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**Online Cultural Contention and China-Korea Relations: Interpreting Netizens' Narratives
on Social Media**

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APS 650: MAPS Capstone Seminar
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Abstract

In this era of social media, popular narratives have increasingly important implications on domestic policy and bilateral relations. In part based on the video of making Kimchi published by a famous Chinese YouTuber, this study analyzes Chinese and Korean netizens' opinions of each other by examining around one thousand social media posts, which offer a glimpse of the unique cultural confrontation between China and South Korea. By revealing the complexity of China-Korea relations through a social media lens, my analysis provides new insights into the implications of these popular narratives on China's policymaking. Even as an authoritarian regime, the Chinese government has started to pay attention to and respond to netizens' public opinions. It is still difficult to assess how the generally negative view of Chinese and Koreans towards one another will shape the future and if those with more positive views will increase in number. In any case, the intense, combative dialogue on social media serves as an important reference point and a cautionary warning—that the Chinese and Korean governments need to make policies that are conducive to sustainable bilateral relations and the Asia Pacific stability.

Keywords: social media, popular narratives, cultural confrontation, China-Korea relations

Introduction

In the past ten years, the cultural disputes and cultural confrontations between China and Korea are increasing significantly: South Korea appropriated and used the Dragon Boat Festival, a traditional Chinese festival, as a means of World Intangible Cultural Heritage¹ for their own country; Li Ziqi, an influential YouTuber with 14.6 million subscribers published a video at the end of 2020 about how to make Kimchi, which led to the intense online debate about which country Kimchi originates from; the famous Chinese cartoonist “Old Xian” (Old 先) was accused by Korean netizens of stealing the design of Korean consumes on his cartoon works published on Twitter on Nov. 1st, 2020; a Chinese screenwriter fought with Korean netizens when they accused him of appropriating Korean traditional consumes in his upcoming television series. Among those confrontations, the “Kimchi war” aroused intense online discussion domestically and abroad. The narratives from Chinese and Korean netizens are in direct conflict with the friendly, welcoming official narratives of the Chinese and Korean governments. In a world connected by social networks, the question of whether or not such large-scale online contention will damage China-Korea relations is one arousing many people’s curiosity, including mine.

China and Korea have a longstanding strategic and economic partnership, deep-rooted cultural similarities, and a close emotional bond, which traditionally has made China-Korea

¹ “The ‘intangible cultural heritage’ means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.” – UNESCO, “What is the intangible cultural heritage?”, last accessed on Apr.28, 2021, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>.

relations solid as a rock. In the past, Korea was protected by China from aggression by other ethnic groups. Trade and people's exchange brought the Chinese civilization to the ancient Korea, such as printing, food, medicine, philosophical thoughts, which not only boosted economic and political development in Korea, but also laid the foundation of Korean's modernity. In contemporary times, China and South Korea are closely connected with each other through political partnership, trade, and cultural exchange. Therefore, for China, where policies are always made by the elite class, netizens' opinions and their impact on China's foreign policy towards South Korea—and even future regional cooperation—is sometimes difficult to assess. It seems that the complexity of Korea's peninsula security pattern and the Sino-U.S. relationship are the main factors in changing China-Korea relations rather than cultural confrontation. However, the Chinese spokeswoman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to the intense debate between Chinese and Korean netizens over the origin of Kimchi on January 20, 2021, which signaled that the Chinese government was interested in what netizens said about South Korea on social media. More importantly, the Chinese government has started to regard social media as a vehicle that reflects people's wishes and demands and seems to think that responding to views expressed on social media is an effective way to maintain a close relationship between the CPC and people.

Because Chinese citizens feel suppressed or fearful of expressing their opinions in public, social media has become a platform where they feel safer and freer to express themselves. For China, with its strict online censorship, netizens are more likely to discuss cultural and social issues rather than even more sensitive political and economic issues. Moreover, the popularity of social media makes it the new battlefield for countries to shape their national image and show national power. While Koreans are less afraid of criticizing the government, social media is an easy, accessible communication system. Concerning the future bilateral relations between China and

South Korea, intense online spats caused by cultural confrontation will only increase, which will put more pressure on Chinese policymakers. Moreover, the popular narratives in social media may be used as a leverage to gain an upper hand, seize initiative in the negotiations, and reap greater benefits. These are why the popular narratives are becoming critical factors in international competition and can't be ignored even by an authoritarian regime.

This project examines popular discourse on social media about the cultural confrontation between China and South Korea through content and statistical analysis of YouTube comments and Weibo posts. This complex cultural relationship is analyzed through various conceptual frames. First, I examine how the countries ridicule each other and label their people as “culture thieves”; second, this study looks at each country’s critique of the other’s ideologies—with China accusing Korea of acting as a watchdog for western countries and Korea criticizing China for violation of human rights and democracy because of its communist and authoritarian rule; third, this project explores the policy recommendations Chinese netizens gave to the Chinese government to stop Korea’s cultural appropriation and gain more advantages in Chinese-Korean relations; finally, this study reflects upon the positive voices in this hostile confrontation. With these multi-layered dynamics and ongoing issues, China-South Korea relations may become even more complicated for the foreseeable future.

