

Widening the unbridgeable gap in South Korea: between anti-China sentiments and pro-China interests

Lee Ji-yong
Assistant Professor, Keimyung University

‘China’ is one of the main examples of the gap between the general public and the elites in today’s Korean society. While anti-Chinese sentiment is growing within the general population, pro-China interests of the ruling elite are deepening as well. Recently, many examples are being shown that illustrate these gaps. This article will clearly introduce the main example that shows the difference in perceptions towards China in South Korea.

Episode 1: anti-China sentiments

The results of an opinion poll released in October 2020 by the Pew Research Center in the U.S. illustrate Koreans’ perception on China.¹ In 2002, 66 percent of Koreans were favorable to China and 31 percent found China to be unfavorable. However, favorability toward China continued to decline, falling to 24 percent in 2020. On the other hand, China’s unpopularity increased to 75 percent in 2020. However, anti-China sentiment among Koreans is rapidly deteriorating. This is well illustrated in a Korean poll conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in April 2021.² On a scale of 0-10, China’s favorability was rated at 3.1—a sharp drop from the 4.8 rating from the 2019 survey. This figure is close to South Koreans’ unfavourability towards North Korea (2.8). Also, 83 percent of South Koreans surveyed said China was a security threat and 60 percent said they were an economic threat. There is a growing perception that China is a threat to both the security and economy in South Korea. Meanwhile, 74 percent of the people view that the American military presence in South Korea contributes to the security and stability on the Korean Peninsula and the Asia-Pacific region.

However, if you take a closer look at Koreans’ perception to China, you will find something interesting. It is the fact that the anti-China sentiment from the younger generation is very strong, and this is well-illustrated by the results of a 2021 survey conducted by the Hankook Research in five neighboring countries.³ The results of this opinion poll shows that, first, Koreans’ favorability towards China has been rapidly declining in recently years. Second, anti-China sentiment among teenagers and people in their 20s are very high. According to the survey, the average score for China stood at 26.3 points, which is far lower than the average score for North Korea at 33.5. In particular, the scores for China from teens and people in their 20s stood at 12.8, which is much lower than the scores for the U.S. (54.8), Japan (26), North Korea (25.2), and Russia (39.2). Third, China is highly unfavorable regardless of a person’s ideological stance. Although liberals (30.4) had a higher rating than conservatives (24), China is more unfavorable than North Korea when compared to their affinity towards other countries.

¹

https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/pg_2020-10-06_global-views-china_0-01/

²

<https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/public-opinion-survey/south-koreans-see-china-more-threat-partner-not-most-critical-threat>

³ <https://hrcopinion.co.kr/archives/18012>

Episode 2: pro-China interests

It's been observed that an ecosystem of pro-China interests is being formed by the Korean elites. There is no distinction between the ruling and opposition parties among politicians' pro-China flunkeyism behavior. President Moon Jae-in stated during his visit to China that China is the topmost peak on a mountain and that as a smaller nation, South Korea will share the Chinese Dream. The Moon Jae-in administration's Ambassador to China used the idiom that this feudal nation is loyal to its emperor. The leader of the ruling party praised the Chinese Communist Party and Xi Jinping during his keynote speech at the second plenary session of the "Dialogue with World Political Parties High-level Meeting." For your information, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does not entrust keynote speeches at such meetings to anyone. The former Seoul City mayor, who was a strong candidate for the next presidential election, said without hesitation that South Korea must stick to China like a fly on a horse's bottom to profit from China's growth.⁴ And now Korean politicians are fervently greeting China. After becoming president, Moon Jae-in begun sending New Year greetings to China. The ruling elite is joining the ranks of Moon Jae-in by sending enthusiastic greetings. This includes a strong candidate for the next presidency from the ruling party. Aside from the question of why we're only sending New Year's greetings to China, we are well-aware that the greeting to China in the Korean context is not just a New Year's greeting. The deep-rooted Korean flunkeyism to China has been revived in the 21st century under a different. We must question why they are doing this.

