

# Politics of Race in East Asia: The Case of Korea and the Chinese community in South Korea

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The immigration of Chinese to the Korean peninsula has a long history. According to legend it began at the very dawn of Korean history with the migration of Gija from Shang China to Gojoseon (old Korea). With the rise of modern nationalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Chinese contribution to Korean nationhood, gene pool and history has been downplayed and replaced by what has been termed racialist historiography, the attribution of a pure genetic origin to the Korean ‘race’. This has in turn led to open discrimination towards Chinese residents in South Korea (huaqiao) and the peculiar situation whereby Korea was until recently the only nation in East Asia that did not have a highly visible China town in its major cities<sup>1</sup>. The Chinese immigrants who settled in Korea tended to hide their origins or even assimilate to avoid discrimination. However, with the recent increase of China’s economic might, Korea has been forced to reassess its relations with China itself and also the Chinese residing in Korea. What this implies for the Chinese minority residing in Korea and what these new changing circumstances suggest for future Sino-Korean relations will be discussed in this article.

## **Chinese Migration to Korea before the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

The long history of Sino-Korean contacts began during the early years of the Chinese Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). The Chinese historian Sima Qian records that the king of the

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<sup>1</sup> P.S. Yang and J.H. Lee, 차이나타운 없는 나라 - 한국 화교 경제의 어제와 오늘 (*A country without a Chinatown-The yesterday and today of the Chinese-resident's economy in Korea*) (Seoul; Samsung Center for Economic Research, 2004).

Joseon (Korea: Chaoxian) named Man, who he claims was a leader of Chinese migrants from the Chinese kingdoms of Yan and Qi to Joseon (*Shiji* 115.2985), agreed to be an outer vassal of the emperor and was authorized to impose order on the barbarians (*Man Yi*) of the east. In return for his services the prefect of Liaodong was instructed to provide the king with material aid that enabled him to expand his kingdom over an area stretching thousands of *li* in all directions (*Shiji* 115.2986). Thus established in power with Chinese aid, Sima Qian records, the kings of the dynasty of Man (founder of the royal line of Joseon) consistently refused to present themselves at the imperial court to pay homage<sup>2</sup>. Throughout his narrative of the conflict between the Han Empire and Joseon, Sima Qian interestingly does not once apply to state of Joseon the epithet *Man Yi* (barbarian). As Gi notes, Sima Qian clearly regards the kingdom as being part of the sinocentric world order and the ruling dynasty at least, which is supposedly Chinese in origin, to be civilized<sup>3</sup>. Eventually a punitive invasion from China was launched to subdue Joseon and Han Wudi established four commanderies in what is now Northern Korea in 108 BC to rule the conquered Koreans. The impact of this early Han Chinese penetration into Korea was immense and led to the sustained sinification of all of Northeast Asia in succeeding centuries.

During the subsequent Three Kingdoms period (ca. 1<sup>st</sup> century BC-668 AD) of Korean history Chinese migration to Korea continued. According to the *Samguksagi* entry for the 38<sup>th</sup> year of King Bak Hyeogeose of Silla, it is claimed that refugees from Qin (China) settled in Jinhan, that is south-eastern Korea<sup>4</sup>. In the same *Samguksagi* the entry for the 11<sup>th</sup> year of King Sansang of Goguryeo/Koguryo (in Northern Korea and southern Manchuria) records

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<sup>2</sup> S.Y. Gi, *Study of the 'Dong Yi Zhuan' of the Hou Han Shu centered on a comparison with the 'Dong Yi Zhuan' of the San Guo Zhi* (Seoul: Baeksanjaryowon, 2005), p. 6, argues that the submission of Wei Man (the surname Wei does not appear in the *Shiji*, but only appears in a later 3<sup>rd</sup> century source, the *Weilue*) to the imperial court was genuine and should be taken seriously and not simply as a diplomatic gesture.

<sup>3</sup> Gi, *Study of the 'Dong Yi Zhuan'*, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Kim Pu-sik, *Samguk-Sagi*, tr. K.L. Lee (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1998), vol.1, p. 65.

that a certain Ha Yo from Northern China defected to Goguryeo with 1,000 migrants<sup>5</sup>. During the Goryeo period (918-1392 AD) the influx of a small number of Chinese into Korea continued. King Gwangjong (reigned 949-975 AD) employed Ssang Gi and other naturalized Chinese migrants to carry out his aggressive reform agenda. Later still during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910 AD) the collapse of the Ming dynasty in China brought an influx of defeated Ming partisans from China into Northern Korea.

