The Koguryo Controversy, National Identity, and Sino-Korean Relations Today

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In July 2004, a Chinese claim that the ancient Kingdom of Koguryo (37 BC–AD 668) was China's vassal state ignited a firestorm of protest in South Korea. The decade-long South Korean love affair with China appears to have ended, as increasing numbers of South Koreans have begun to view their colossal neighbor with new suspicion. What were the causes and consequences of this controversy? Rather than forwarding the usual political, economic, and security explanations, this paper interrogates the deeper identity politics at stake, arguing that the Koguryo controversy implicates the very meaning of being Korean or Chinese in the 21st century.

Keywords: Koguryo Kingdom, Sino-Korean relations, national identity, existential conflict

"China's Koguryo"?

In 2001, Pyongyang applied to UNESCO to have tombs from the ancient kingdom of Koguryo (37 BC–668 AD) registered as North Korea's first "world heritage" site. The next year, the Chinese government launched its own high profile "Northeast Asia History Project," which later included a 2003 application to declare Koguryo tombs in China's northeast China's own world heritage site. At issue: was Koguryo, the root of the word "Korea," Korean or Chinese?

In the end, UNESCO skirted the issue: both Beijing's and Pyongyang's applications for world heritage status were granted on July 1, 2004. China's site, labeled "Capital Cities and Tombs of the Ancient Koguryo Kingdom" on the UNESCO website, was consistently referred to as "China's Koguryo" (*Zhongguo Gaogouli*) in the Chinese media. Wei Cuncheng, a professor at Jilin University, was quoted declaring that "Koguryo was a regime established by ethnic groups in northern China some 2,000 years ago, representing an important part of Chinese culture." To add insult to injury, South Koreans soon discovered that China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) had deleted Koguryo from a summary of Korean history on its website.

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South Koreans were outraged. Newspapers were full of editorials and opeds denouncing China's actions. Cyber-nationalists constructed "Defend Koguryo" websites, and there were demands for economic sanctions against China and a boycott of Chinese imports. Demonstrators dressed in Koguryoera costumes protested outside the Chinese embassy in Seoul. China responded by blocking access to the Chinese language websites of the *Chosom Ilbo* and other South Korean websites protesting China's Koguryo activities. South Korean Prime Minister Lee Hai-chan was compelled to take a tough stand, setting up a working-level state committee on Koguryo history. Defended to take a tough stand, setting up a working-level state committee on Koguryo history.

Perhaps seeking to diffuse the controversy, the next month China again revised its Foreign Ministry website, this time deleting reference to all of South Korea's (and Japan's) pre-World War II history, including Koguryo. South Koreans took it as a further insult: China was literally erasing Korea's past! A group of South Korean lawmakers were then forced to postpone a trip to visit the Koguryo tombs in China's northeast because the Chinese Embassy delayed issuing them visas. An August 16 *Korea Herald* poll revealed that only 6% of South Korea's National Assembly lawmakers viewed China as their most important diplomatic partner; this represented a dramatic drop from the 63% that saw China that way just four months earlier in an April poll.⁷

A week later, PRC Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei visited Seoul and negotiated a five-point verbal accord to help resolve the Koguryo controversy. But in December 2004, the PRC issued stamps to commemorate "China's Koguryo" being placed on the world heritage list.⁸ Given that South Koreans and Japanese both issued Tokdo/Takeshima stamps earlier in 2004 to buttress their respective claims to the disputed islands⁹, the political meaning of Beijing's Koguryo stamps was not lost on Seoul. Indeed, in March 2005 scholars from North and South Korea initiated a joint research project on Koguryo burial mounds outside of Pyongyang. It is the first such collaborative research project since the division of the peninsula.¹⁰ The Koguryo controversy, in short, does not appear to want to fade away.

Explaining the Koguryo Controversy

China-South Korea relations have clearly hit a snag. By raising the Koguryo issue, the Chinese, intentionally or not, have rocked the boat of an extremely beneficial economic and political relationship. The decade-long South Korean love affair with China appears to have ended. Infatuation has shifted to suspicion, and South Koreans are groping for a new framework within which to understand their relationship with their giant neighbor.