Chinese-Korean Social Media Relations: Causes of the Confrontation and Emerging Social Media

Previous research tends to focus on the ways in which China and South Korea are linked together in mutually beneficial ways. Scott Synder asserts that “despite political and diplomatic tensions, the fundamental complementary nature of the Chinese and South Korean economies

continues to create mutual beneficial opportunities.”² It is of necessity for them to cooperate with one another because of their common interests.³ Xiaoxiong Yi points out that “China and South Korea have mutual economic and strategic interests, the potential for the cooperation is immense. China is adjusting his Korean policy depending on everchanging peninsula security pattern to ensure its strategic interests.”⁴

However, as this confrontation develops, there is increased scholarship that centers on the conflict between China and South Korea. This conflict often focuses on cultural appropriation and socioeconomic impact. Scott Snyder and See-Won Byun (2021) points out that “fueled by social media, Beijing and Seoul’s history controversy uncovered a much wider clash of identities at the societal level.”⁵ Chinese and Korean’ contradicting thoughts about culture and history has incited the outrages of netizens in two countries. They were inclined to attribute those disputes to “culture takeover” or “economic coercion.”⁶ In another study, Guozhong Li, Eun-Mi Park and Seong-Taek Park (2015) conclude that social media is important in the “forming of country image which is the source of competitiveness.”⁷ Using data analysis of PLS (Partial Least Square), they learned that numbers of social media users in China and image of Korea are positively correlated. Using social

² Scott Snyder, “Clash, Crash and Cash: Core Realities in the Sino-Korean Relationship,” *Comparative Connections* 4, no.2, (July 2002): 5.

³ Snyder, 5-6.

⁴ Xiaoxiong, Yi, “Ten Years of China-South Korea Relations and Beijing's View on Korean Reunification,” *The Journal of East Asia Affairs* 16, no.2 (Fall/Winter 2002): 351.

⁵ Scott Snyder and See-Won Byun, “Strategic Dilemmas, Clashing Identities, and Free Trade,” *Comparative Connections* 22, no.3 (Jan 2021): 110-111.

⁶ Scott Snyder and See-Won Byun, 110-111.

⁷ Guozhong Li, Eun-Mi Park and Seong-Taek Park, “Effects of social media usage on country image and purchase intention from social P2P network perspective,” *Peer-to-Peer Networking & Applications* 9, no. 3 (May 2016): 488.

media, the “general image of a specific nation positively influences purchasing products of the nation.”⁸

According to the Fewsmith and Rosen, “The place of public opinion in China’s foreign policy is a common yet controversial research topic.”⁹ China’s foreign policy, thought to be immune to online public opinion, is increasingly influenced by it. Thomas Olsen-Boyd (2019) argues that “social media sentiment is forcing the hand of the Chinese government in a way that may not necessarily be in line with government policy.”¹⁰ With the widespread use of social media in China, the Chinese government has to react to public opinion online. After the “century of humiliation,” Chinese people are sensitive about any attempt to humiliate China; moreover, the Chinese government “will tolerate venting frustration towards foreign entities that cannot normally be publicly articulated towards their own government.”¹¹ In terms of China-Korea relations, cultural clashes attract more attention from the masses and people are more likely to comment on these relevant issues, because compared to political and economic issues, culture is perceived as more interesting, less political sensitive, and closer to our lives.

To date, there has been some analysis of the impact of social media on these bilateral relations and China’s foreign policy toward South Korea. These studies, however, tend to hone in on specific aspects of the conflict rather than giving a holistic analysis. Some authors assert that “public opinion and netizens’ opinions forced the Chinese government to respond and was even

⁸Guozhong Li, Eun-Mi Park and Seong-Taek Park, 494.

⁹ Andrew Scobell, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Astrid Cevallos, Arthur Chan, and Zev Winkelman, “Netizen Opinion and China’s Foreign Policy: Interpreting Narratives about North Korea on Chinese Social Media,” *Asia Policy* 14, no. 3 (July 2019): 99.

¹⁰ Thomas Olsen-Boyd, “Stockholm Syndrome: social media can shape China’s foreign policy,” Lowy Institute, March 28, 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/stockholm-syndrome-social-media-can-shape-china-s-foreign-policy>.