### **The Coming of the Huaqiao in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Whereas these early Chinese who settled in Korea before the 19<sup>th</sup> century were quickly absorbed into Korean mainstream society, a distinctly different Chinese settlement in Korea occurred during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Qing China in imitation of Western colonial powers sought to exercise a more intrusive, western style hegemony over Joseon<sup>6</sup>. The Qing merchant community that settled in Incheon from 1882 onwards did not immediately adapt or divest itself of its foreign identity but chose to form a separate Chinese community within Korea. After the Chinese defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1894, Chinese merchants residing in Korea were confined to Seoul and three ports only (Incheon, Busan and Wonsan) and forbidden to move inland. In addition their once protected status in Korea, as citizens of Korea's hegemon, received a blow due to the expansion of Japanese influence in Korea and the withdrawal of Qing military presence in Korea after 1894. This also significantly undermined the economic strength of the Chinese residents residing in Korea<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 353.

<sup>6</sup> See K.W. Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Choson Korea, 1850-1910* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 43-127.

<sup>7</sup> P. Yang, *한국 화교 사회 변화의 연구 (Research on the transformation of the Chinese-resident society in Korea)* (unpublished thesis: Kei Myung University, 2011), pp. 21-22.

## The Huaqiao under Japanese Occupation

During the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945) and further Japanese expansion into Northern and eastern China, imperial Japan imported cheap labour from China into Korea as part of its concerted policy of developing what was then regarded as a ‘backward’ colony. The number of Chinese in Korea climbed to a respectable 67,794 people by 1930<sup>8</sup>. Friction, however, arose between Koreans and Chinese migrants leading to the tragic Manbosan incident (만보산사건)<sup>9</sup>. The Manbosan incident actually began as a land dispute between Chinese and Korean migrants in Manchuria that evolved into an armed clash involving firearms. No-one was killed in the incident which occurred in Manchuria. However, exaggerated reports of a massacre of ethnic Koreans in Manchuria by Chinese mobs, which appear to have been false, spread into Korea via newspapers. This precipitated angry ‘reprisals’ in the form of pillaging and murder against Chinese residing in Korea and even Japan. The anti-Chinese sentiment was also apparently encouraged by the Japanese authorities who were eager to create excuses for further intervention in Northeastern China on the pretext of ‘protecting’ ‘Japanese citizens’ on Chinese soil (i.e. Korean migrants). The incident as terrible as it was did not seriously affect inter-community relations in Korea. Swift apologies were issued on both sides and a diplomatic solution was immediately sought to alleviate the plight of migrant communities (Koreans in Manchuria and Chinese in Korea)<sup>10</sup>.

## The Huaqiao in Post-independence Korea

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<sup>8</sup> N. Yoon, *한국 화교의 정체성 연구 :부산지역 화교사회에 대한 설문조사를 중심으로* (Research on the Identity of Chinese residents in Korea: centered on the poll taken from Chinese residents in the Busan area) (unpublished thesis: Pukyung National University, 2008), p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Yang, *한국 화교 사회 변화의 연구*, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> For more details on the Manbosan incident see Y.S. Park, *萬寶山事件研究* (Research on the Manbosan Incident) (Seoul: Asia Cultural Society, 1978).

More serious to the status of Chinese in Korea was the upheavals that followed Korean independence in 1945. During the Korean War (1950-3), when Communist China intervened on behalf of North Korea, the Chinese residing in Korea became scapegoats for Chinese aggression against South Korea. The huaqiao, like the rest of Korea suffered crippling losses to property and livelihood during the war. Even worse they were subjected to progressively worse discrimination and neglect after the war which prevented them from advancing the social ladder into more elevated professions and positions of influence. The most serious blow to the huaqiao in Korea was probably the measures taken by the Park Jung-hee administration between 1962 and 1976. In 1962 radical currency reform measures were enacted by Park as part of the concerted effort to control the outflow of capital from Korea and to crack down on money laundering. The measures however had damaging effects on the huaqiao who were more actively involved in overseas trade. In 1976 further punitive measures were enforced that deprived the huaqiao of property rights and access to education within Korea<sup>11</sup>. As a result of these measures many huaqiao migrated out of Korea due to poverty or in search of better conditions<sup>12</sup>. For instance out of the 5,000 residents of Incheon's once sprawling Chinese community only 500 decided to stay<sup>13</sup>. Of those that stayed many were forced to resign themselves to running Chinese restaurants and small business as part of an under-privileged and often despised minority<sup>14</sup>.

