

‘Seoul Searching’: The History, Politics and Prejudice behind the Re-naming of Korea’s Capital in Chinese

Hyun Jin Kim, Peter Mauch, Niv Horesh

Introduction

On 19 January 2005, Seoul Mayor at the time and South Korea’s president at present, Lee Myung Bak, held a press conference to announced his desire to see the Chinese name for Seoul changed from the traditional rendition of Hancheng (漢城), to Shouer (首爾). By explaining that the change was a matter of phonetic convenience – “Shouer” phonetically approximates the Korean sound of “Seoul,” as opposed to “Hancheng” which bears no phonetic similarity whatsoever – Mayor Lee made clear that he was motivated by a simple desire to remove a potential cause for Sino-Korean “confusion.” Lee further suggested that the principal beneficiary of the name change would be those Chinese in some way connected to Seoul, and proclaimed that all signage carrying the Chinese characters for Hancheng would be changed accordingly, and that the traditional Chinese name would be promptly discontinued in South Korea.¹

If Mayor Lee had hoped for an uncontroversial re-naming, he was proven right for the most part. Not only did the Chinese government grant Mayor Lee’s wish quickly and quietly, but regional media outlets also remained notably low-key on the naming issue. Lengthy editorial

¹ Reported in the newspaper *Chosunilbo*, the most widely read newspaper in South Korea: http://news.chosun.com/svc/content_view/content_view.html?contid=2005011970127. This received attention from the major Japanese daily newspapers, including the *Asahi Shimbun* (9 February 2005) and the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (10 February 2005). This was also reported in Xinhua, the PRC official news agency. See http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2005-01/19/content_2482227.htm; see also fairly laconic report in the traditional-character online edition <http://www.people.com.cn/BIG5/guoji/14549/2530048.html>.

commentary on the matter on the front pages of either South Korean or Chinese (PRC) newspapers does not exist; similarly, Japanese newspapers offered little more than the simple observation that Seoul's Chinese name had changed. As we will demonstrate below, there is nonetheless good reason to believe that Lee's move was driven by overarching concerns about China's growing regional clout, and that in this context the character Han 漢 composing "Hancheng" could be potentially misrepresented as suggestive of ethnic-Han ownership of Seoul.

We believe, in addition, that the significance of Seoul's name change in Chinese extends well beyond semantics, and can in a sense be seen as a test-case for the PRC's ability to leverage soft power in the region, and allay the concerns of its neighbours about the implications of its geo-strategic rise. The PRC has recently begun to semi-officially endorse the idea of re-establishing a Confucian "harmonious" cultural sphere in East Asia. Against this backdrop, we argue that China's willingness to accede to Seoul's name change may be part of a new strategic thinking in Beijing, which posits "humane authority" (*wangdao* 王道) -- namely establishing international authority by way of concessions and moral suasion -- as key to pulling neighbouring countries away from their reliance on the US military umbrella.² While the academic literature on Chinese soft power is extensive, this article is to our knowledge the first one in the English language to thoroughly address the issue through the prism of Seoul's name change in Chinese.³

Though it is perfectly sound to question on what grounds Beijing would want to refuse Seoul's request at a time when China's so-called "charm offensive" was in full swing, we show in this article that it is wrong to deem the re-naming of Seoul a "no-cost" or merely

² See e.g. Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton, 2011).

³ See e.g. Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive* (New Haven, 2007).

perfunctory PRC gesture, considering the prominence of pre-modern semantics in ongoing territorial disputes across the region, and in view of the popular backlash such a gesture could potentially arouse. After all, it is precisely historiography and semantics that foreground what many Chinese see as South Korean ambition to take over the North on the back of American military support and, once there, to let US soldiers man the border with China, and later carve up parts of Jilin province where many ethnic Koreans reside. Conversely, South Koreans are often rattled precisely by what appears to them like a contrived PRC historic discourse that is designed to legitimise territorial claims on parts of what is today North Korea.⁴

To be sure, Chinese blogosphere is usually more nationalistic than Chinese government positions, and this case is no exception. By the same token, the Chinese government frequently overlooks grass-roots xenophobia in framing policies towards Japan and the US, and thus a more moderate *official* language toward South Korea (ROK) can certainly be expected on a day-to-day basis. However, PRC pragmatism vis-à-vis the US or Japan rarely assume the same long-term historic-narrative implications that are manifest in Seoul's name change, whilst defusing media attention elsewhere. Thus, for example, the 1979 neologism "Chinese Taipei" for Kuomintang-controlled Taiwan was a gesture the US helped coin so as to appease the PRC, not the other way around; and one that was not devoid of media coverage.⁵

Neither do we wish to overlook the major deterioration that occurred in Sino-ROK relations in 2010. Beijing's solitary refusal to condemn the North Korean sinking of the corvette Cheonan and Pyongyang's subsequent attack on the island of Yeonpyeong—the first military

⁴ Chen Zhimin "Embracing the Complexities in China-ROK Relations: A View from China", *Asian Perspective*, April-June 2012, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 195-218.

⁵ Catherine K. Lin, "How 'Chinese Taipei' Came About", *Taipei Times*, published online on 5 August 2008. <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2008/08/05/2003419446>

attack on South Korean territory since 1953—triggered off anger across the ROK towards Beijing. China’s continued refusal to exert serious pressure on North Korea to scale down its destabilising military aggression has damaged China’s standing in the ROK.