¹¹ See note 10 above.

used to gain more benefits from the North Korea.”¹² Public opinion plays an increasingly important role in shaping the policies of China toward Japan¹³ and the United States,¹⁴ and is even leveraged by the Chinese government as a bargaining chip to accrue more benefits. A more in-depth analysis will be helpful to look at how social media magnifies cultural conflicts. My research delves further into these recent highly contested cultural disputes and examine how social media integrates into social frameworks and impacts foreign policy. On social media, netizens have a platform to voice opinions, which has major implications in terms of politics, economics and culture. As the Chinese government attaches more importance to public opinion on social media, netizens’ narratives will become an effective tool to achieve political goals.

Using Social Media Posts and Comments to Analyze Popular Narratives

With the development of digital technology and globalization, social networks have integrated into the daily lives of those in China and South Korea. According to the most updated data, “South Korea’s social media penetration rate has reached 87 percent, the third highest among nations around the globe.”¹⁵ There were 45.79 million social media users in South Korea in January 2021, “equivalent to 89.3% of the total population in January 2021.”¹⁶ In democratic Korea, Korean people feel free to voice their opinions and comments on policies and regulations

¹² Andrew Scobell, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Astrid Cevallos, Arthur Chan, and Zev Winkelman, 99.

¹³ James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China’s Japan Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁵ Woo-hyun, Shim, “Korea’s social media penetration rate ranks third in world,” *The Korea Herald*, Sep. 7, 2020, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200907000815>.

¹⁶ Simon Kemp, “Digital 2021: South Korea,” Datareportal, last modified Feb.11, 2021, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-south-korea#:~:text=There%20were%2045.79%20million%20social,total%20population%20in%20January%202021.>

through which they can participate in the realms of politics and social issues. Korean government regards social media and netizens' opinions as an important channel to discern public attitudes.

With the increased popularity of Weibo and WeChat, social media is becoming an essential way for the Chinese government to supervise and monitor popular discourse with a focus on public attitudes toward policies and regulations. By December 2020, about 989 million people had access to the internet in China,¹⁷ and 175 million of them were under 18 years old.¹⁸ Over 680 million of these netizens were adults with at least a high school degree and from an urban area.¹⁹ Sina Weibo (“Weibo” hereafter), controlled by Alibaba Group, is widely used by Chinese netizens as a social media platform for current news, entertainment, and public expression. Although there is strict censorship of online expression, social media and online platforms still offer a relatively authentic and candid means for Chinese popular discourse. The platforms also depict a realistic picture of the national image of these countries and the effectiveness of cultural policies.

Compared with previous studies that selected specific posts to support their arguments, my analysis reviews a wide range of data from social media platforms to create a more holistic picture. In order to reflect the authentic popular discourse, I collected as much data as I could regardless of sentiment or theme.

Data Collection

¹⁷ “The 47th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China,” China Internet Network Information Center, February 2021, <https://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwtjbg/202102/P020210203334633480104.pdf>.

¹⁸ “The Statistical Report on Internet Juvenile Users in China 2019,” Division of Juvenile rights protection of Central Committee of the Communist Youth League and China Internet Network Information Center, May 2020, <https://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/qsngb/202005/P020200513370410784435.pdf>.

¹⁹ China Internet Network Information Center, “The 47th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China.”

My goal in collecting this data is to gain a deeper understanding of the popular discourses in both China and South Korea surrounding Kimchi's origin, the most discussed online cultural confrontation. I have collected 103 posts made on Weibo from December 1st, 2020 to March 31st, 2021 and selected 977 comments from the video "the last episode of the 'Life Series': The life of White Radish" published by Li Ziqi on Jan. 9th, 2021. Each post or comment contains one term, or several terms related to Kimchi's origin, China's cultural appropriation, cultural theft, and ideological attacks on each other. Table 1 and Table 2 show 977 useful comments from 977 accounts that I selected from 336,000 YouTube comments to ensure a diversity of comments and avoid too much overlap and repetition. Table 3 shows the 103 posts from Weibo.

Content Analysis

I analyzed and coded every post or comment by relevance and topic. First, I coded a post as relevant if it discussed cultural appropriation, ideology, and policy recommendations related to China and South Korea. Second, I coded and categorized relevant posts according to a variety of themes, as follows:

- 1) Kimchi is a Chinese food or Korean food;
- 2) critique of Chinese ideology;
- 3) Korean cultural independence;
- 4) Xinjiang and Hongkong and other sensitive issues in China;
- 5) sarcastic comments or posts;
- 6) ridicule of Korean's scarcity of resources; and
- 7) ridicule of Koreans' lack of knowledge of history and policy recommendations.

Results

In my total of 1080 samples, 2.4% (26 samples) were coded as positive, while 97.6% (1054 samples) were coded as unfavorable. All of the samples from the YouTube comments were negative, accounting for 90.46% of 1080 samples. Samples from Weibo, which reflected the public attitudes of Chinese netizens, show different popular discourses from YouTube comments: 70.64% were coded as unfavorable, while 29.36% were positive. Ruling out the influence of other factors, including fifty-cent party, online army,²⁰ third-party's intervention,²¹ some netizens from both China and Korea highlighted the importance of China-Korea friendship. This finding is an essential foundation to repair and reconcile the bilateral relationship damaged by frequent online confrontations and negative popular narratives.