## The Perception of China and the Chinese among Koreans

<sup>11</sup> Entry by Y.H. Ju, 한국학중앙연구원 한국학대학원 교수 (Center for Korean Studies, Korean Studies Graduate School Lecturer) in *Shindonga*:

[http://shindonga.donga.com/docs/magazine/shin/2008/07/08/200807080500000/200807080500000\\_1.html](http://shindonga.donga.com/docs/magazine/shin/2008/07/08/200807080500000/200807080500000_1.html)

<sup>12</sup> Yoon, 한국 화교의 정치성 연구, pp. 27-29; K.O. Kim, "Chinese in Korea", in M. Ember, C.R. Ember, and I.A. Skoggard (eds.), *Encyclopedia of diasporas: immigrant and refugee cultures around the world* (New York: Springer, 2004), pp. 688-97, esp. p. 690.

<sup>13</sup> 서울신문 (Seoul Sinmun) '자장면 원조공화춘' (Gonghwachun, the Origin of the Jjajangmyun), 17/03/2006.

<sup>14</sup> Yang, 한국 화교 사회 변화의 연구, p. 25-6.

Such was the history of Chinese migration and settlement in Korea, which eventually led to the formation in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century of a clearly disadvantaged and maligned minority within Korea. Interestingly however, in medieval Korea association with Chinese migrants was something to be proud of. The beginnings of Sino-Korean contacts were pushed back artificially to the very dawn of East Asian history via the legendary story of the migration of Gija (Jizi; 篪) to Korea during the Shang-Zhou dynastic transition. During the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties, the Korean government offered state sacrifices to this Gija, a Chinese sage who supposedly brought civilization to Korea<sup>15</sup>. Koreans, especially during the sinophile Joseon dynasty took pride in this association with China and Chinese civilization, which in their eyes and also they hoped in the eyes of the Chinese lifted their country above the status of Dongyi (eastern barbarians)<sup>16</sup>. As a matter of fact after the fall of the ‘legitimate’ Ming dynasty and its takeover by the ‘barbarian’ Manchus in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Yangban elite of the Joseon dynasty considered Korea to be the sole bastion of Chinese civilization or rather Neo-Confucian civilization and eagerly adopted for themselves the mantle of ‘Little China’ (소중화)<sup>17</sup>.

The legend of Gija which played such an important role in the Joseon articulation of Korea’s self-image to the outside world before the 19<sup>th</sup> century was without a doubt a fictitious story invented by the Chinese<sup>18</sup> during the late Warring States or Han period in order to explain the

<sup>15</sup> The earliest reference to Gija and his fictitious ties with Joseon can be found in the *Shangshu dazhuan* (尚書大傳) and Sima Qian’s famous *Shiji*, see J. Shim, “A New Understanding of Kija Chosŏn as a Historical Anachronism”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 62.2 (2002), pp. 271–305, especially 274-5.

<sup>16</sup> For Sinocentrism and Chinese attitudes towards the ‘barbarians’ see H.J. Kim, *Ethnicity and Foreigners in Ancient Greece and China* (London: Duckworth, 2009), pp. 34, 60-69.

<sup>17</sup> J.H. Kim Haboush, *The Confucian Kingship in Korea: Yongjo and the Politics of Sagacity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 21-28.

<sup>18</sup> Y. Bugin, *Gojoseon Yoksa-Gogohakjuk Geyo* (Introduction to the Historical and Archaeological Gojoseon), tr. H.J. Yi and B.D. Yi (Seoul: Sonamu, 1990), p. 116. As S.M. Nelson, “Archaeology of the Two Koreas”, in M. T. Stark (ed.), *An Archaeology of Asia* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 37-54, p. 49, argues, there is