This abrupt shift begs explanation. The economic complementarily between South Korea's newly industrialized economy and China's developing economy has led to double-digit growth in bilateral trade and investment since diplomatic relations were formalized in 1992. Trade has exploded from \$3 billion in 1991 to \$30 billion per year in 2001. China is now South Korea's largest trading partner and its largest destination for overseas direct investment.

This dramatic growth in economic ties, furthermore, has been accompanied by an equally striking growth in cultural ties. South Korean popular cul-

ture has been a huge hit in China, and Korea has experienced a China fever of its own. Two million Koreans traveled to China in 2003 and 30,000 Korean students studied Chinese at Chinese universities. ¹² Cultural affinity—a common Confucian tradition—appeared to further ensure harmonious bilateral relations.

So how can this recent Koguryo controversy be explained? The pundits have largely focused on Chinese political and security concerns. Some have argued that the Koguryo controversy is evidence of a deep-rooted Chinese expansionism. Writing in the *South China Morning Post*, Donald Kirk depicts China as motivated by a "drive for power and influence over Korea." Indeed, "the people who make policy in China see Beijing as exercising control, sometimes firm, sometimes benevolent, throughout the Korean peninsula." Brahma Chellaney, a professor of strategic studies in New Delhi, goes even further, arguing in *The Japan Times* that Beijing sought "to dig into the past to prepare for the future.... China's use of legends to pursue irredentist claims is renowned.... As the fairy-tale Middle Kingdom, China has for long presented itself as the mother of all civilizations, weaving legends with history to foster an ultranationalistic political culture centered on the regaining of supposedly lost glory ... publicly enunciating its ambition to be a 'world power second to none'." Koguryo, in this view, is just another manifestation of the "China threat."

Most pundits, however, focused on legitimate Chinese concerns about future instability in the Korean peninsula and its implications for China's bordering northeastern provinces. Professor Ahn Byung Woo of South Korea's Hanshin University expressed the consensus view that "China's Northeast Asia Project is not just about Koguryo, but aims at asserting its historical claims to Manchuria and even part of the Korean peninsula in case the region turns unstable."15 Where analysts tend to differ is on whether China's motives are largely defensive or offensive in nature. The defensive position ties the Koguryo controversy to Chinese concerns about North Korean refugees flooding into China's northeast or even the secession of the two million ethnic Koreans in China's northeast into a newly reunified Korean nation. Park Sang-seek of Kyung Hee University's Graduate Institute of Peace Studies claims that China is worried about losing sovereignty over the eastern part of Manchuria: "A reunified Korea may claim that area in the long-term—that is China's fear."¹⁶ Mark Byington concurs: "It's possible that a unified Korea could make a claim to some of that territory." The more sinister offensive variant of this argument holds that China has ambitions to control the whole area. Kim Woo Jun, a diplomatic history professor at Yonsei University, claimed in an interview that, "Fundamentally, China wants to have complete control over the areas where ethnic Koreans reside. They are getting ready for the future." 18 Either way, Beijing is seen as attempting to preempt any future irredentist claims that the territory should be returned to Korea.

There is significant evidence to support this view. Following a meeting with Chinese authorities, for example, South Korean foreign minister Ban Ki Moon said, "China showed acute reactions to claims by some Korean politicians and scholars that the Chinese far-eastern provinces should be returned to Korea.... China called for the [South Korean] government to restrain them." Beijing

clearly appears concerned about the security of its sovereignty over its northeast. But these economic and security issues cannot explain why so many South Koreans responded so passionately to Beijing's claims to Koguryo—or how Beijing could have failed to realize that its Koguryo gambit would backfire so dramatically.