The “Kimchi War” is a cultural confrontation based on each country's own form of nationalism, need for cultural independence and strategic considerations. Although some comments on social media are too irrational to reference, they still offer essential glimpses into China-Korea relations, which are not as good as what Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi claimed when stating the countries are “friends who look after each other in times of trouble.”²² Netizen narratives reveal a tension between public opinion and the government's official stance. Although these discourses might have little influence on China's foreign policy towards South Korea, China's official response and commentaries on government “mouthpieces” reveal that it is still of relevance to the CPC leaders. As public opinion shapes the policy of democratic Korea, China will

²⁰ Fifty-cent party and online army are groups supported by the Chinese government. The groups are responsible for supervising the popular narratives and posting favorable words regarding the government.

²¹ Among the comments on the Li Ziqi's YouTube video, there are lots of comments written in traditional Chinese, which criticize the Chinese government and foment the dissent of both Chinese and Korean netizens.

²² During a tour of Northeast Asia in 2020, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi used the phrase “shou wang xiang zhu” to describe the China-Korea relations, means China and South Korea should be “friends who look after each other in times of trouble.”

probably face pressure from Korea as they feel mounting pressure from the ever-intense online conflict. Therefore, with nearly 1 billion net users today in China, the CPC will have to respond and adjust their policies rather than ignored what citizens say as they have sometimes done in the past.

Interpretation of Major Discourse on South Korea and China

Based on the data I collected, the major discourses of Chinese netizens on South Korea related to the online confrontation over Kimchi consisted of three narratives: accusations towards South Korea of “cultural thief”; critiques of South Korea’s betrayal of Chinese-Korean friendship and its fawning over the western countries; policy recommendations on how to deal with China-Korea relations, including economic sanctions, military coercion, hard-core foreign policy. On the Korean side, the popular narratives of Korean netizens focus on China’s cultural appropriation; critique of China’s ideology and sensitive issues; and the importance of keeping a good relationship with China. While comments sometimes overlap into more than one category, I chose to code the comment based on the content that is most emphasized.

Table 1 Coded Chinese Netizens’ YouTube Comments on South Korea

Theme	Comments	% of Total
Korea: Country as a thief	143	39.39
“Kimchi is Chinese”	29	7.99
Ridicule of South Korea	191	52.62
TOTAL	363	100

Table 2 Coded Korean Netizens' YouTube Comments on China

Theme	Comments	% of Total
China: Cultural Appropriation	54	8.79
“Kimchi is Korean”	147	23.94
Critique of China's ideology	109	17.75
China's sensitive issues: Xinjiang, Tiananmen, COVID-19,etc	108	17.59
Mocking China	196	31.92
TOTAL	614	100

Table 3 Coded Weibo Posts on Origin of Kimchi and South Korea

Theme	Comments	% of Total
Accusations: Cultural Thief	48	46.60
“Country as a thief”	24	23.30
Korean's not confident in its own culture	8	7.77
lack of knowledge of history	16	15.53
Policy recommendation	19	18.45
Chinese should protect Chinese culture	14	13.59
China-Korea cooperation	4	3.88
Enhance the strength	1	0.97
Mocking and Satire (hate Korean, watchdog of US, narrow-minded, sanctions)	29	28.16

Kimchi is Korean food	3	2.91
Korean should be rational and respect history	2	1.94
“not a big deal, just a misunderstanding of Paocai and Kimchi”	2	1.94
Total	103	100

Cultural Thieves: Accusations Towards One Other

In many posts, netizens accuse each other of cultural appropriation. Chinese netizens gives South Korea the “nickname” of a “country of thieves,” mocking them for appropriating Chinese culture, including traditional costumes, food, and books. Compared with the general negative attitude of South Koreans, Chinese netizens are more inclined to use intense even insulting words: among the terms frequently used in YouTube comments and Weibo posts are “country of thief” (tou guo), “country of coldness” (han guo), “country of hell and coldness” (dahan minguo), “watchdog of the West” (xifang de zougou), as well as “small country” (danwan zhidi), “former colony of Japan” (riben de zhimindi).