Yet, in construing overall PRC policy formulation vis-à-vis Lee’s administration, one might well speculate that disappointment over the latter’s cool response to the gesture of re-naming Seoul in Chinese when still mayor; his subsequent abandonment of previous administrations’ attempt at appeasing North Korea, as well his bold embrace of the US once entering the Blue House, have all converged to tilt Beijing closer toward Lee’s centre-left rivals at home.⁶

Inevitably, once the PRC refused to place the blame for sinking the Cheonan squarely on North Korea’s shoulder, Lee sought to forge much greater strategic collaboration with the US to the extent that bilateral ties with China saw a further setback. But, if anything, the fact that Seoul’s re-naming is virtually unmentioned even in lengthiest and most detailed scholarly treatments of the evolution of Sino-Korean ties should draw some attention to the subject rather than serve as a proof of its triviality. Indeed, the gravity of the issue at hand would seem compelling when hypothetically placed within other regional dynamics: consider for example how incendiary an Israeli government request from Ankara to change the former’s capital appellation in Turkish from “Kudüs” to “Yerushalaim” might potentially be; or an Irish demand that the UK forbid its domestic media from using the term “Ulster”; or for that matter a UK demand that the French cease calling London “Londres”.

Seoul in Korean history

⁶ Gilbert Rozman, “History as an Arena of Sino-Korean Conflict and the Role of the United States”, *Asian Perspective*, April-June 2012, Vol. 36, No. 2, p. 278; Scott W. Harold, “Beijing Unflustered by Cool Ties with Seoul”, *YaleGlobal*, published online 14 August 2012.

<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/beijing-unflustered-cool-ties-seoul>

During its long history, the city of Seoul has changed name some half-a-dozen times. It began as the capital city of one of the Korean peninsula's three historical kingdoms, known as Baekje (18 BC – 660 AD). Situated north of the Han River (漢川), the city was called Wiryseong (위례성; 慰禮城). It soon moved, however, south of the Han River and was renamed Hanseong (한성; 漢城) according to the Korean sounds of the Chinese characters extensively used by Korean literati at the time, or Hancheng in the Chinese rendition of the same characters⁷. The city's name changed to Namgyeong (남경; 南京) during the Goryeo dynasty (918—1392); it reverted back to Hanseong (or Hanyang) (한성; 漢城/한양; 漢陽) during the Joseon dynasty (1392—1910). Its name changed yet again to Gyeongseong (pronounced Keijō in Japanese; 경성; 京城) during the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945), before changing to Seoul soon after World War II ended in 1945.

The Japanese in the early postwar period followed the dictates of their American occupiers and quickly adopted the new Korean name, Seoul (ソウル) which is based on the indigenous Korean term for capital city, and for which there have been no equivalent Chinese characters until recently. The Chinese, however, continued until 2005 to use the traditional name Hancheng (漢城). As a result, the Chinese name did not in any way approximate the Korean pronunciation of Seoul. The need to address this discrepancy provided the fulcrum across which South Korea's mainstream media reported on the name change. Indeed, implicit in most accounts was a perceived prosaic need to prevent any possible confusion among Chinese about the Korean-ness of Seoul. In short, the South Korean media presented Seoul's name change as being mainly of benefit to the Chinese.⁸

⁷ For the history of the early Baekje kingdom when it was based in the Seoul region see G.R Lee (ed.), *Wonbon Samguksagi* (The Original Version of the Samguk-sagi) (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1998), pp. 227-248.

⁸ http://news.chosun.com/svc/content_view/content_view.html?contid=2005011970127

On balance, this was a show of real restraint on the part of the South Korean media. After all, as already mentioned, the name change could have potentially been projected as a nationalist act of protection. It should also be noted that, only twelve months before the Chinese accepted Seoul's name change, the South Korean media alluded to such nationalist sentiments. To provide but one example: the *Chosunilbo*, in August 2004 alleged that the Chinese were “unhappy” with efforts at a name change because those efforts revealed a South Korean “independent streak.” In this way, South Korea's most widely read daily newspaper linked the name change with a separation from Chinese influence.⁹

Efforts at distinguishing clearly between Koreans and Chinese stretch far beyond the naming of Seoul into Korean medieval and early-modern history; ironically, such efforts were often instigated not by resentment of China but by underlying affinity. Indeed, as an integral part of what some have called the “Chinese interaction sphere,”¹⁰ Korea was – for very many centuries – unashamedly Sinocentric. When Koreans spoke of *sadaejui* (or serving the great), they spoke of serving China. Indeed, Koreans went so far as to label their own society “little China,” and after the fall of China's “legitimate” Ming dynasty and its takeover by the “barbarian” Manchus in the 17 Century, the Yangban elite of the Joseon dynasty considered Korea to be the sole bastion of Chinese civilization (or rather, neo-Confucian civilization).¹¹ It was within this Sinocentric setting that the capital city of Hanseong/Hancheng emerged and thrived; there is every reason to believe that the Koreans themselves readily adopted a name

⁹ http://news.chosun.com/svc/content_view/content_view.html?contid=2004081070258

¹⁰ K.C. Chang, “China on the Eve of the Historical Period”, in M. Loewe and E. L. Shaughnessy (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Ancient China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 37-73, in particular p. 59.

¹¹ J.H. Kim Haboush, *The Confucian Kingship in Korea: Yongjo and the Politics of Sagacity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 21-28.

connoting “Chinese city” (or Hancheng/Hanseong) for their own capital city in order to infuse it with an air of high civilisation.¹²

This remarkable love for everything Chinese (which is somewhat mirrored in contemporary Korea by the love of all things Western) came to an abrupt halt in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, with the intrusions of the colonial powers and Imperial Japan. Indeed, by the 1950s, South Koreans no longer regarded China as the fountainhead of all civilization, but instead as poor, backward, communist country where supposedly uncouth ‘barbarians’ (중국오랑캐) dwell. This rejection of most aspects of Chinese influence coincided with a distinct rise in Korean nationalism; that streak of nationalism was itself arguably tinged with racialism that attributed a pure genetic origin to all Koreans. It led among other things to an instinctive repugnance among South Koreans of being mistaken for Chinese by outsiders, or by the Chinese themselves.¹³

China’s rise over the last few decades has not necessarily dispelled all of these negative perceptions. Rather, it has elicited a Chinese politico-historic assertiveness, which has in turn escalated numerous Sino-Korean territorially-framed disputes. For example, recent Chinese claims to historic affinity with Koguryo 高句麗 and Balhae 渤海國 have run headlong into South Korea’s own national discourse, which has long since held those two kingdoms to be

¹² For a very balanced analysis of the Joseon-China tributary relations and *Sadae* before the 19th century see K.W. Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Choson Korea, 1850-1910* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 29-35.

