traditional Korean attire. For example, a scene with dancers clad in hanbok appeared in the promotional video released by China to mark its application for the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing, and the largest Chinese online portal Baidu asserts that hanbok originated from China. Moreover, many Chinese Internet users leave comments on social media saying that Korea stole hanbok from China.”

The US Embassy Chargé d’Affaires Christopher Del Corso also joined the campaign. He posted on Twitter his photo in a hanbok accompanied by the phrase, “What comes to mind when you think of Korea? Kimchi, K-Pop, K-dramas... and of course Hanbok”.

Many actors and singers produced their photos in hanboks “confirming its Korean origin”, thereby causing a war in the comments between their Chinese and South Korean fans.

The general attitude of the conservative and even moderate media was well expressed by an extract from the editorial in The Korea Times dated February 7, stating that “it may be natural for the woman in hanbok to attend the ceremony representing ethnic Koreans as part of the 56 minorities in China. Yet it was inappropriate as it might give the impression to global audiences that the hanbok is part of China’s unique culture despite Korea’s own sovereignty.”

The conservative Chosunilbo fueled the flame by publishing photos of the Chinese blogger @shiyin.w wearing a hanfu - the Chinese traditional attire of the period of the Ming Empire (XIV - XVII centuries), looking very much like a hanbok. The comment under the photo says that hanfu is the traditional Chinese clothes worn at the periods in the Chinese history when the country was ruled by the Han people, as well as that this type of attire becomes increasingly popular among the Chinese youth. Shiyin is known for her statements regarding the influence made by the Chinese clothes on forming the hanbok, though some users of the Chinese Internet go even further saying that it is not China that appropriates the Korean culture, but on the contrary, hanbok has its origins in hanfu, and it is, in fact, hanfu.

Only the moderately left Hankyoreh sinmun took a more reasonable approach. It reminded that there was a Korean ethnic community in China and “the hanbok isn’t just ours, but theirs as well”.

Nevertheless, an upsurge of Sino-phobic feelings continues in the media and social media of South Korea. Apart from
the attempts “to steal our hanbok,” there were recollections of a similar story regarding Kimchi, attempts to “write into the history of the PRC” the Korean state Goguryeo (based on the fact that half of its territory had been located in the present China), some far-right nationalists talked to themselves to the point of the PRC’s interference with the elections.

Against this background, the Chinese Embassy in the Republic of Korea noted in its special statement that “it is the wish and right of the representatives of China’s nationalities to wear national costumes and participate in international sporting events such as the Beijing Winter Olympics.... Ethnic Koreans in China have their origin in the same bloodline as the South and North Koreans and share the same culture including the traditional clothes.”

To sum up, Seoul’s claims are limited to the following two points - “how dare they demonstrate hanbok as a part of the Chinese culture” and “how dare they call Koreans an ethnic minority while they have their own state.”

Actually, the key to this dispute lies in entirely different models of nationalism professed in China and South Korea. China, notwithstanding the fact that its 1.4 billion population includes a mere 120 million representatives of ethnic minorities not related to the Han people, has always emphasized that it is a multinational country and the five stars on its flag are also the symbols of the main ethnicities apart from the Chinese. Some of these ethnicities live only in the PRC, however among China’s ethnic minorities who have their own states are Mongols, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs and even Russians who are officially recognized as one the Chinese ethnic minorities (they are the descendants of those who settled in Manchuria or Xinjiang in early 20th century; in one of the locations of their habitat in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, the Enhe Russian Ethnic Township, consisting of 8 rural settlements, was formed). And, as can be noted, none of the aforementioned countries had any hysterical fits regarding cultural appropriation.

The Korean diaspora in China consists of about 2.5 million ethnic Koreans, and is thus one of the country’s largest minorities. Prior to a certain period of time it was the most numerous Korean diaspora, and only at the turn of the 21st century did the American [Korean] diaspora edge it out. There exists the so-called Yanbian - Korean Autonomous Prefecture, where, pursuant to the Constitution of the PRC, the Law on Regional National Autonomy and other resolution, there are not only education and signboards but also its own TV in the Korean language.