Many posts by some famous Weibo accounts mock the idea that Korea is not a truly independent country throughout history. It used to be the vassal state of China, the colony of Japan and one of the military bases of the U.S. at present. As a result, they had to appropriate other countries’ cultures and pretended itself as a country with a diverse culture. One post cites kimchi as the side dish in China:

The thing in different cultures means differently. For example, in Northeast China, kimchi can’t be served on the table when people invite friends for dinner because it is a side dish or appetizer; in South Korea, it is a national food. It means nothing to China, but it means significantly to South Korea. “A country, if without politeness and insult his important

neighbor, will die in the end.” South Korea should learn Chinese because the first constitution of South Korea was written in Chinese.²³

This post was reposted and commented over several thousand times. On one hand, it shows that Chinese people are very proud of the diversity of Chinese culture; on the other hand, Chinese netizens infer that Korean netizens are ridiculous to argue with them because Korean culture borrows a lot from Chinese culture. Without Chinese culture, there is no Korean culture, not to mention Kimchi.

Some netizens speculate as to why Koreans would like to “steal” Chinese culture and conclude that Korea is not confident in its own culture and would not like to admit the significant influence of China on Korean society. That a Chinese making Kimchi raises such an intense spat makes many Chinese confused: they don’t think it is a big deal and can’t understand why Koreans are so sensitive. One post comments that the “export of Chinese culture in Tang Dynasty and Ming Dynasty have a great influence on the development of Korea but the success of the economy makes Korea start to get rid of the trace of Chinese culture.”²⁴ Another post states that Korea has been trying de-Chinesization since Chosen Dynasty by inventing Hangul, manifesting the notion that since the Chosen Dynasty, Korean people have struggled to get rid of Chinese influence and built up a unique Korean identity. However, denying the cultural connection between two countries only causes animosity. A Chinese netizen posted this comment:

What a joke! Do Korean have a culture? We Chinese made Paocai (Kimchi) thousands of years ago. Cabbage, the raw material of Kimchi, is originated from China, not to mention

²³ Xia, Zhu (@Zhuxia-CityChannel), “I am a tough lady from Northeast China, Kimchi is a side dish to me,” Weibo, Jan. 13, 2021, https://weibo.com/lrtvzx?refer_flag=1005055013_&ssl_rnd=1616185749.5196&is_all=1.

²⁴ Yangzheng Gongkaike (@Yangzheng Gongkaike), “Korea’s inferiority complex and confuse about history: Why Korean steal Kimchi?” Weibo, Jan.16, 2021, https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%E9%9F%A9%E5%BC%8F%E8%87%AA%E5%8D%91%EF%BC%8C%E5%8E%86%E5%8F%B2%E8%BF%B7%E5%A4%B1&wvr=6&b=1&Refer=SWeibo_box.

Kimchi. It is ridiculous for Korean to claim Kimchi as their own cultural product. Do Korean know history?²⁵

Some Chinese netizens, like this one, relate Korean cultural appropriation with their lack of knowledge of history. They list lots of historical facts, including how Chinese people had written down how to make Kimchi in the *Analects* and thus mocking Korean peoples' ignorance; and that the raw material of Kimchi, cabbage, was also imported from China since Ming Dynasty. One post states: "Korean netizens are a group of people who are ignorant, narrow-minded, and stubborn . . . The *Analects* had recorded the method of making Kimchi in Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 B.C.) . . . Korean netizens should've gone to school and learned history."²⁶

Most Korean netizens firmly claim that "Kimchi is Korean" and ridicule China as a "cultural thief" regarding Kimchi as Chinese food. They accuse the Chinese of cultural appropriation by "stealing" Kimchi, Hanbok, and traditional festivals. Like Chinese netizens' aggressive responses, most Korean netizens use intense words to express their anger. Among the words that they use frequently in the comments and posts are "Kimchi is Korean," "apologize," "thief," "Korean culture." Some of them show anger about the name of this video²⁷ "Chinese food" and list several reasons "why kimchi is Korean food other than Chinese": first, in Korea, there is a refrigerator designed for storing Kimchi, called "Kimchi refrigerator"; second, there are several

²⁵ Haishishenlou Jieshuo (@Haishishenlou Jieshuo), "Liziqi was strongly criticized by korean netizens for making Kimchi," Weibo, Feb. 14, <https://s.weibo.com/weibo/%25E9%259F%25A9%25E5%259B%25BD%25E4%25BA%25BA%25E6%259C%2589%25E8%2587%25AA%25E5%25B7%25B1%25E7%259A%2584%25E6%2596%2587%25E5%258C%2596%25E5%2590%2597?topnav=1&wvr=6&b=1>.

²⁶ Xiaochu fuji de meishaonv (@Xiaochu fuji de meishaonv), "Liziqi was criticized by Korean netizens for making Kimchi," Weibo, Jan.11, 2021, <https://s.weibo.com/weibo/%25E4%25B8%2580%25E7%25BE%25A4%25E6%2597%25A0%25E7%259F%25A5%25E7%259A%2584%25E9%259F%25A9%25E5%259B%25BD%25E7%25BD%2591%25E5%258F%258B?topnav=1&wvr=6&b=1>.