¹³ In this context, one has to consider, for example, the removal of references to Gija, the mythical Chinese ‘founder’ of the nation, in history books in South Korea. D. Chen, “Domestic Politics, National Identity, and International Conflict: The case of the Koguryo Controversy”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 21.74 (march 2012), p. 233. For a critique of this racialism in Korean historical scholarship see H.I. Pai, *Constructing ‘Korean’ Origins: A Critical Review of Archaeology, Historiography, and Racial Myth in Korean State-Formation Theories* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000). See also G.W. Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

incontrovertibly Korean.¹⁴ South Koreans also feel nonplussed by the notion of historically Chinese “provincial” regimes, and Korea’s inclusion therein. Semi-officially endorsed by the Chinese government – and actively supported by many Chinese academics – this notion applies (1) to those states or peoples historically under Chinese cultural influence, and (2) to those whose territory is contiguous with modern-day China. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such ideas have served to convince many South Koreans that China is chauvinistic, imperialistic, paternalistic, and possibly even aggressive in its outlook.¹⁵

In view of such perceptions, it is little wonder that *contemporary* South Koreans continue in their efforts to clearly distinguish “Korean” from “Chinese.” The re-naming of “Seoul” perhaps ought to be seen against this backdrop. If so, it would not be at all unreasonable to expect the renaming issue to have inflamed nationalist passions in South Korea despite the low-key nature of the mainstream media coverage. Yet, not only did the renaming issue escape significant comment in South Korea’s mainstream media, it also did relatively little to fire the imaginations of South Korea’s netizens. Indeed, South Korean bloggers maintained almost complete silence on the issue. This stands in stark contrast to the vocal debate which

¹⁴ For detailed analyses of this dispute over Koguryo and its significance see P.Hays Gries, “The Koguryo Controversy, National Identity, and Sino-Korean Relations today”, *East Asia*, 22.4 (winter 2005), pp. 3-17, and D. Chen, “Domestic Politics, National Identity, and International Conflict”, pp. 227-241. See also <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Andrei-Lankov/2233> and <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Yonson-Ahn/2631>. For excellent analyses of the dispute over ancient history between China and South Korea and the negative effects of nationalist indoctrination in both countries see G.H. Song, *East Asia’s History Conflict*, pp. 13-44; S.S. Lee, *Mandeul eo jin godeh: geun-deh gukmingukga ui Dongasia iyagi* (Created Antiquity: The Early Modern Nation-State’s story of East Asia) (Seoul: Samin, 2001), pp. 19-34, 186-88; J.O. Lee, *Goguryeo ui Yoksa* (The History of Goguryeo) (Seoul: Gimyoungsa, 2005), pp. 12-23. This highly publicized and acrimonious dispute between China and Korea over ancient history is also mirrored by an equally acrimonious disagreement over more recent history between Korea and Japan which receives treatment in Kimijima Kazuhiko, “The Continuing Legacy of Japanese Colonialism: The Japan—South Korea Joint Study Group on History Textbooks,” in Laura Hein and Mark Selden, eds., *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States*, (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), pp. 203-225.

¹⁵ For a sound critique of this pseudo-historical approach see Q.E. Wang, *Inventing China through History: The May Fourth Approach to Historiography* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 121. See also K.C. Chang, “Reflections on Chinese Archaeology in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century”, *Journal of East Asian Archaeology*, 3.1-2 (2001), pp. 5-13.

the renaming issue sparked among Chinese and even Japanese netizens, as discussed further below; it is, therefore, entirely appropriate to question the reasons for South Koreans' silence. We would suggest three factors at play. Firstly, the demise of Classical Chinese as a written medium in contemporary Korea has minimized the exposure of the Korean public to this name-change in Chinese. In other words, it seems entirely possible that many Koreans have come to regard this as a 'foreign' issue, or that the issue was locally and somewhat ironically de-sensitised because Chinese characters are much less understood nowadays.

Secondly, South Korea's reluctance to associate nationalism with this issue, which contrasts strikingly with the rather demeaning condescension that characterized Korean attitudes towards the Chinese in the recent past, surely has something to do with the rise of China over the past two decades.¹⁶ China is now no longer the 'backwards, poor' country that it used to be and this new found wealth and power of the Chinese has arguably contributed to the mellowing of Korean attitudes towards the Chinese. Money and power bring respect as always!

The third reason is closely tied up with the second. The rise of China has to some degree boosted left-wing alignments in Korea that tone down identity politics insofar as China can be portrayed as the antidote.¹⁷ The established Korean left, which had historically favoured

¹⁶ For a good analysis of this rise and what it implies see C. Horner, *Rising China and its Postmodern Fate: Memories of Empire in a New Global Context* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2009), pp. 1-21, 145-56, 183-91. For the history of the evolution of South Korea-China diplomatic and economic relations see J.H. Chung, *Between Ally and Partner: Korea-China Relations and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

¹⁷ The intense polarization of Korean politics has forced us to use the rather outdated terms left and right instead of the more neutral terminology favoured by the current Korean political establishment: Progressive and Conservative. See Rozman, "South Korea's National Identity Sensitivity", pp. 2-6, for discussion on the 'Progressive' vs. 'Conservative' conflict in Korean politics. The new terms are obviously borrowed from American politics. However, the weakness or virtual non-existence of any centrist parties in Korea is one of the peculiarities of Korean politics and quite obviously the residue of the cold war polarization that still divides the Korean peninsula. The two main parties Senuri (right wing or conservative), Tonghap Minju (left wing or progressive), are by no means the traditional centre right or centre left parties that we are familiar with in

communist North Korea and communist China and displayed a persistent anti-American and anti-Japanese approach, also has influential allies in the Korean media, who usually tone down the rhetoric or are silent when affairs that would present China negatively to the Korean public appear.¹⁸ This pro-Chinese stance among the influential left wing South Koreans and also the fear of the Korean business elite that any antagonism caused by excessive nationalistic outbursts may harm their interests in the PRC, have all contributed to the softening of the nationalist voice in the mass media.