high level of material culture (which was attributed to the civilizing influence left by Gija) that the Chinese encountered as they expanded east. It is revealing that the earliest stories about Gija mention no such immigration from China to Joseon on his part<sup>19</sup> and the attribution of Chinese ancestry to the ancient rulers of Korea was part of the wider Chinese practice of ascribing a Chinese ancestor to all neighbouring, foreign peoples<sup>20</sup>. However, what is noteworthy is the extent to which this sinification of Korea in the Chinese imagination was fully embraced by the Koreans as part of their identity. The migration of small numbers of Chinese to Korea was almost without exception welcomed by the Korean ruling elite of all dynasties and time periods before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was seen as an opportunity to absorb China's 'superior' civilization and with the prevailing mood of sinocentrism and *sadaejui* (serving the great, i.e serving China<sup>21</sup>) during the Joseon dynasty even the confusion of Korea and China (that is regarding the two countries as part of the same civilized Confucian community) was at times encouraged.

This remarkable love for everything Chinese was abruptly brought to an end by the intrusions of the Western colonial powers and Imperial Japan in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. China at least from 1950s onwards was no longer regarded as the fountain of all civilization, but increasingly despised as a poor, backward, communist country that had invaded Korea during the Korean War. The rejection of most aspects of Chinese influence<sup>22</sup> and the rise of Korean nationalism (tinged with racialism that attributed a pure genetic origin to all Koreans (단일민족) and tried to reject historically attested injection of foreign blood into the Korean

nothing that can be identified as Shang or Zhou in eastern Liaodong and Korea in the archaeological record before the Warring States Period.

<sup>19</sup> See B. Hinsch, "Myth and the Construction of Foreign Ethnic Identity in Early and Medieval China (Xiongnu, Xianbei and Koreans in China)", *Asian Ethnicity*, 5.1 (2004), pp. 81-103, in particular 101 ff. for further details.

<sup>20</sup> Kim, *Ethnicity and Foreigners*, pp. 137-39.

<sup>21</sup> For a very balanced analysis of the Joseon-China tributary relations and *Sadae* before the 19<sup>th</sup> century see Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties and Trade*, pp. 29-35.

<sup>22</sup> For instance the abrupt disconnect with the story of Gija founding Joseon and the removal of references to Gija in history books in South Korea, see 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.

gene-pool<sup>23</sup>) also led to the instinctive repugnance among Koreans of being mistaken for Chinese by outsiders or by the Chinese themselves. In this overwhelmingly nationalist political climate of post-independence Korea the foreignness of the Chinese residing in Korea was increasingly suspect and the loyalty or lack thereof of the huaqiao towards the Korean state became an issue. The Chinese community itself became torn due to conflicting identities that they had to negotiate. Were they nationalist Chinese (or Taiwanese), mainland Chinese or should they become naturalized Korean citizens?<sup>24</sup>

The economic rise of China from the 1990s onwards and the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and South Korea in 1992<sup>25</sup> brought about a slow but visible improvement in both the treatment and the economic well-being of Chinese residents in Korea that had hit an all time low in 1976. The fact that mainland China is now no longer the ‘backwards, poor’ country that it used to be and the recognition among Koreans of this new wealth and power among the Chinese have both contributed to the mellowing of Korean attitudes (at least official government attitudes) towards the Chinese. This has had positive consequences for the Chinese community in Korea that had until recently been subjected to

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<sup>23</sup> 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).

<sup>24</sup> See S.H. Jang, ‘이산민의 초국가성과 다층적 정체성 : 중국 위해의 한국화교에 대한 사례연구’ (The supra-national multifaceted identity of the Chinese Diaspora in Korea), *현대중국연구*(Modern China Research), 11.2 (2010), pp.263-97, in particular pp. 284-9, for the identity crisis among Chinese residing in Korea, having to negotiate their way between multiple identities: Korean, Taiwanese, Chinese. The strong anti-communism of post Korean War South Korea had also affected the attitudes of Chinese residing in Korea towards mainland China. The suspicion and hostility towards communist China was shared by both the native Koreans and the Chinese Diaspora in Korea. This was only slowly dispelled after the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992, which allowed Chinese residing in Korea to participate in trading activities with mainland China. See also Yoon, *한국 화교의 정체성 연구*, pp. 58-70.

<sup>25</sup> 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).

various levels of discrimination by mainstream Korean society<sup>26</sup>. It is, however, still very common for huaqiao who have resided for generations in Korea and are fluent in Korean to simply blend in and hide their Chinese origins. Although officially the huaqiao are now subjected to no open discrimination or maltreatment, the stigma of being ‘foreign’ and the fear of rejection or exclusion by one’s peers at school and colleagues in work places, if one’s identity as a huaqiao should be exposed, prevent many huaqiao from openly declaring their ethnic affiliation.