²⁷ "The last episode of the 'Life Series': The life of white radish" published by Li Ziqi on YouTube, Jan. 9th, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6bJ_vTslYo.

hundreds of kinds of Kimchi, made from cabbage, radish, cucumber, pepper, sweet potato, and eggplant; third, Kimchi is the symbol of Korea and Korean culture and is recognized by the global society. Unlike Chinese netizens, Korean netizens rarely discussed or debated the historical origin of Kimchi and the history of the bilateral relationship between China and Korea. Their avoidance of this topic was attacked by the Chinese, who said Koreans lacked intelligence and self-confidence.

Ideology: Watchdog and Authoritarian Regime

Another major theme that frequently occurs in YouTube comments and Weibo is the critique of each other's ideologies. China netizens criticize Korea of acting as a watchdog for western countries and betraying the friendship which has lasted for hundreds of years. Korean netizens criticize China for its human rights issues, authoritarianism, and communism. According to them, China's cultural appropriation speaks to the weaknesses of communism and authoritarian regimes, such as no democratic system and freedom of speech. In addition, some Korean netizens assert that cultural aggression towards neighbors is an important way for China to extend its influence in the Asia Pacific region. In the meantime, Chinese netizens mock and ridicule Korea's "amnesia": to become a "loyal friend" of western countries, especially the United States and Japan after the Korean War (1950-1953), it turns a blind eye to the history of "Comfort Women" in the 2nd World War and the U.S. army base in Camp Humphreys.

In the samples I coded, Korean netizens attack China's authoritarian regime. One post, for instance, notes sarcastically that "China is a country full of lies, pride, supervision over people, unsanitary places and counterfeit products."²⁸ Many users point out that the Chinese government

²⁸ Xi Jin Pooh, comment on Li Ziqi, "The last episode of the "Life Series": The life of white radish!" Mar. 23, 2021.

poses strict censorship and supervision on social media and people's comments, making it lose people's support gradually. They even assert that Li Ziqi is sponsored by the government and acts as a tool to extend the Chinese cultural influence on the whole world. Moreover, many Korean net users claim China used this video²⁹ to agitate the confrontation between Chinese and Korean people to achieve its political goals. One post declares that "Four years ago, China boycotted kimchi to protest against South Korea's THAAD deployment. Kimchi cannot be written in Chinese letters. ISO also said that paocai is not kimchi. The Chinese don't know about government's brainwashing education."³⁰

Korean netizens also express dissatisfaction with how the CPC regime deals with Xinjiang Muslims, Hong Kong, the spread of COVID-19 and other sensitive political and human rights issues. They criticize the way the CPC treated the patriotic students in the democratic movement in Tiananmen Square 1989 and Muslims in Xinjiang, condemning them for taking away Hong Kong's democracy, and denouncing China's for not taking responsibility for the COVID-19 worldwide breakout. Such posts include "Kimchi is from Korea, COVID is from China."³¹ Another one states: "I'm really sorry for the Uighurs who are dominated by the Chinese government."³²

Some Chinese net users criticize Korea's loyalty to western countries as a sign that they are a watchdog for the United States and claim that Korea exchanged independence for the

²⁹ "The last episode of the 'Life Series': The life of white radish" published by Li Ziqi on YouTube, Jan. 9th, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6bJ_vTslyo.

³⁰ Baldwood bad, comment on Li Ziqi, "The last episode of the "Life Series": The life of white radish!" Mar. 20, 2021.

³¹ 일회용계정, comment on Li Ziqi, "The last episode of the "Life Series": The life of white radish!" Mar.22, 2021.

³² 원준이, comment on Li Ziqi, "The last episode of the "Life Series": The life of white radish!" Apr.7, 2021.

protection of the United States by allowing the existence of a US army base and intervention from the US on domestic affairs. One post state, “Korea was the vassal state of China in the past, is the colony of the US at present.”³³ Another post claims, “US soldiers committed crimes on South Korea territory, but Korean government has no right to punish them. South Korea is the slave of US.”³⁴ Moreover, some users argue that Korea criticized China for cultural stealing for making up to the US’s complaint about China’s IP theft. One user writes that “the US said China stole their technology, so Korean said China stole their Kimchi. It is ridiculous.”³⁵ Most Chinese netizens seem to believe that Korea and western countries work closely to oppose and defame China and thus feel disappointed about South Korea. Moreover, the deployment of THAAD and South Korea-US joint military practices make the Chinese government and Chinese people feel betrayed. Angry Chinese people attack Korea for putting China and Chinese people under the watch of the United States and mock them for having no dignity: in order to be a loyal ally of the U.S., they said, Korea has sacrificed its own security and independence.

Policy Recommendation: Sanctions, Cooperation and Friendship

While a great deal of this online debate has fueled and intensified this cultural confrontation, more and more Chinese netizens have started to offer their advice, which has rarely been seen in the past.³⁶ Most of these policy recommendations are about taking hard-core foreign stances and

³³ Linkter Tang, comment on Li Ziqi, “The last episode of the “Life Series”: The life of white radish!” Mar.16, 2021.