Last but not least amongst the factors that could arguably account for Korea's low-key approach to name change -- or for the silence in the Korean blogosphere -- is the fact the Chinese government fairly swiftly acceded to Mayor Lee's request. We would argue that the Chinese official reaction to Lee's request was astute because it helped stem the escalation of mutual suspicion carrying over from the historic disputes over "ownership" of the Koguryo and Balhae kingdoms.

The Chinese reaction

Western democracies. The out-dated ideological conflicts that still govern the thinking of both parties warrant the use of the terms left and right when referring to them. Other political parties both on the left and right are even more radical than the two major parties mentioned above, which somewhat explains the extreme verbal and physical abuse that often blight the Korean parliament. For the recent 'tear gas incident' in the Korean parliament where a far left MP threw tear gas at his rivals, a world first in parliamentary politics (!), see http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/11/24/2011112400200.html and http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/politics_general/510352.html

¹⁸ Gyeonghyang Sinmun (경향신문), Ohmy News (오마이뉴스), Hangeoreh Sinmun (한겨레신문), MBC News network, Pressian (프레시안), Media Today (미디어오늘), etc., all favour the left of the political spectrum and have shown a marked reluctance to criticize either the North Koreans or their Chinese patrons in Beijing. In contrast their criticisms of the US and Japan have been extremely vigorous. Most of the news agencies cited above for instance denied the North Korean involvement in the recent Chonanham tragedy and rapidly adopted the Chinese official position towards the incident while rejecting the position espoused by the South Korean government and most of the international community. Their influence among the younger generation of Koreans is also very strong and will in all likelihood contribute to the growing support for Chinese interests among younger Koreans in the future.

Official PRC coverage of Seoul's name change remained consistently low-key, as was the case with South Korea's mainstream media. Probably because the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had decided in principle to accede to Lee Myung Bak's request, and in view of the nationalist backlash it might have unleashed, there seems to be intentionally little content in its leading mouthpieces that might elicit reactions in Zhongnanhai, or excite public attention. In what follows, we will therefore focus on unofficial sources in a bid to gage what might have gone through the minds of China's leaders as they weighed up Lee's request.

Such rationale for the name change as Lee's might have conceivably raised in Chinese eyes the spectre of demands for name changes of other historic cities across East Asia whose pronunciation in Mandarin is far-removed from the phonetics by which they are known elsewhere, e.g. Dongjing for Tokyo. However, as indicated above, the PRC official media did not openly question Lee's rationale. Furthermore, by the end of 2005, most media outlets in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and other parts of the Sinophone world had chosen to follow Beijing's lead and reverted to "Shouer" in lieu of "Hancheng".

Notably, however, the traditional-character online edition of Xinhua, which is aimed at Taiwan readers in the main, did carry an op-ed piece by Mainland-born commentator Wong Ping Fah 黃彬華 published that day in Singapore's *Lianhe Zaobao* 聯合早報, and titled "Why Is Seoul's Name Change So Perplexing?".¹⁹ Wong caustically remarked that Mayor Lee's move was one-sided, namely, directed *not* at Koreans, but in effect dictating to the Sinophone world that it drop a place name that had been in use for 600 years. Wong also alluded to the fact that Korea had for some time actually considered moving its capital to a

¹⁹ http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/overseas/2005-02/04/content_2547303.htm

new location in the middle of the country to be named Sejong in honor of the 15th-century king who created Hangul, the indigenous Korean alphabet. The relocation plan had been partly motivated by a desire to place government beyond the range of North Korean missiles, but it did not materialize.²⁰

And yet – Wong noted – even though the capital relocation did not eventuate, a name change of some sort was still required to allay Korean suspicions. While acknowledging foreigners had no right to “stick their beak” (*zhihui* 置喙) into how Koreans want to call their own capital city, Wong nonetheless wondered if Lee had the right to make such a diplomatically-sensitive request on behalf of the Korean central government, given that he was merely elected as mayor. Wong also questioned Lee’s rationale on the grounds that many prominent foreign place name in modern Chinese are figurative rather than phonetically-constructed, e.g. San Francisco (*Jiujinshan* 舊金山, “Old Gold Mountain”), Honolulu (*Tanxiangshan* 檀香山, “Fragrant Sandalwood Mountain”), Cambridge (*Jianqiao* 劍橋, “Sword Bridge”), and Oxford (*Niujin* 牛津 “Ox Stream”) etc. After all, Wong concluded, it was the Korean Yi dynasty that enshrined in 1394 the specific characters for Hancheng, not a Chinese invasion of the country.

²⁰ On the fate of capital relocation to Sejong see, e.g., Dennis Normile, “New Korean Science City Caught in Political Crossfire”, *Science* 5 February 2010: Vol. 327 no. 5966 p. 630.