In this essay I interrogate the deeper identity politics at stake in the Koguryo controversy, arguing that it implicates the very meaning of *being* Korean or Chinese in the 21st century. I begin with a brief discussion of the political psychology of international relations: specifically, how national identity is constituted through significant diplomatic encounters and contested stories about the national past. I then apply these ideas first to Korean and then to Chinese understandings of Koguryo and Sino-Korean relations. I conclude with some thoughts on existential conflict in northeast Asia, suggesting that if the Koguryo controversy is allowed to simmer, Chinese and Korean identities could become locked in a negative interdependence that will undermine mutual trust and destabilize northeast Asia.

National Identity Today and Yesterday

Why do ordinary Chinese and Koreans care so much about a kingdom that collapsed over a millennia ago? Isn't this a purely academic issue that should be left to historians to settle? I argue that Chinese and Koreans care greatly about Koguryo not because of Koguryo itself, but because of what Koguryo means for Chinese and Korean identity today. It is not the past itself that is important, but the implications that contending histories or stories of that past have for Chinese and Korean national identity in the 21st century. These national identities are no mere emotional matter: they have highly instrumental implications for Sino-Korean relations in the evolving East Asian security order. China and South Korea are contesting their relative places in the emerging East Asian hierarchy.

Following in the social identity theory (SIT) tradition of social psychology, I define "national identity" as that aspect of an individual's self-concept that derives from his or her perceived membership in a national group.²⁰ National identities, I argue, are constituted in two ways: through international relations today and through the stories that we tell about our national pasts.²¹

No man is an island. In the post-Enlightenment West, and especially in the United States, a fierce individualism often maintains the fiction of an autonomous "self." America, it often seems, is a nation of Lone Rangers and John Waynes who sing to their own tune—regardless of what "society" thinks. The truth, however, is that as social beings, our personal identities are intersubjective, constituted through our interpersonal encounters. Thus most "autobiographies" are in fact stories about the author's *relationships* with influential others, such as parents, siblings, and friends. It is through these personal relationships that the author explains how s/he came to be who s/he is today.

Our social identities are no different: they do not exist in isolation but evolve through intergroup relations. National identities, for example, are not autonomous, but instead evolve through international encounters. What it means to

be an American, for instance, emerges through the interactions of individual Americans with foreign nationals. "Freedom fries" are a great example of this process. Americans may say that they do not care what others think of US foreign policy decisions (in this case on the Iraq War). They loudly declare that the US will "go it alone" if others will not confirm their decisions. But the truth is that Americans, like all peoples, care greatly about what others think of them. We all need to maintain positive valuations of our cherished ingroups—such as our nations. So many Americans responded to France's challenge to their self-esteem as Americans by denigrating the French—an easy way to restore threatened self-esteem.²² By reclaiming "French fries" as "freedom fries" and seeking to belittle the "frogs," American nationalists ironically revealed that they do indeed care greatly about what international society thinks of Americans.

Our national identities thus evolve through contemporary international encounters; they also evolve through the stories that we tell about our national pasts. The liberalism at the heart of American national identity today, for instance, is constituted in part by the histories that Americans have written about their past, stories that highlight the theme of the fight for liberty. The story thus invariably begins with the Declaration of Independence and the War of Independence, a fight for freedom against the tyranny of King George. Americans celebrate the Boston Tea Party not because they hate tea or the event's intrinsic importance to the War's outcome, but because it symbolizes American defiance in the face of the tyranny. We tell the story of the past that best fits our current understandings of ourselves.

Over the past quarter century, the constructivist and rational choice revolutions that have swept the social sciences have synergized in studies of nationalism. Nationalist elites, Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm have taught us, construct nations and their traditions.²³ By focusing on the writing of nationalist histories, this new approach has successfully combated the "pastism" of earlier scholarship that held that deep-rooted animosities from the past predetermine present-day nationalist conflicts. But the over-correction of the problem of "pastism" has generated a new problem: "presentism," an extreme constructivism that leaves readers with the impression that the past is a blank slate that nationalist historians can rewrite at will. In "presentist" scholarship, the weight of the past is lost.