³⁴ See note 33 above.

³⁵ Shenwangye de riji (@Shenwangye de riji), “US said we stole their technology,” Weibo, Jan.20, 2021, <https://s.weibo.com/weibo/%25E7%25BE%258E%25E5%259B%25BD%25E4%25BA%25BA%25E8%25AF%25B4%25E6%2588%2591%25E4%25BB%25AC%25E5%2581%25B7%25E6%258A%2580%25E6%259C%25AF?toplevel=1&wvr=6&b=1>.

³⁶ The samples I coded in this section are from Weibo.

implementing economic sanctions. Despite the general anti-Korean sentiment, there are still some Chinese netizens who claim that China-Korea relations are so important that the Chinese government needs to deal with things carefully.

When netizens bring up policies or speak of bilateral relations, it is sad to see that many of them view each other with distaste. Some Weibo posts observe that the military cooperation between South Korea and the US has damaged China's interests, and that they are taking advantage of China in terms of trade and national security. Korean netizens point out that China is helping Kim Jong Un and North Korea. Moreover, this frequent cultural confrontation has made the bilateral relations more tenuous and fraught than ever before. Angry Chinese netizens call for harsh measures to make Korean learn a lesson. One post states: "China should impose economic sanctions on South Korea and stop importing Korean products . . . To be sure, Korean's stealing Chinese culture is a big deal, which should be paid attention to. China should give it a heavy blow and make them learn from it."³⁷ Another post states, "I am a patriot. With regard to China-Korean relations, I suggest that China needs to keep status quo and don't lift the ban on Korean culture products export."³⁸ A majority of Chinese netizens insist that economic sanction are a simple but effective method to stop Korean's cultural appropriation.

Along with those negative posts, there are some positive and rational voices. Some Chinese netizens underscore that China should take responsibility for protecting Chinese culture. They call for the promotion of Chinese culture through international platforms and social media, application

³⁷ Lu Xiaozhou (@Lu Xiaozhou), "Korean's three major harm to China," Weibo, Jan. 10, 2021, <https://s.weibo.com/weibo/%25E9%259F%25A9%25E5%259B%25BD%25E5%25AF%25B9%25E4%25B8%25AD%25E5%259B%25BD%25E7%259A%2584%25E4%25B8%2589%25E5%25A4%25A7%25E5%258D%25B1%25E5%25AE%25B3?topnav=1&wvr=6&b=1>.

³⁸ H Xiaoningha (@ H Xiaoningha), "Some personal opinions," Weibo, March.6, 2021, https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%E5%B0%B1%E6%83%B3%E5%8F%91%E8%A1%A8%E4%B8%AA%E4%BA%BA%E8%A7%82%E7%82%B9&wvr=6&b=1&Refer=SWeibo_box.

of “Intangible Culture Heritage” for Chinese traditional festivals, foods, costumes, and other cultural products, and increased culture exchange between China and other countries. Through these means, there is no chance for Korea to appropriate Chinese culture. Other Chinese netizens declared that cooperation is vital for China-Korea development. A netizen reasons that “China and South Korea should learn from each other. We have similar food and traditions which are linking us together. I hope we are friends forever.”³⁹ Besides, some Chinese netizens hoped that Chinese and Korean should respect history. One post states that “it is right for Korean to protect its own traditional culture, but it is also important to respect the history.”⁴⁰

Moreover, some Chinese netizens declare the Kimchi War is a misunderstanding and Chinese and Korean people should not take it seriously. The endless confrontation will only hurt feelings of both Chinese and Koreans. A few Chinese netizens defend Korean netizens: “Kimchi is Korean food and its unique food culture.”⁴¹ “Kimchi is Korean, Sushi is Japanese, Dumpling is Chinese. This is irrefutable.”⁴² “I think Kimchi is Korean food. Paocai in China is salty, but Kimchi is spicy.”⁴³ These kind words may not stop the debate but will warm the hearts of Korean people. Hopefully, more positive voices from both sides will join in.

Popular Narratives and China-Korea Relations

³⁹ Erxi Aichi Kaoya (@Erxi Aichi Kaoya), “My personal opinion,” Weibo, Jan.16, 2021, <https://m.weibo.cn/5960976078/4594098881430368>.

⁴⁰ Dentist Zhaoyong (@Koujiang zhongzhi yisheng zhaoyong), “respect the history,” Weibo, Jan.13, 2021, <https://m.weibo.cn/7276014270/4592987184576330>.

⁴¹ Mefannnew (@Mefannnew), “Kimchi is Korean food, isn’t it?” Weibo, Jan.16, 2021, <https://m.weibo.cn/7138148146/4594351139719642>.