Quite predictably, Taiwan's pan-green (i.e. pro-independence) press depicted Lee's move more favourably. The *Liberty Times* 自由時報, for example, quoted Taiwanese Korea specialist Lin Chiu-shan 林秋山 who explained that the neologism Shouer would be in line with pronunciation in the rest of the world, reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of the city. But Lin added that Korea did have some unresolved psychological issues (*xinjie* 心結) concerning China, as borne out by the aforementioned historiographic disputes over how "Sinified" the medieval kingdoms of Koguryo and Balhae were. The same article also quoted the Korean Sinologist Ōm Ik-sang (嚴翼相), who had been involved in the search committee for a new Chinese name for Seoul on behalf of the Mayor; Ōm pleaded in the article that Lee's move was *not* political in nature. Rather, he infused the Mayor's request with the aura of Confucian legitimacy that could potentially resonate with many Chinese when he described it as an attempt at "rectification of names" (*zhengming* 正名).²¹

Elsewhere in Greater China, Hong Kong's leading Chinese daily Singtao 星島 reported dryly on Lee's rationale of avoiding confusion among tourists. It also suggested that most Chinese residents of Seoul opposed the change despite official South Korean claims to the contrary.²² The Epoch Times 大紀元, published by the nationalistic anti-Communist Buddhist sect known as Falungong, reported on 27 February 2005 that leading mainland newspapers like *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily) had already reverted to Shouer. However, the Epoch Times suggested that the Taiwanese press and government organs were somewhat less cooperative than their Mainland counterparts, even though Taipei was Seoul's sister city.²³ In fact, three

²¹ <http://www.libertytimes.com.tw/2005/new/jan/20/today-t1.htm>

²² <http://www.singtao.com/archive/fullstory.asp?andor=or&year1=2005&month1=1&day1=20&year2=2005&month2=1&day2=20&category=all&id=20050120b02&keyword1=&keyword2>

²³ <http://www.epochtimes.com/b5/5/2/27/n829620.htm>

days earlier the Epoch Times had reported in a seemingly unrelated piece that semi-official Korean organisations expressed anger at the fact that an official Chinese government website used the term “Japan Sea” instead of “Eastern Sea” on its maps. The latter incident has indeed aroused rebuke in South Korea, which contrasts with the low-key approach to the name change.²⁴ We would suggest that the use of the term “Japan Sea” by an official Chinese government website may not have been incidental, as claimed, but perhaps a trial retaliation to Lee’s request by Beijing, which was ultimately abandoned thereby averting further escalation in bilateral relations.

Taiwanese blogosphere seemed by and large more restrained towards the name change than PRC netizens. Many suggested Shouer sounded, indeed, more cosmopolitan. Lapsing into Hoklo slang perhaps intentionally, one pan-green blog even went as far as suggesting that Lee’s move effectively countered PRC historiographic ‘bullying’ (*lishishang de ‘yaba’* 歷史上的鴨霸), while conceding at the same time that on a personal level the name change was an inconvenience to speakers of Chinese.²⁵

PRC bloggers conveniently overlooked, by and large, the fact that North Korea had actually discontinued the use of Chinese characters much earlier and more effectively than South Korea. Instead, many bloggers accused South Korea - under right-wing President Roh Tae-woo at the time - of intentionally expunging all trace of Chinese characters in the country ahead of the 1988 Seoul Olympics Games. Allegedly, when the left-wing President Kim Dae-jung tried in 1999 to lift some of the restriction on Chinese character use, Korean ultra-

²⁴ <http://www.epochtimes.com/b5/7/2/24/n1629155.htm>

²⁵ <http://tw.myblog.yahoo.com/liaoran-lab/article?mid=3>

nationalists obstructed his move. The Shouer initiative was thus interpreted by many as simply the continuation of the sort of Korean jingoism that was unleashed in late 1980s.²⁶

Arguably, one the most jingoistic entries in the PRC blogosphere suggested that Seoul's name change was in fact part of a bigger South Korean plot, concocted in concert with the US, to make territorial claims on Northeast China (formerly Manchuria) on the grounds that it has been historically and ethnically Korean; Washington, it was alleged, aimed at destabilising CCP rule, so that the two Koreas can then unify under American tutelage and expand east. Korea was depicted by this blog as possessing obsequious "vassal" (*weixingguo* 衛星國) mentality – first toward China; after 1910 toward Japan, and currently toward the US. But, the anonymous contributor warned, Korea was now acting blindly: client states cannot lean on one great power to provoke another great power for long, because they will crumble (*daomei* 倒霉) once the global balance of power shifts; truly crafty client states like Singapore or King Hussein's Jordan were successful and long-lasting, it was alleged, precisely because they were chary of provoking contending powers.²⁷

Another anonymous PRC blogger suggested that the process of de-Sinification (*qu Zhongguo hua* 去中國化) in Korea had started – just like in Taiwan – as late as the 1980s, on the back of rapid economic modernisation, and against the backdrop of relative poverty in China at the time. By contrast -- the blogger alleged -- Korea had been trying to look thoroughly Sinified for hundreds of years beforehand, in order to gain respect in the region. This particular blog

²⁶ <http://www.city363.com/asia/seoul/531.htm>. On the Roh era in Korean politics, see e.g. Robert E. Bedeski and James R. Brown, *The Transformation of South Korea: reform and reconstitution in the sixth republic under Roh Tae Woo, 1987-1992*, Routledge 1994. On the history of written-language reform in East Asia more generally, see Wm. C. Hannas, *Asia's Orthographic Dilemma*, University of Hawai'i Press 1997.

²⁷ http://bbs.tiexue.net/post_1462569_1.html

aroused many talk-back responses, a few abusive in nature. One was eerily reminiscent of European post-war ‘Kraut-bashing’:-²⁸

“Kimchi-land is talking tough again ? As I said to my close friend, after you’ve eaten too much pickled cabbage you might become paranoid”.

