

BOOK REVIEW

Empire and Righteous Nation: 600 Years of China-Korea Relations, by Odd Arne Westad. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021, 205 pp.

In an age when Beijing is increasingly willing to attempt to shape policy outcomes in Seoul by deploying economic statecraft, cyberattacks, and coercive diplomacy, while tacitly abetting Pyongyang's nuclear brinksmanship through trade and support, it is helpful for scholars and policy makers to remember the history behind the nuanced relationship between Beijing and the two Koreas. Norwegian Historian Odd Arne Westad encapsulates the complexities of this relationship in his book *Empire and Righteous Nation: 600 Years of China-Korea Relations*. Westad's background studying the Cold War and contemporary East Asian history enables him to summarize the region's diplomacy from the late fourteenth century onward in a concise and thematically detailed historical overview. Although the scholarship covering East Asian diplomatic history and international relations is crowded, Westad adds merit by employing impactful secondary historical sources and an incisive writing style to present a text that is accessible to generalists and yet valuable for policy makers seeking greater context of the region.

The book's *raison d'être* and thesis are clear and concise. Due to the contemporary challenges on the peninsula and East Asia, developing an understanding of Sino-Korean relations may illuminate potential opportunities and highlight possible impasses. Westad argues that the Korean peoples' enduring defense of their political and territorial autonomy lies at the heart of the Sino-Korean political, cultural, and diplomatic relationship. He posits that although the onus of responsibility for solving the current north-south division lies in Korean hands, history reveals that regional players, like China, will have to play a role (3).

Mindful of the challenge of writing "a small book about a very big topic," Westad relies on a thematic approach to connect key historical concepts: empire, nation, and righteousness. He asserts that the Ming and Qing dynasties—that governed China from the late fourteenth century onward—are representative of an empire, as outlined by the first century CE Han dynastic model. The Ming and Qing dynasties were "centralized, militarized states that demanded ideological conformity from the population and proclaimed to offer stability, and betterment to its people" (11). In this analysis, Westad carefully avoids mirror-imaging a Eurocentric construction of empire upon the unique system of Sinocentric hegemony practiced by the Ming and Qing.

Westad takes similar care in explaining how the Korean idea of nation developed in a distinctly separate manner from eighteenth century Westphalian notions. Korea's Chosŏn Kingdom—the antecedent for both the Democratic Peo-

ple's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea—maintained a unique sense of identity by acting as Beijing's most-favored vassal within the Sinocentric hierarchy. Chosŏn monarchs maintained Korean territorial autonomy by following key Ming norms, adopting key aspects of Chinese culture, largely expressed through neo-Confucianism, and a deferential public stance toward Ming rulers. Relying on the academic work of the late Korean scholar JaHyun Kim Haboush, Westad explains how the Korean concept of nation was further cemented when Japanese invaders challenged Chosŏn territorial sovereignty in the Imjin War of the late sixteenth century (53). Chosŏn governed domestic affairs, but Korea was dependent on the "older brother" in Beijing for defense and foreign affairs (162). The complexities of this "older brother, younger brother" symbiotic relationship between the empire and the nation is an important aspect of the text.

The concept of righteousness is tied to Chosŏn Korea's dedication to the tenets of Confucian thought. Westad writes that in Confucian teaching, righteous implied, "moral fitness, loyalty, and fidelity to principles" (22). The author explains that righteousness is evident throughout Korean history. For instance, whether Korea was challenged by Manchu marauders, Japanese warriors, or foreign imperialists, self-titled "righteous armies" rose to defeat them (23). A righteous adoption of neo-Confucian tenets was more than a cultural connective to Beijing; it ensured Chosŏn security and continued autonomy. The Chosŏn rulers were guided by a common assumption: the Ming or Qing Empire would always support and never seek to consume such a willing neo-Confucian and model partner. This assumption helped define the Sino-Korean relationship for the entirety of the Chosŏn period.

As the historical narrative progresses, the concepts unfortunately lose some of their utility. As Westad discusses late nineteenth-century European imperial adventures against the ailing Qing dynasty and the Japanese annexation of the Korean peninsula, one may wonder how nation, empire, and righteousness manifest in contemporary history. That thought continues as Westad summarizes Marxist influences upon the Sino-Korean relationship, World War II, the Korean division, and the Korean War. The concepts are still visible but less pronounced. For instance, the author notes during the Japanese colonial period, Korean nationalists continue to righteously struggle against Japanese rule, even if the former empire China could not provide the same support as during past wars with Japan (91). Furthermore, prior to World War II, Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Kuomintang Chinese nationalists, outlined (in his journal) the goal of recovering the Korean peninsula from Japanese control. Although the key concepts from the text's title lose some of their utility during contemporary history, they are still a beneficial thematic nomenclature for a complex relationship.

In the concluding chapter, Westad asks the question, “what can we learn from history about China-Korea relations?” The author’s conviction, “that the paternalistic view of a unique Chinese responsibility for Korea is alive and well in the Chinese capital” is a profound assessment that calls into question Beijing’s current strategy for a divided Korea (165). Amid Beijing’s paternalism, Westad asserts that the Korean peninsula is proving to be a thorny peripheral partner for Beijing. Gone are the days of Ming-Chosŏn subservience.

Though the Chinese Communist Party shares a special relationship with Pyongyang, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is a stubborn, food-insecure, nuclear power unwilling to fall neatly into total Sinocentric obedience. In comparison, many officials in the People’s Republic of China perceive the Republic of Korea’s military alliance and strong economic ties with Washington as a challenge to regional hegemony. The Chinese economic sanctions levied against Seoul for deploying the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system is a recent example of impasses in Sino-Korean dialogue. The author’s conclusion unfortunately omits discussions of how Beijing’s historical legacy factors into Chinese Communist Party grand strategy and relations with other regional states along the Chinese periphery (ASEAN, Japan, etc.).

In the modern era, the People’s Republic of China pursues regional hegemony by referencing the Nine-Dash-Line on historical maps of the South China Sea, positing irredentist claims to the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, and advocating a Beijing-centric economic order. These factors are a reminder of the importance history plays in Chinese identity and grand strategy. In one of Westad’s previous texts, *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750*, he writes that “history . . . influences Chinese ways of seeing the world in a more direct sense than in any other culture” (2). The question that those engaged in competition against China for Indo-Pacific hegemony should ask is: to what extent are the countries at China’s periphery willing to return to a Beijing-centric regional order? In the case of Sino-Korean relations, the answer is complicated and remains undetermined. Westad’s analysis represents a fine addition to the debate around this question.

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