Both "presentism" and "pastism" thus hobble our capacity to understand the complex interplay of past and present in nationalist practice today. The concept of "national narratives" can help us overcome this dualism to better understand the role of the past in nationalist politics. Narratives are the stories that we tell about our pasts. These stories, personality psychologists have argued, infuse our identities with unity, meaning, and purpose. He cannot, therefore, radically change them at will. Sociologists Anthony Giddens and Margaret Somers maintain that narratives infuse identities with meaning. Giddens argues that narratives provide the individual with "ontological security": "The reflexive project of the self ... consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continually revised, biographical narratives." Somers contrasts "representational narratives" (selective descriptions of events) with more founda-

tional "ontological narratives": "the stories that social actors use to make sense of—indeed, to act in—their lives. [They] define who we are." The storied nature of social life, in short, infuses our identities with meaning. "Identities," Stuart Hall notes, "are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past."

National identity, in sum, is both dependent upon interactions with other nations, and constituted through the stories that we tell about our national pasts. The rub, of course, is that it takes at least two parties to have an interaction, and others may tell different stories about our shared or overlapping pasts. Identity politics thus involves contestation over the terms of intergroup interactions today as well as competition over the stories that different groups tell about their shared pasts.

Koguryo and Korean Sovereignty

Chinese claims that Koguryo is Chinese or was a Chinese vassal state strike at the very heart of what it means to be Korean today. As Chua Sok Peng wrote in *The Straits Times* (Singapore), "Koguryo is the root of the word Korea, and also an essential part of Korean history." *The Korea Herald* went further, maintaining that China's claim to Koguryo is a "preposterous scheme to destroy our historical roots and national identity." In this view, the very idea of "China's Koguryo" represents a threat to Korean identity. John B. Duncan, director of the Center for Korean Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, put it well: "Any effort by an outside power, such as China, to deny that Koguryo is part of Korean history is bound to be seen as a denial of Korean nationhood, as an act of aggression that threatens the very existence of Korea as a human collectivity." Koreans, in other words, perceive "China's Koguryo" as an existential threat—a threat to their very existence as "Koreans."

Historiographical issues have long been central to inter-state relations in East Asia. Alexander Woodside has noted that in premodern Vietnam and Korea, "history writing became a major form of oppositional 'boundary maintenance' by Vietnamese and Korean state centers and their elites against Chinese hegemony."³¹ 21st-century Korean concerns about Chinese claims to Koguryo fit into this long political tradition.

But why do Koreans feel so strongly about Koguryo in particular? First, Koguryo is central to the stories that Koreans today tell about their relationship with *China*, and China is the first and arguably foremost Other against whom Koreans define who they are. Second, Koguryo is a symbol of heroic Korean *resistance* against foreign invaders. It is central to a virile and masculine Korean nationalism; robbing Korea of Koguryo, therefore, is like robbing Korean nationalists of their manhood. "China's Koguryo," in other words, translates into an emasculated, feminized Korea.

Identity involves both similarity and difference, and Korean identity is invariably constructed through a dialectic of similarity to and difference from first, imperial China, second, colonial Japan, and most recently, post-war communist North Korea and capitalist America. This essay examines the former:

the continuing role that China plays in Korean understandings of themselves today. In his 1986 *The Fracture of Meaning*, David Pollack explores the centrality of China to Japanese identity for the millennia starting in the 7th century with the arrival of Chinese culture in Japan. Drawing on Mencius' metaphor of a frog at the bottom of a well, Pollack argues that "the fundamental meaning of life itself could be expressed only in terms of walls.... China was Japan's walls, the very terms by which Japan defined its own existence." I wish to advance a similar argument about China and Korean identity. For well over a millennia, China has been Korea's walls; Korean identity cannot be understood apart from Korea's relations with China.

Korea has a long history of both resistance against and subordination to the Chinese empire. The Three Kingdoms period (57 BC–AD 676) and especially the Koguryo kingdom (37 BC–668 AD) are symbols of resistance, while the later Yi/Chosun Dynasty (1392–1910) is a symbol of Korean submission to Chinese hegemony. As Michael Robinson has noted, the China-Korea relationship after 1392 was structured by the ritual of the Ming tributary system: "By acknowledging Korea's ritual subordination and accepting Chinese centrality in a universal world order, the [Yi] founder solved, for the most part, the problem of Chinese military threat while legitimating his own rule." The tribute system, in other words, served both foreign and domestic goals of the Korean elite.