泡菜國又發威了？我已經和很多身邊的朋友說過了泡菜吃多了，會發妄想症的。

From blogger abuse, we must now turn to equally germane yet more nuanced discussions in the PRC para-academic literature. Here, perhaps the most interesting commentary was by Liu Wansheng, a lecturer at the Foreign Languages Department of Nantong Vocational College. Published in a peripheral academic journal as late as 2008, Liu ambitiously deployed Foucault’s power discourse theory in order to explain why South Korea might wish to change its capital’s name in Chinese. He concluded that Korea scrambled to affirm the distinctiveness of its national culture by pitting it against what it saw as a hegemonic Sinitic culture. Echoing similar attitudes in blogosphere, Liu suggested that the Korean rush for national affirmation betrayed quite a reasonable urge to cash in on the country’s relative economic advancement vis-à-vis neighbouring China before it fades away. But Liu also asserted that Seoul’s name change was ultimately contrived (*qianqiang* 牽強), thereby divulging Korea’s deep seated cultural ‘cringe’. At the same time, Liu contrasted that historically-grounded Korean ‘cringe’ with the more recent wave of adulation for Korean (or Koreanised) pop-culture idols (*Hanliu* 韓流) among many PRC urban youths, particularly singers like Rain and Zhang Lala or actor Bae Yong Joon; Liu noted with bemusement the high ratings, which television dramas like *Dae Jang Geum* 大長今, set as they are in pre-modern Korea, can achieve in modern China. Finally, Liu speculated that China’s last decade

²⁸ <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/worldlook/1/155653.shtml>

of breakneck economic progress might soon start to offset Chinese adulation for Korean pop-culture, particularly as so many young Koreans study Mandarin in PRC universities.²⁹

In a slightly revised version of the same article, published in 2009, Liu added that the strategists of China's rise should in fact learn from the Korean cultural experience and turn relative weakness to international strength. He described how three decades of economic reform and opening up to the West have turned English into the hegemonic language in the PRC, so much so that the rich sediments of Soviet cultural influence of the 1950s-60s had been all but erased. Nonetheless, Liu thought that the hegemony of English can be effectively resisted by advancing Chinese culture onto the world stage. In practical terms, to learn from Seoul's name-change episode would require, according to Liu, that China insist other countries refer to Chinese national symbols by their Mandarin pronunciation, e.g. "Chinese Long" for "Chinese Dragon", "Kongzi" for Confucius, or "Jinngju" instead of Peking Opera. Liu stated China needed to continue promoting Mandarin internationally through Confucius Institutes, and employ as many staff dedicated to the showcasing of Chinese culture as those dedicated to the instruction of English worldwide.³⁰

Even if somewhat less inflammatory than blogosphere content, journals aimed at younger readership carried pieces much less appreciative of Korea's language policies. Under the pseudonym Chi Cheng 馳騁 ('galloping'), one author stood out as an exception to that pattern of moderation. In a 2005 piece, Chi Cheng fulminated that China was being "attacked" by Koreans on "every corner"; Korean culture was "taking over" the young through *Hanliu*,

²⁹ Liu Wansheng 劉万生, "Cong 'Hancheng' dao 'Shouer': wenhua qianshi diwei de kewang", *Anhui zhiye jishu xueyuan xuebao*, Issue 3, 2008. On the impact of *HanLiu* and Korean pop music across East Asian see also Keehyeung Lee, "Mapping Out the Cultural Politics of the 'Korean Wave' in Contemporary South Korea", pp. 157-172. In Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi eds., *East Asian Pop Culture* (Hong Kong University Press, 2008).

³⁰ Liu Wansheng 劉万生, "Cong 'Hancheng' dao 'Shouer': jingji fazhan gaibian huayuquan", *Yibin xueyuan xuebao*, Issue 3, 2009.

which despite some admittedly good-quality features was nonetheless infused with Korean supremacism; peddlers from North Korea were “everywhere” selling “South Korean”-labelled Kimchi with impunity, and Korean-made household appliances and automobiles proved all the rage. But this adulation for Korean culture only bred -- according to Chi Cheng -- contempt for China among most Koreans, as shown by the ditching of “Hancheng”, even when it was the ancestors of Koreans themselves who had embraced these two characters to denote Seoul. Chi Cheng then satirically suggested that all Koreans ought to change the sounds of their surnames if they were serious about rinsing themselves of Chinese culture, as these surnames were invariably derived from Chinese characters. He concluded in a retaliatory fashion by asserting that Korea’s was in fact an indistinct (*sibuxiang* 四不像) culture that borrowed all too heavily from China over the centuries, as compared with Japan’s more genuinely syncretic nature.³¹

By contrast, in a 2005 piece, Zhou Yongsheng coolly suggested that Korea had every right to change place-name signage domestically. But, Zhou immediately added, it was up to the Sinophone world to decide whether it wished to accept the name change outside Korea.³² Mao Haiyan, a Chinese academic based in Korea, was even more accommodating. In a piece published in 2005, she suggested the Koreans had a right to change the name of their capital in Chinese irrespective of the rationale of such a change. Seemingly dismissive of the uproar elsewhere, Mao concluded that the induction of Shouer in lieu of Hancheng was not much different to the PRC’s insistence that Westerners re-spell Peking as Beijing earlier on.³³ Quan Yinchu similarly countenanced the name change in broad terms even while acknowledging it would put the Sinophone world to great trouble (*mafan* 麻煩). For Quan, the ultimate

³¹ Chi Cheng 驰骋, “Bu guan ‘Hancheng’ jiao ‘Shouer’”, *Shaonian rensheng* (Youth Life), Issue 21, 2005.

³² Zhou Yongsheng 周永生, “Hancheng gaiming ‘Shouer’ wei naban”, *Tangzheng luntan*, Issue 4, 2005.