The cause for the gap between anti-China sentiments and the pro-China interests

Currently, South Korea seems to have a strong pro-China ecosystem centered on the elites. This ecosystem is being strengthened by combining political ideology with economic interests. First, regarding the political stance, the current power of Korea's ruling elite is the Kim Il-Sung faction (also known as the Jusapa). And socialists and other progressives are building a united front, centered on the Jusapa. These include politicians, press and the media, cultural artists, intellectuals, unions, and left-wing civic groups. And they are building a strong solidarity front (united front). They share Korea's socialism and anti-Americanism. Socialist ideology and anti-Americanism are inextricably linked because the U.S.-ROK alliance system is the biggest obstacle to the Korean socialist transformation that they seek to achieve. And they share the same political ideology with North Korea and China. However, currently China has become the world's second largest economy. They've become a strong patron that can help South Korea's ruling left-wing elites face off against the U.S.

South Korea's left-wing elites have been building economic interests compared to sharing political ideology with China. China is currently South Korea's number one trade partner. The CCP has been strategically working on a unified front for political and economic elites in developed countries and most recently, it's been identified through numerous analysis reports and books that the CCP's united front operations have been focused mainly on the United States, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and EU countries. South Korea is the number one strategic country that the CCP should dominate in East Asia. Therefore, it is easy to infer that the

4

<https://libertykoreapress.com/2018/02/17/seoul-city-mayor-park-won-soon-says-south-korea-must-stick-to-china-like-a-fly-to-horse-bottom/>

CCP has been intensively working on a united front against South Korea's political and economic elite. The CCP's typical method of establishing a united front is to exclusively grant economic and political privileges to the elite chosen by the CCP and to establish interests with them. In fact, there are cases in which the CCP is solidifying its interests not only ideologically but economically with the current ruling elite. Furthermore, it was revealed that the CCP was deeply involved in South Korea's elections. During the April 15, 2020 general election, it was discovered that the slogan "Follow The Party" was planted within the code of the electoral counting program. In addition, evidence of distorting, manipulating, and inciting public opinion in Korea through the Internet and social networking sites (SNS) was revealed. However, the government is not investigating such allegations and is choosing to ignore it. If it is true that the CCP had a strong influence on South Korea's elections and public opinion, it should be considered that Korea's political elite is building a three-party ecosystem of a united front with the CCP. It is an ecosystem of interests that combines ideologies, economic interests, and political interests.

On the other hand, the public's view on China is getting colder. This is not simply due to the global pandemic that began in China. Basically, Koreans' anti-China sentiment has been imprinted as a historical memory. However, the direct cause of the recent anti-China sentiment stems from China's political pressure and economic retaliation against South Korea, Chinese socioeconomic infiltration in South Korea, and its overt display of historical and cultural misappropriation. China has demonstrated strong pressure and shameful economic retaliation against South Korea's THAAD missile defense system. Economically, China is no longer a land of opportunity due to technological theft, protection trade, and deep unfair practices against Korean companies entering China.

Conflicts with more than 1 million Chinese living in Korea are also intensifying. Chinese people who have entered Korean society are seriously undermining the refuge of the Korean society, including real estate bubbles, job erosion, low-level awareness of order, and the formation of criminal cartels. In universities, organizations of Chinese students express Chinese nationalism and disrupt the university culture. China is also developing a cultural exhibition that distorts Korean history through its historical distortion and is now transforming the Korean culture into the Chinese culture through culture warfare. Recently, we've been forced to deny any expression of gratitude towards the UN forces which defended South Korea's liberal democratic system from North Korean and Chinese forces during the Korean War. It's even become a situation where the identity of a free Korea must be denied. In other words, the general public in Korea is already feeling the threat of China. As a result, the gap between the elite and the general public, which is deepening their ideological, political, and economic interests with China, has become very wide.