The Yi/Chosun subordination to China later created a psychological problem for 20th-century Korean nationalists, however. With the arrival of Western imperialism and the end of the Sino-centric Asian order in the 19th century, Koreans were first colonized by the Japanese, and then divided by the two superpowers during the Cold War. Korean nationalists needed heroes, and the Yi/Chosun, seen as shamefully subservient to China and corrupted by Confucianism, did not fit the bill. Instead, 20th-century Korean nationalists sought to recover the virility of the pre-Chinese Korea of the Three Kingdoms. Such accounts generally construct a virile Korean nationalism by juxtaposing Korea's yin (male) against China's (and Confucian Yi/Chosun's) yang (female). Here I briefly examine three prominent sets of Korean nationalist texts from the beginning, middle, and end of the 20th century: 1) Sin Ch'aeho's nationalist writings of the '10s and '20s, 2) President Park Chung Hee's 1962 Our Nation's Path, and 3) the War Memorial, opened in Seoul in 1994.

Sin Ch'aeho (1880–1936) fled Korea to China when the Japanese invaded the Korean peninsula in 1910. Living in exile in Manchuria, Beijing, and Shanghai, Sin sought to find and create in the Korean past the martial spirit that the Korean people needed for their fight against the Japanese. Borrowing from the Japanese notion of *minzoku* (nation), Sin located the martial roots of the Korean *minjok* in the ancient Kingdom of Koguryo, which he depicted as militarist and even expansionist. As Andre Schmid has noted, Sin wrote a Korean history of victorious struggle against foreign imperialism that began with Koguryo.³⁴ Sin's heroic history sought to create the pride in the past that Koreans would need to inspire confidence in their resistance against the Japanese.

Soon after leading a successful military coup in 1961, and just before winning the presidential election in 1963, Park Chung Hee (1917–1979) penned

Our Nation's Path (1962), a plea for national revival in the face of the North Korean threat. Park sought to create a usable past that would serve his goal of defeating the communists and reunifying the Korean peninsula. Like Sin before him, Park viewed the Yi Dynasty as the problem and Koguryo as the answer. The Yi, in Park's view, left two pernicious legacies: a "factional consciousness" and "mandarin bureaucracy" stemming from Zhu Xi Confucianism, and a "historical vassalism" leading to "reliance upon others" and "blind obedience."35 The "vassalage" of the Yi and their "blind admiration for anything Chinese" created a passive and "servile" mentality that obstructed South Korea's political, military, and economic development in the 20th century.³⁶ Like Sin, Park found hope in Koguryo, which was "aggressive in war" and "martial in temperament": "Before the Yi Dynasty the Korean people had by no means been the subservient nation. The Kingdom of Koguryo was an Oriental power of the first rank with wide territories in what is now Manchuria." And although Yi vassalage and subservience to China threatened this virile tradition, it reemerged whenever the nation's fate was threatened, such as when Admiral Yi upheld "lofty national dignity" during the 16th-century Japanese invasions of Korea.³⁷

The War Memorial that opened in Seoul in 1994, like Sin's articles and Park's book, can be read as a text that tells a particular story about the Korean past—a heroic story remarkably similar to the one that Sin and Park told. As Sheila Miyoshi Jager notes, the Memorial constructs a narrative of an unbroken Korean warrior tradition that begins with the Three Kingdoms period (especially Koguryo) and runs to the ROK military today. It is a story of victory that refuses to dwell on Korean suffering under Japanese colonialism. These silences, Jager notes, speak volumes: the museum's creators sought to construct a heroic narrative. Admiral Yi's Turtle Ship and his defeat of the Japanese Hideyoshi invasions in 1592 and 1597 is given pride of place in the center of the museum, and a large memorial stele to King Kwang-gaet'o the Great, Koguryo's most celebrated king, is given a prominent position outside. Both powerfully symbolize Korea's heroic national past.³⁸