Quite obviously this is a cautious response among the huaqiao to escape from the still pervasive prejudice towards Chinese in Korean society. The author himself can attest to the frequency with which Koreans in private discourse voice mild contempt (although more recently largely harmless and hardly malicious) for the Chinese using derogatory terms such as ‘Jjangkye’ to refer to Chinese in general. Fear of being excluded and othered still haunt the huaqiao for whom for generations Korea has been their primary home. In fact as the Chosunilbo reports 70% of the huaqiao households that have resided in Korea for multiple generations are now mixed families of both Chinese and Korean ancestry due to wide-spread inter-marriage between huaqiao and native Koreans<sup>27</sup>. The fact that even these huaqiao have felt a degree of exclusion from mainstream Korean society, should they openly flaunt their ethnic origin, is an indictment on the pernicious effects of nationalist and ethnocentric education long-favoured by the Korean state and in Korean schools. That in Korean society being openly huaqiao still brings unwanted attention and a degree of negative publicity was best demonstrated by the recent sensational coverage of the alleged huaqiao origins of one of

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<sup>26</sup> For specific instances see Y.J. Rhee, “Diversity within Chinese Diaspora: Old and New Huaqiao Residents in South Korea”, in J. Fernandez (ed.), *Diasporas: Critical and Inter-Disciplinary Perspectives* (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2009), pp. 111-126, p. 115.

<sup>27</sup> [http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2011/08/04/2011080400138.html](http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/08/04/2011080400138.html)

Korea's best known actresses Jeon Jihyun (전지현 '화교설')<sup>28</sup>. Jeon had to vehemently deny the rumours, apparently because she believed that if people perceived her to be huaqiao that would erode her popularity and appeal as an actress<sup>29</sup>.

### **The Changing Nature of the Chinese Community in Korea**

According to figures collected in 2005 these old huaqiao in Korea with non-PRC passports (i.e descendants of the original Chinese migrants from before the Korean War, mainly from the Shandong region of Northern China<sup>30</sup>) numbered some 25,099 people, residing mainly in Seoul (39%), Incheon (13%) and other major urban centers such as Busan (9%)<sup>31</sup>. However, their limited numbers have made their impact on Korean society relatively minimal and their poor visibility in Korean society, as discussed above, for various reasons continues to this day.

Much more visible are the recent wave of legal and illegal, largely economic, migrants to Korea from the PRC. According to the *Chosunilbo* the number of non-Korean citizens residing in Korea passed the one million mark in 2009 and among them the Chinese from the PRC were the majority, making up 56.5 % of all foreigners residing in Korea. The growth in the number of Chinese in Korea has also led to the revival of Korea's moribund Chinatown in

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<sup>28</sup> For details see Kyunghyang Sinmmum [http://sports.khan.co.kr/news/sk\\_index.html?cat=view&art\\_id=200905131033574&sec\\_id=540101&pt=nv](http://sports.khan.co.kr/news/sk_index.html?cat=view&art_id=200905131033574&sec_id=540101&pt=nv) and <http://www.thetimes.kr/news/article.html?no=3615>

<sup>29</sup> The only huaqiao who have successfully been accepted as 'talents' (Korean for actor-actress, media entertainer in general) and mainstream by the Korean media and entertainment industry are the actresses Ha Hee-Ra 하희라 and 주현미. Both of them are of a mixed heritage (Chinese father and Korean mother), married to native Koreans and have taken Korean nationality, abandoning their official status as huaqiao. Even so their huaqiao origins initially raised eyebrows among certain segments of Korean society.

<sup>30</sup> Rhee, "Diversity within Chinese Diaspora", pp. 111, 113.

<sup>31</sup> Yoon, 한국 화교의 정체성 연구, pp. 30-1.

Incheon. The new Chinatown boasts some 25 Chinese restaurants (22 of which are run by Chinese), 13 Chinese stores and 40 other Chinese businesses<sup>32</sup>.