As noted by the newspaper Hankyoreh sinmun, the word “Chaoxianzu” is an official term in China. However, as the word “Joseon” has a reference to the PDRK, “Joseonjok” is rather a slang or pejorative term in South Korea, and the left-wing media make it clear that, unlike the American Koreans, persons originating from China (as well as from Central Asia countries) are often discriminated as “second-class” citizens.

While a Russian reader will understand the differentiation between the term “Russian” and the term “Russian national,” in China there exists a similar differentiation between the notions of “Han” (ethnic Chinese) and “Zhonghua,” meaning all residents of the Central State. When the Beijing propaganda speaks about the Chinese nation the term “Zhonghua” is used. It was within the framework of this trend that at the 2022 Olympic Games the Chinese flag was carried out by people wearing clothes of all the ethnic minorities representing the entire multinational China.

Korean nationalism is of a different type as Korea used to be a multinational country during a long period. The only more or less large diaspora was the Chinese, however during the rule of Rhee Syngman and, especially, of Park Chung-hee, the squeezing out of that diaspora to China began, and some respondents of the author compared this process with squeezing out the Jews in Poland during the rule of Gomulka.

On the one hand, South Korea pursued and pursues the policy of prevention of forming stable minorities with their own interests in its territory. On the other hand, it has actively worked with Korean minorities in other countries’ using great efforts to turn them into lobbying structures. This propaganda is aimed not only at “the right understanding of the Korean culture” but also tells that ethnic self-identification must have priority over the national one. Roughly speaking, if you are a Korean, your true homeland is South Korea, and whenever it is that you live in is just a place of your stay. It should be noted that this strategy rather failed in respect of the Russian and Chinese diasporas, though in the 1990s there even were attempts to lobby the idea of return of Koreans to the Russian Far East and creating a respective autonomous region or autonomous district there.

That is why for a Russian national South Korean claims are borderline nonsense and chauvinism. Really, don’t ethnic Koreans of China have the right to be proud of their culture in a multinational country? As noted by the British-American scientist and University professor Scott Shepherd in his special opinion, “something’s really going wrong when South Koreans are criticizing an ethnic Korean for wearing hanbok” and “fundamentally, China was celebrating the Korean culture of some of its citizens, not appropriating it.”
In this regard, one of the author’s esteemed colleagues points out that the South Koreans have never lived in a multicultural state and are not aware of the principles it works on, while the Chinese, on the contrary, understand them very well, and their policy targeting ethnic minorities takes into account the negative experience of the USSR that started falling apart along its ethnical outskirts.

At the same time, due to demographic problems and the need to fill in the lack of workforce by migrants, South Korea may be already considered a multicultural state. Of approximately 50 million of its population, there are already a million (2% of the population) foreigners with Korean nationality, and if illegal aliens or migrant workers staying in the country with long-term visas, and some others, are added, then more than 5% of South Korea’s current population are not ethnic Koreans. As of September 30, 2021 “the Chinese of Korean origin” were the most numerous group of foreign nationals registered in the South, numbering 256,030 of 1,091,369 persons, or 23.5%. And it was quite a socially active group, which leads to Sinophobia many times mentioned by NEO.

The present scandal rather shows how closely the hanbok kerfuffle is related to the growing anti-Chinese feelings, and the author has several questions:

- If the opening ceremony had passed without minorities’ participation, would it not have ended with a scandal on the same level, with accusations levelled against Beijing of chauvinism and trampling non-Chinese peoples’ rights?
- Should the Joseonjok wear their national attire or should they, in the opinion of the South Korean “patriots,” change into Mao-style field jackets - as only the “real” Koreans have the right to wear a hanbok?
- What will happen if South Korea by such scandals fans the flame of a real “hatred war” with China, similarly to what is going on with Japan?
- And isn’t it what the government is preparing? The choice between Beijing and Washington is inevitable and strictly defined, and nursing Sinophobia very much helps the masses to acquire hate towards the right subject in advance.

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