Sin, Park, and the War Memorial, in sum, all turn to Koguryo to create a past that Koreans can be proud of. Pride and confidence are both positive self-evaluations, differing only in their time frame: pride is directed towards the past, while confidence is directed at the future.³⁹ For Sin and early 20th-century Korean nationalists, confidence was needed for resistance against the Japanese colonizers. For Park and other Cold War nationalists, confidence was needed for the ongoing civil war with the North Korean communists. For War Memorial creators and other post-Cold War Korean nationalists, pride in Koguryo is needed for the confidence to confront an uncertain and rapidly evolving East Asian regional order. The nature of Koguryo is thus no mere academic matter: it has direct implications for Korean confidence and self-esteem.

In short, independence from and resistance against China is a central theme in 20th-century Korean narratives of their past and understandings of their current identity. As the *Korea Times* declared in a July 17, 2004 editorial, "The Korean people, both Southern and Northern, take pride in the legacy of the ancient regime that straddled the Chinese borderlands, especially its inde-

pendent spirit, military might and cultural achievements."⁴⁰ The *Korea Times* is right: independence from China is also central to North Korean national identity. While we typically think of North Korea as a last bastion of communism and thus an ideological ally of the People's Republic of China, independence from China is also central to North Korean identity. Nationalism apparently trumped communist ideology when the North Korean media published a series of broadsides in 2004 against Chinese claims that Koguryo was a vassal state that maintained a tributary relationship with China.⁴¹ "Koguryo firmly maintained its national independence in external relations while crushing any attempts to trespass on its sovereignty," the (North) Korean Central Broadcasting Station (KCBS) pronounced. "Koguryo was a sovereign state without doubt, far from an ethnic minority or a provincial government or a tributary of any state power."⁴² North and South Koreans clearly share a strong pride in their past resistance against Chinese aggression—and that pride hinges upon memories of Koguryo.

Koguryo and Sinic Civilization

China's Koguryo gambit failed miserably. If Beijing's goal was to shore up the security of China's northeast, its efforts have clearly proven counterproductive, generating anti-Chinese sentiment in South Korea and possibly contributing to a shift in South Korean security strategy. "The anti-U.S., pro-China atmosphere has changed recently as we saw the hegemonic side of China," Kim Woo Jun, a diplomatic history professor at Yonsei University told the *New York Times* in August 2004. "Anti-China sentiments could quickly lead Korea to take a pro-U.S. stance and cooperate more with Japan." South Korean balancing behavior would clearly not be in China's interest.

How could Beijing fail to anticipate this South Korean reaction? The failure is particularly puzzling because Beijing committed the same mistake with its Southeast Asian neighbors in the mid-1990s. Provocative Chinese behavior in the Spratly Islands and Mischief Reef led to clashes with Vietnam and the Philippines, and contributed to "China threat" discourse throughout Southeast Asia. 44 China quickly learned its lesson, however, seeking to reassure its Southeast Asian neighbors of its benign intentions through an active embrace of a wide variety of confidence building measures (CBMs). It also countered "China threat" discourse by touting China's "peaceful rise." China appeared to have awoken to the security dilemma: how China's neighbors could view China's rise as threatening, leading them to seek to balance against China, thus in the end undermining China's security.

So how could China's elite forget this lesson just a few years later in its Korea policy? I suggest that in Chinese eyes, Korea has long been part of Sinic civilization and a Sino-centric East Asian regional order. Confidence in China's ability to reconstruct a hierarchical regional order in the 21st century is tied in part to proud stories about a past tributary system in which vassals like Chosun (Korea) paid humble tribute to the Chinese center. Because Chinese, like all peoples, view the groups to which they belong as inherently good, they simply did not imagine that Koreans would object to being part of

a past and future Pax Sinica. Korean rejection of "China's Koguryo," furthermore, was likely met by the anger of those who feel their cherished in-group identities are being challenged.