One would then naturally expect this huge increase in the number of Chinese citizens in Korea to have a social and political impact on South Korea, possibly even providing China with the tool to exert some kind of influence Korean internal affairs. However, the numbers, impressive as they are, are in fact slightly deceptive. Of the 624,994 PRC citizens in Korea some 71 % (443,566) are ethnic Koreans from Yanbian in north-eastern China<sup>33</sup>. These ethnic Koreans from Yanbian due to their PRC education and sense of belonging to the Chinese state that their upbringing in China had fostered, caused somewhat of a stir in South Korea by professing their loyalty to China rather than to their ‘motherland’(that is Korea). The author of this article has personally encountered many instances of Yanbian Koreans declaring themselves to be Chinese (an affront to the nationalist/ethnocentric sentiments of some Koreans) without hesitation before a bewildered South Korean audience. Their sense of Chineseness is only strengthened by prejudice that they encounter from some South Koreans who discriminate against them<sup>34</sup>. Yet despite their love for china and their self-proclaimed Chinese identity the Yanbian ethnic Koreans, once in South Korea, generally tend to blend into Korean society as quasi-second-class Korean citizens and they have not been very vocal in advocating Chinese interests in Korea<sup>35</sup>.

The deep divisions (political and ethnic) within the Chinese community in Korea have also somewhat lessened the likelihood of any unified political assertiveness among them in the

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<sup>32</sup> 서울신문 17/03/2006. For more details about the current state of the Incheon Chinatown see [http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2012/04/16/2012041601767.html](http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/04/16/2012041601767.html) and <http://www.ichinatown.or.kr/introduction/history.asp>

<sup>33</sup> [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2009/08/06/2009080600243.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/08/06/2009080600243.html)

<sup>34</sup> For a good example of this prejudice even in official media see

<http://www.ilyosisa.co.kr/news/article.html?no=17468>

<sup>35</sup> [http://article.joinsmsn.com/news/article/article.asp?total\\_id=2481497](http://article.joinsmsn.com/news/article/article.asp?total_id=2481497)

near future. The huaqiao remain divided in their allegiance between the PRC and Taiwan<sup>36</sup>, while the ethnic Koreans from Yanbian are usually far from vocal and due to ethnic ties are much more receptive to and immersed in South Korean culture than other migrants from China<sup>37</sup>. The expectation therefore that the Chinese residing in Korea may somehow influence Sino-Korean relations and Korean policy making decisions with regard to China seem premature.

### New Obstacles to Sino-Korean Relations

The rise of China and the growing Chinese confidence in their own strength have also brought to the fore new controversies that threaten the stability of Sino-Korean relations and also the well-being of Chinese residents in Korea. The most troubling of these controversies is surprisingly enough a dispute over ancient history. The revisionist Chinese claims to what the Korean public regards as historical Korean states such as Koguryo and Balhae (동북공정)<sup>38</sup>, has in recent years sparked an emotional response among nationalist Koreans and needlessly heightened anti-Chinese sentiment in Korea. The claims to Koguryo and Balhae are part of China's concerted effort to strengthen its historical-territorial claims<sup>39</sup> on its borders and also

<sup>36</sup> Rhee, "Diversity within Chinese Diaspora", pp. 116-7.

<sup>37</sup> A spate of murders committed by an ethnic Koreans from Yanbian has recently generated some ill feeling towards Yanbian Koreans among South Koreans. It has also again generated some debate about the 'identity' of these migrants. Are they Chinese or Korean? See <http://joongang.joinsmsn.com/article/aid/2012/04/23/7605023.html?cloc=olink|article|default>, <http://www.mt.co.kr/view/mtview.php?type=1&no=2012041914284666453&outlink=1>, <http://www.kyeonggi.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=570388> and <http://www.sisainlive.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=12966>

<sup>38</sup> 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.

<sup>39</sup> These claims are in turn buttressed by the growing nationalist sentiments of the Chinese people. For Chinese nationalism see J. Townsend, "Chinese Nationalism", in J. Unger (ed.), *Chinese Nationalism* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. 1-30, especially p. 17 ff. and P. Duara, "De-constructing the Chinese Nation", in the same volume, pp. 31-55. For a critique of the pseudo-historical approach adopted to legitimize modern

to allay its own internal security concerns<sup>40</sup>. However, this assertiveness on the part of China has offended large sections of the Korean population in South Korea, who like their mainland Chinese counterparts were heavily indoctrinated by the East Asian version of state-sponsored, nationalist, pseudo-historical semi-propaganda<sup>41</sup>.