³³ Mao Haiyan 毛海燕, “‘Hancheng’ gaiwei ‘Shouer’ zhihou”, *Dangdai Hanguo*, Issue 4, 2005.

vindication for the name change was the fact that Japan, too, had resorted to Katakana phonetics in order to denote Seoul rather than clinging to the traditional Chinese characters.³⁴

Pieces like Mao's and Quan's were filliped by interviews with Korean scholars published in other Chinese journals. In one such interview, South Korean sinologist Meng Joo-Oeck (孟柱亿), for example, re-iterated at length that the name-change was in the main phonetic in nature – it was concerned with bringing Seoul's pronunciation in Mandarin closer to the Korean original, and with avoiding confusion. Much like the aforementioned Ōm Ik-sang, Meng tried to play down historiographic disputes between the two countries by invoking the Confucian term *zhengming* as precondition for good governance. Meng then reminding his Chinese interlocutors that the PRC, too, had changed South Korea's name in Mandarin from Nan Chaoxian 南朝鲜 to the less confrontational Hanguo 韩国 after the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992; it was now only natural, *pace* Meng, to further facilitate bilateral relations by prizing Shouer over Hancheng.³⁵

The Japanese Reaction

The Japanese are no strangers to name changes within their region. The Japanese Government from the mid-19th Century took to referring to China in more minimalist terms as “Shinkoku” (清国) or ‘Qing-dynasty Country’ instead of the more traditional ‘Middle Kingdom’ (*Chūgoku* 中国); by the early 20th Century Japanese officials favoured the

³⁴ Quan Yinchu 全寅初, “Hanguo shoudu Hanzi biaoji you ‘Hancheng’ gaiwei ‘Shouer’, *Dangdai Hanguo*, Issue 1, 2005.

³⁵ Meng Joo-Oeck 孟柱亿, “Cheng ‘Hancheng’ wei ‘Shouer’ bus hi gaiming, er shi zhengming”, *Zhejiang wanli xueyuan xuebao*, Issue 4, 2005.

somewhat pejorative term “Shina” (支那); and soon after World War II, the Japanese preference switched right back to Chūgoku (中国).³⁶

As indicated above, throughout the period of Japanese colonial rule over the Korean peninsula, Seoul was known not by its traditional Sinitic name of Hancheng (漢城) but instead as Keijō/Gyeong Seong (京城). When U.S. occupation authorities in Korea in the early aftermath of World War II declared that the capital’s correct name was “Seoul,” the Japanese (themselves under U.S. occupation) simply abandoned the use of Chinese characters and reverted to the katakana phonetic syllabry, so that the sounds of the South Korean capital became approximated as Souru (ソウル).

Yet if the mainstream media remains an accurate barometer of public opinion, then it seems fair to assert that the issue was of little interest to most Japanese. Such major dailies as *Asahi Shimbun* and *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (or *Nikkei*, as it is popularly known) did, to be sure, carry stories explaining the name-change; these were nonetheless brief, matter-of-factly, and devoid of opinion or comment.³⁷ The principal cause of this Japanese lack of interest is readily discernible: this was a Sino-Korean issue, and Japan remained a bystander.

Of course, not all Japanese professed equanimity. The issue animated the blogosphere, even if only for a short time. Many Japanese netizens felt the name Hancheng (漢城) was indicative of a – real or imagined – Chinese mindset, which clings to the notion of itself being “suzerain” or “overlord” of the region.³⁸ Drawing such thinking to its logical conclusion, one blogger

³⁶ See especially Joshua A. Fogel, *The Cultural Dimension of Sino-Japanese Relations: Essays on the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 1995), pp. 66-78.

³⁷ *Asahi Shimbun*, 9 February 2005; *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 10 February 2005.

³⁸ <http://blog.goo.ne.jp/noridar002/e/f88472796468682acc8a1af7f2912e22>

congratulated the Korean people soon after the Chinese consented to Seoul's name change. In a rather obvious state of excitement, he wrote: "You can now say in triumph that Korea is not China's tributary state!"³⁹ As if to highlight the spectrum of ideas and opinions informing the Japanese, one right-wing blogger reached an altogether different conclusion, and saw reason not to congratulate but to belittle the South Koreans. "Maybe Koreans, who cannot read Chinese characters," he wrote, "do not know their own origins."⁴⁰

Other bloggers related the issue directly back to Japan. One blogger saw China's perceived antagonism to the name change as being analogous to the well-known Chinese practice of pronouncing Japanese names in accord *not* with their Japanese reading but with the Chinese reading (the cited instance being Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei, who in the 1970s normalized Japan's relations with China, but who in China was known as "Tianzhong" rather than Tanaka).⁴¹ Another blogger angrily questioned why the Chinese would accede to Korean requests regarding Seoul, but continue to refer to the Japanese prefecture of Okinawa as "the *Liuqiu* 琉球 Islands."⁴²

Tanaka Nobuhiko wrote what was perhaps one of the more thoughtful accounts to come out of the Japanese blogosphere. A lecturer in Asia University's Graduate School of Asian and International Business Strategy, Tanaka acknowledged that the literal meaning of Hancheng (漢城 "Chinese city") was probably distasteful for many Koreans. He added, however, that most Chinese had probably never considered the literal meaning of Hancheng. It only had meaning because, he averred, this was "how the Chinese have long since named Seoul."