I can only "suggest" and not "prove" this argument because of a lack of direct evidence: due to state censorship, there was almost no open discussion of the Koguryo (*Gaogouli*) controversy in the Chinese press.⁴⁵ Instead, I will lay out a broader framework within which we can explore this hypothesis about Chinese views of Koguryo and Sino-Korean relations today.

Pride in the superiority of China's "5,000 years of Civilization" is central to much nationalism in China today. Soon after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, Xiao Gongqing, an outspoken neoconservative intellectual, began advocating the use of a nationalism derived from Confucianism to fill the ideological void opened by the collapse of communism. The mid-1990s, indeed, witnessed a revival of interest in Confucianism. The Chinese Communist Party, which only twenty years earlier in 1974 had launched a campaign to "Criticize Lin Biao, Criticize Confucius," ironically became an active sponsor of Confucian studies. President Jiang Zemin himself attended the 1994 celebration of Confucius' 2,545th birthday.⁴⁷

The "5,000 years" are central to the dream of a "prosperous country and a strong army," which still inspires Chinese nationalists over a century after it was first promoted by late-Qing Dynasty reformers. People's Liberation Army writer Jin Hui writes that "For over one hundred years, generation after generation of Chinese have been dreaming that since we were once strong, although we are now backwards we will certainly become strong again." The "unlimited cherishing of past greatness," Jin laments, is tied to overconfidence that "in the future, we will certainly be 'first under heaven'." Such "illusions," Jin Hui warns, are "even worse than spiritual opiates." Such "illusions" about China's past glory are nonetheless tied to a confidence that a Sino-centric order will reemerge in 21st-century East Asia. Beijing Normal University's Lu Benlong wrote in 2004 that "In East Asia, a distinctive empire system emerged and centered on China. This single territory constituted the so-called Chinese-barbarian order and tribute system, which formed the concentric and hierarchic world system of East Asia. Even today, this great-power psychology characterized with 'China at the center and barbarians in the four directions' still remains in the subconscious of many Chinese."49

This nationalist story about "China at the center" requires foreign confirmation. In 1996, popular nationalist Li Fang wrote, "Our ancient neighbors found glory in drawing close to Chinese civilization." Note that Li does not simply assert that Sinic civilization was glorious; instead, he attributes that view to others. China's "ancient neighbors" like Korea thus serve to confirm Li's claim to in-group positivity.

This Sinocentric order was not just glorious for all involved, but benefited all as well. Beijing University's Ye Zicheng has recently written, "unipolarity is not necessarily bad; for instance, the Sinocentric East Asian system was in the interest of both China and the other nations within the system." If the tribute system benefited everyone in the past, this argument suggests, a 21st-century China-led East Asia will be in everyone's interest as well.

We are thus presented with another puzzle: Chinese security discourse resists hegemony and promotes equality at the global (anti-American) level, but often appears to embrace hegemony and promote hierarchy at the regional East Asian level. The "new security concept" (*xin anchuanguan*) first put forward in 1996, then reiterated by Jiang Zemin in 2002, is at the heart of China's public discourse on global security. In addition to mutual trust, mutual benefit, and coordination, "equality" and the "democratization of international relations" (*guoji guanxi de minzhuhua*) lie at the heart of the new security concept.⁵² This Chinese advocacy of equality in global politics, in my view, should be understood in the context of China's opposition to US unipolarity. Put another way, advocating multipolarity is part of China's strategy of soft counterhegemony.

Chinese security analysts do not appear, however, to advocate "equality" and the "democratization of international relations" in the context of East Asian regional security. In the domain of Sinic civilization in particular, Chinese analysts tend to view the relations among states less in terms of Westphalian sovereignty and equality and more in terms of the Confucian father-son or elder brother-younger brother relations. Hierarchy, not equality, is seen to structure relations in Sinic East Asia.⁵³

Conflict in Sino-Korean relations today revolves around issues of hierarchy and identity. In general, Chinese claim superiority ("big brother" status) on the basis of history (the ancient tributary system) and culture (common Confucianism), while South Koreans resist those claims on the basis of politics (democracy) and economics (capitalism). Chinese advance a politics of similarity; Koreans deploy a politics of difference. Because these claims are made in different realms, however, conflict is generally avoided.