Such disputes and also a host of other minor issues have left virtually no room for the Chinese minority in Korea to project a more positive image both of China and themselves to the Korean public. It has also limited their capacity to actively lobby for China's interests within Korea. Rather surprisingly that role has been taken up by left-wing alignments in Korea, which had historically favoured communist North Korea and communist China. Along with their allies in the Korean media they have displayed a persistent anti-American and anti-Japanese approach, while usually toning down the rhetoric when affairs that would present China negatively to the Korean public appear<sup>42</sup>.

This pro-Chinese stance among the influential left wing South Koreans has the potential to swing Korea in the direction of Beijing away from the current Korea-Japan-America

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territorial claims 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.

<sup>40</sup> 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 further discussion.

<sup>41</sup> 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.

<sup>42</sup> Gyeonghyang Sinmun, Ohmy News, Hangyeoreh Sinmun, MBC News network, Pressian, Media Today, 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 incident 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.

alliance<sup>43</sup>, with immense geopolitical implications. During the Sinophile Roh Moo-hyun presidency the ruling Uri party (the main left-wing coalition) consistently cultivated closer ties with Beijing at the expense of the traditional ties between the US and South Korea. While the left-wing was in power, according to one internal poll, among the new incoming legislators 63 percent were reported to have picked China as the most important nation for South Korea and expressed a dim view of the United States<sup>44</sup>. The change in government under the conservative Lee Myung-Bak presidency from 2008 onwards has definitely slowed the pace of this political drift in South Korea towards Beijing. However, should the left-wing regain power in this year's presidential elections the drift towards Beijing among Korea's political elite may recommence, regardless of the low esteem with which China is held among the Korean public in general.

It is doubtful whether the Chinese community in Korea will have any role in advancing the cause of the pro-Chinese elements in Korean politics. However, what is clear is the fact that Sino-Korean relations remain highly volatile and the polarization of Korean politics<sup>45</sup> spells danger for any overt signs of Chinese political assertiveness within Korea. If the Chinese residing in Korea were to be seen actively supporting a particular political movement within Korea that furthers China's interests, this may well provoke a backlash from nationalists in Korean politics. The extraordinary potency of nationalism (based on race) that pervades Korean society and influences both the left and right spectrums of Korean politics, will in all likelihood continue to hinder the normal integration and political activity of the huaqiao in Korea in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>43</sup> See J. Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 132.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> See G. Rozman, "South Korea's National Identity Sensitivity: Evolution, Manifestations and Prospects", *Korea Economic Institute: Academic Paper Series*, 4.3 (march 2009), pp. 1-9, esp. pp.2-6.

## Conclusion

The contemporary influx of Chinese into Korea has numerous historical antecedents. One would then naturally expect a greater degree of tolerance and familiarity towards the Chinese from within Korean society. Yet, the politics of race or ‘racialism’ that has dominated both 20<sup>th</sup> century Korean statehood and Korean nationalist historiography has encouraged the notion of ethnic exclusivity at the expense of the Chinese minority (the huaqiao) residing in Korea. This led to open discrimination against the Chinese, especially in post Korean War South Korea, which was only somewhat discontinued after 1992 with the establishment of Sino-Korean diplomatic relations. The plight of the Chinese in Korea has significantly improved since then. However, the rising power of China and the expression of that new found confidence among the Chinese in the form of historical revisionism threaten to undermine the growing current of Pro-Chinese sentiment among the left-aligned political parties of South Korea. The ever-present nationalism of Korean cultural and political life also means that the full enfranchisement or independent political action among Chinese residing in Korea remains a difficult task. The current boom of the Incheon Chinatown and the growth in the number of Chinese visitors and workers in Korea all suggest that the importance of ties to China will only become greater in the Korea of the future. However, the likelihood of this eventually leading to the re-establishment within Korean society of the state sponsored ‘China-worship’ that was practiced in pre 19<sup>th</sup> century Korea, is for the moment at least very slim. The nationalism that swept Korean society will not easily disappear and other geopolitical players, most notably the United States, now loom close to the Korean peninsula to limit the degree of China’s influence. How Korea will navigate its way through this difficult geo-political situation is the key issue of Korean politics of the future. Would it be too much to suggest that for Korea its future treatment of its long-neglected resident Chinese

population is a litmus test of how well Korea will weather the storm of China's imminent rise?