³⁹ <http://blog.livedoor.jp/wildhorse38/archives/50155793.html>

⁴⁰ <http://tosi.iza.ne.jp/blog/entry/796538/>

⁴¹ <http://blogs.dion.ne.jp/bunsuke/archives/529787.html>

⁴² http://sh.explore.ne.jp/yorozu/45087_1.html

Tanaka came out explicitly in favour of the status quo, which of course meant he favoured retention of the name “Hancheng.”⁴³

Tanaka then turned his attention to Sino-Japanese relations, and made an interesting comparison. Reminding his readers that the Chinese call Tokyo “Dongjing,” he asked: “Do we tell China: ‘Tokyo is not Dongjing. It is Tokyo.’ If it comes to that, then the Japanese will have to stop saying ‘Peking’ and instead use ‘Beijing’ ... It would, in fact, require the writing of Chinese place names not in Chinese characters but instead in Katakana (Japanese phonetic syllabry).” He concluded with the thought that, in his mind at least, the use of Chinese characters rather than katakana had two great advantages. It was (1) “more beautiful,” and (2) respectful of Sino- Japanese “shared culture.”⁴⁴

Conclusions

The analysis of the official and unofficial media and academic responses to the name change in China, South Korea and Japan yields numerous fascinating perspectives. One of the most noticeable trends in the Chinese discourse on the name change is the desire among the wider Chinese public for the re-assertion of China’s dominant political and cultural role in the East Asia region, and frustration at Lee Myung Bak’s apparent disregard for the inconvenience of phasing out an age-old place name in Chinese. On the extreme, the name change was viewed in some instances rather disturbingly as the ‘revolt’ and ‘impertinent self-assertion’ of a former ‘vassal’ state. The venom with which some Chinese bloggers have reacted to the name change is indicative of the newly assertive and at time jingoistic mood of certain segments of Chinese society. Quite obviously the PRC government had chosen on this

⁴³ <http://www.actiblog.com/tanaka/40102>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

occasion to avoid confrontation and wisely keep jingoism at bay by rapidly agreeing to the Korean requests for the name change, and maintaining low-key coverage of the issue in the state-run media.

However, it is evident that there is a growing number of Chinese who are no longer in the mood for any perceived ‘concessions’. This will likely mean increasing difficulties in the future for Chinese policy-makers who will struggle to cope with the rising nationalist sentiment of their people while striving to pursue a more pragmatic foreign policy towards the rest of East Asia.

Yet the speedy, quiet and effective resolution of the name-change issue is an indication that common sense has prevailed among China’s diplomats and leaders over nationalist pressures. Moreover, it is an indication that historically-hued semantics, i.e. the politics of naming neighbourly localities, can potentially be deployed to allay suspicion of China’s intent just as it is an all-to-familiar channel for inflaming popular sentiments. Will such common sense among China’s leaders sufficiently contain the popular fervour currently arising as a result of the escalating territorial dispute surrounding the Diaoyutai/Senkaku and Spratly Islands? That remains to be seen. What will be the impact of nationalist sentiments further afield, as China continues to global cachet?⁴⁵

The foregoing analysis of popular reactions to the name change in all three countries thus poses some serious questions about the retention of stability in East Asia. But, perhaps more importantly, the accession to Mayor Lee’s request by the Chinese government speaks to the

⁴⁵ For a broader discussion of how public opinion impact on PRC policy see e.g. James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

benign potential of newly-envisioned theoretical principles such as “humane authority” if and when they are applied to modern PRC foreign policy.

The picture that emerges from the observation of Korean reactions to the name change is also highly complex. On the one hand, Lee Myung Bak’s name-change initiative bespeaks widely-shared nationalist sentiments and deep-seated suspicion of Chinese intent. Yet on the other hand the political fault-lines that divide Korean society are still quite strong. The fear among Koreans, particularly those of right-wing leanings, of an increasingly powerful China are often implicit rather than explicitly stated. It may well be the case that the South Korean low-key approach to Seoul’s name change, as well as the subsequent accession by the Chinese government to name-change request, could signal a new *modus operandi* of resolving bilateral disputes and ultimately securing closer relations quite apart from which side of South Korean politics is in power.

Similarly, the virtual silence in the Korean media about the name-change might reveal the extent to which established and new left-wing alignments could mitigate popular perceptions of China or, indeed, the degree to which South Korea wishes to remain in the US fold and at loggerheads with North Korea. Yet sooner or later a more overtly pro-Chinese stance by Korean intellectual elites will be called into question again over issues of historiographic (read: symbolic) or substantive significance. How South Korea’s right-wing politicians will reconcile the bipartisan imperative of keeping China -- nowadays their country’s largest trading partner -- on side with the underlying popular suspicion of China in South Korea remains to be seen.

The analysis of the Japanese approach to the name change has likewise revealed growing anxiety over China's rise, even if a few comments valorised the shared Sino-Japanese cultural baggage. The generally favourable response and even support for Korea's decision to assert its 'independence' reflects the desire to maintain the current balance of power in East Asia, which would be perturbed if the Koreans were to shift their allegiance to China and sever ties with their American and Japanese allies. There remains, however, a underlying current of ambivalence toward Korea, as revealed by those netizens who took the occasion to belittle and deride Seoul's name change.

At the heart of all this is lingering mistrust among East Asian nations towards each other are as-yet unresolved territorial disputes that continue to muddy popular and elite perceptions. To these factors, one should add the great uncertainty across the region about the viability of North Korea. The largely pro-Chinese sentiment of South Korean left-wing political parties and their supporters may not be enough to contain the nationalist uproar that may erupt if China chooses to intervene actively in North Korean affairs in order to prevent its disintegration or "fall" into American hands.

In that sense, it would appear that South Korea might have some soul-searching to do in terms of genuinely re-defining its national identity and determining where its strategic future lies, quite apart from searching for a new Chinese name for Seoul. Has the relatively quiet acceptance of "Shouer" paved the way to closer Sino-Korean relations ? Or are we likely to see President Lee or even Prime Minister Noda demanding sometime in the near future that Renchuan 仁川 (Incheon) and Dongjing (Tokyo), too, be re-named in Chinese ? As was argued throughout this article, such questions extend well beyond semantics even if they are not immediately provoked by the ethnocentric connotation of the character Han 漢. To a great

extent, in fact, these seemingly semantic concerns encapsulate what the future may have in store for the region; it is a future where – we argue – pragmatic concerns might end up offsetting the ironically divisive potential of shared East Asian history, culture and language. On balance, we would thus cautiously suggest that the top-down “Shouer” formula is one that could bode well for conflict resolution between the governments of the region in the face of lingering popular suspicion.