The case of Koguryo, however, is different. Koreans cannot respond to Chinese claims to Koguryo by changing the issue to politics or economics. They have to respond in the domain of history. This gives the Sino-Korean Koguryo dispute, and specifically its implications for relative status and identity—"Is China Korea's older brother?"—more of a zero-sum character. Conflict over Koguryo, therefore, is harder to avoid.

Existential Conflict in 21st-Century Sino-Korean Relations

Western pundits have tended to downplay the Koguryo controversy on the basis of an assumption about the primacy of economics. "As long as South Korea needs China so much, ancient history will take second place," Richard Lloyd Parry has argued in *The Times* of London. ⁵⁴ Hank Morris, a consultant for Seoul-based Industrial Research and Consulting, concurs: "The economic ties are too important for either side to sacrifice." ⁵⁵ In this liberal view, growing economic interdependence raises the costs of conflict and thus makes it virtually unthinkable.

In this essay I have argued that attention to a less studied variable in international politics—identity—should introduce a healthy dose of skepticism to such rosy forecasts about 21st-century Sino-Korean relations. Because identity conflict can often become existential, threatening the very meaning of

being Chinese or Korean, it is not easily amenable to rational solution or even compromise.

The Chinese and Korean positions on Koguryo already appear to be alarmingly rigid. Koreans overwhelmingly view Koguryo as Korea's, and many view China's claim to Koguryo as evidence of Chinese arrogance and hegemonism. In an editorial entitled "China looks down on Korea," the *Chosun Ilbo* asks, "Why does China behave so arrogantly toward us?" They cite interference in South Korea's domestic politics as evidence of China's hegemonic behavior: the Chinese Embassy in Seoul made "threatening" telephone calls to South Korean lawmakers who were to attend the inauguration of Taiwan president (and Beijing nemesis) Chen Shui-bian in March 2004, saying, "Aren't you coming to China in the future?" Later, to those lawmakers who had returned from the inauguration, the Chinese embassy made "outrageous utterances," like "We'll remember your visit." "56"

Many Chinese, meanwhile, appear to hold equally rigid views about Koguryo. For instance, Sun Hong of the Center for East Asian Studies in Shenyang was adamant to *Yonhap* that Koguryo was a Chinese vassal state: "Koguryo used the Chinese language throughout its existence.... Almost all Chinese scholars agree that Koguryo is part of Chinese history." Proud Chinese narratives about an ancient tributary system that affirmed the glory of the "5,000 years" of Sinic civilization are frequently central to Chinese confidence in China's 21st-century rise. These Chinese stories, therefore, will not be easily revised.

Existential conflict is passionate and explosive by its very nature. Psychologist Herbert Kelman has written extensively about identity competition in Israeli-Palestinian relations. The two national identities, he argues, have become locked into a state of "negative interdependence": "Each perceives the very existence of the other ... to be a threat to its own existence and status as a nation." Israelis and Palestinians, in Kelman's view, do not just compete over material goods like territory and resources, but they also engage in a zero-sum conflict over identity and existence. Such "existential combat" involves a systematic effort to delegitimize the Other by defining "it" in morally unacceptable ways. Palestinians, for instance, depict Zionism as "racism," while Israelis label the PLO as "terrorist." This leads to further polarization. The dehumanization and demonization of each other serves to exclude "them" from the moral community of humanity, laying the psychological foundation for violent conflict.

I do not wish to suggest that Sino-Korean relations today are comparable to Israeli-Palestinian relations. I do, however, wish to conclude on a sober note: should the Koguryo controversy be allowed to fester and come to play a more central role in Sino-Korean relations, a dangerous cycle of existential conflict is likely to ensue—and it is likely to have a major impact on Chinese and Korean security policies.

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Notes

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