Expressing anti-China sentiment and pro-China interests

The gap between ordinary citizens and elites over China has recently begun to manifest itself in various forms. It is a public backlash against Korea's ruling elite's aggressive pro-China policy. An example is the backlash against the plan to create a Chinatown in Korea. In 2021, when the Gangwon Province created a proposal for the "Korea-China Culture Town," a request to withdraw the plan was posted on the Blue House petition message board. In less than a month,

however, about 670,000 people participated in the petition resulting in the plan's withdrawal. Another example is the backlash against China's misappropriation of history and culture. Also, when the SBS drama "Joseon Exorcist" aired in 2021, viewers strongly protested the fact that the drama severely distorted Korea's history from China's perspective. As a result, SBS had to make an urgent decision to cancel the show early on. And Chinese capital invested in the production of the drama. What was more shocking was that the drama's production company (Jiaping Korea), the Korean branch of the Chinese Communist Party's People's Daily, shares offices with the Chinese language academy Cheon Ji In Education in the same building. This suggests that the CCP has been carefully conducting a "culture warfare" through the People's Daily, Chinese language academies, and drama production companies.

The amendment to the Nationality Act is currently an issue in Korea related to China. The biggest beneficiaries of the revision of the Nationality Act proposed by lawmakers from the ruling party are Chinese nationals and Korean-Chinese (Joseonjok). Currently, ordinary citizens are strongly protesting through the Blue House petition message board and on the National Assembly's petition message board. In this regard, doubts have been raised that the ruling party has the purpose of strengthening its support base. This is because if the Chinese acquire citizenship and suffrage, they are expected to vote for leftist politicians who are friendly to them. On the other hand, ordinary citizens are expressing strong resistance as they fear that the Chinese people will intrude upon Korean society. This is due to the growing concerns of the cultural differences with Chinese nationals who has immigrated to Korea, the Chinese penetration into Korean society and economy, China's strengthening influence, and the Sinicization of the Korean society. It is especially shown by Korean teens and people in their 20s that they have a strong aversion towards China and the Chinese people. They are not ideologically left leaning like those in their 40s and 50s in Korea, have low anti-American sentiment, and have strong pride in the Korean culture and history. On the other hand, China's coercive behavior, low civic awareness and superiority in the Korean society, and China's influence on Korean history and culture are the main reasons why these generations show such strong anti-China sentiment.

The result of the growing anti-China sentiment and pro-China interests

The average Korean still doesn't know much about the reality of Communist China. South Korea's mainstream media and broadcasting networks rarely report on negative news about China. Also, any publications on the realities of the CCP are marginalized. On the other hand, China is conducting a public opinion warfare on the South Korean Internet. However, if Koreans become aware of the reality of the CCP's political, economic, and public opinion campaigns in Korea, public anti-China sentiment will be greatly strengthened. Currently, only few people know about the reality of Communist China through non-mainstream media and other platforms, such as YouTube. For example, if the secret involvement of the Chinese, allegations of election irregularities, and the manipulation of public opinion against Korea are revealed to the public who are unaware, it will have major repercussions not only for public opinion, but also for the Korean political landscape.

On the other hand, the political, economic, and ideological perception on China currently held by South Korea's elite, especially the ruling elite, is being strengthened. This is because China's economic, cultural, and political penetration into Korea is increasing. China's influence

on Korean politics is believed to be secretly consolidating. If politicians whose goal is to win elections are aware of the Chinese influence in Korean elections, they will actively advocate a pro-China position. It can be deduced that Korean politicians are aware of China's influence given its alleged involvement in the election counting program and the influence of China's manipulation of public opinion on Korean domestic opinion polls.

The Chinese Communist Party will further increase its operations on the united front against the Korean political and economic elite. The CCP will solidify its influence in Asia because South Korea is the number one strategic target that needs to be dominated geopolitically and geographically. And South Korea's ruling elite is likely to further increase its pro-China drive. This is because China is already the only patron that leftist elites can lean on. But as a result, the gap between the public and the perception towards China will widen. And this will serve as one of the important factors that could affect the upcoming 2022 presidential election in South Korea.