⁴² Ninijiang (@ninijiang), “Kimchi is Korean,” Weibo, Jan.16, 2021, <https://m.weibo.cn/1660641904/4594315597453141>.

⁴³ Xiaomofang (@xiaomofang), “Kimchi is spicy,” Weibo, Jan.16, 2021, <https://m.weibo.cn/6581225867/4594184155300639>.

When looking at these various popular narratives, we see various dimensions, tones, and purposes to the comments. This is not surprising because the relationship between China and South Korea is complex due to the historical parallels and geographical proximity. With shared ethnicity and similar food and lifestyle, Chinese and Korean people have shared emotional bonds during thousands of years of trade and exchange. As the cultural center of the Asia Pacific region, China has a great influence on its neighbors in terms of politics, economy, culture, and lifestyle. The Korean political system and Korean culture were developed from the imperial examination system, Confucianism, Chinese characters, printing, food, and costumes. Chinese have gotten used to their sense of cultural superiority for hundreds of years, while Koreans have been trying to get rid of the label of “vassal state of Chinese culture.” Therefore, it is not difficult to understand the popular narratives in the “Kimchi War”: both sides’ negative attitudes towards the other shows that the battle to gain superiority is present in many aspects. At the same time, some positive perspectives offer hope for reconciliation.

By analyzing several thousands of YouTube comments and Weibo posts, the popular narratives on the Kimchi War can be divided into two main groups: on one hand, the majority of Chinese and Korean netizens ridicule each other’s countries for cultural appropriation and ideology; on the other hand, a small number of Chinese netizens show their understanding of this cultural spat and their best hopes for long-lasting China-Korean relations.

It is too early to say that China-Korea relations will deteriorate due to these negative popular narratives. However, these conflicting narratives can damage the national images of both countries. In Weibo, a majority of Chinese netizens are calling South Korea “the country of Thief” (Touguo), Korean people “people from country of thief.” The Chinese K-pop fans are called “fake Koreans” (er’bangzi) or traitors. Although the Chinese government doesn’t change its stance, it

has taken a series of measures on limiting the export of Korean products, which will accelerate the spread of anti-Korean sentiment in China. Similarly, the anti-China sentiment in Korea has been spreading. One post describes this phenomenon:

South Korean have very specialized anti-China and anti-Japan education system and media industry . . . This is for specific political goals and this is why a lot of Korean always refuse to admit a lot of history facts. There are always some Korean shout and claim “north China belongs to Korean,” “Sushi& Kanji is from Korea.” . . . Now these people are come to Li Ziqi.⁴⁴

With the negative influence from popular narratives, very few Chinese and Korean netizens call for maintaining friendly bilateral relations. This lack of policy advocacy may be due to censorship and supervision and the suppression of positive opinions for political aims.⁴⁵ In addition, with a large amount of “fifty-cent party” online, the Chinese government is probably guiding popular narratives and creating an anti-Korean atmosphere. Chinese netizens might believe that making policy recommendations online will get them in trouble and have little impact on the official narratives. Therefore, they are not willing to voice their opinions, which they may see as useless.

With direct mutual exchange decreasing, Chinese and Korean people’s impressions of each other will largely be from news and social media. The hostile atmosphere on social media does affect people’s perceptions in real life. Even worse, it creates prejudice or a negative first impression, which is not conducive to the future positive development of China-Korea relations and harmonious integration of the Asia Pacific region.

It is difficult to say that the negative popular narratives will impact the Chinese government’s official stand because there are no obvious changes in foreign policies and official

⁴⁴ Mr. Left, comment on Li Ziqi, “The last episode of the “Life Series”: The life of white radish!” Mar.18, 2021.

⁴⁵ Andrew Scobell, etc, 118.

statements due to these cultural confrontations. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying responded to the origin of Kimchi on Regular Press Conference on Jan. 20. She stated that “We support meaningful and friendly exchange and discussion over academic issues concerning paocai from a culinary perspective, but there should be no place for bias to avoid inciting confrontation and affecting people-to-people ties.”⁴⁶

However, some official accounts in Weibo owned or controlled by the Chinese government have contained different comments. CGTN, the official account of Chinese Global Television posted a video on January 12 with the title of “with regard to the Korean netizens’ criticism on Li Ziqi and her video, who should keep a cool head?” The video claims that “While some South Korean netizens consider kimchi to be a unique dish originated from their country, Chinese pickles, in fact, have a long history that dates back to 1100 B.C. during the Zhou Dynasty.”⁴⁷ Guanchazhe Net, the official account of state-owned newspaper Guanchazhe.com, posted on January 11,

Korea, as the “country of Kimchi”, relied on the import of Kimchi from China and more and more housewives gave up making kimchi at home because of the rising prices of Kimchi. Some Korean media called it the humiliation of Korea, which may be the reason of why Korean netizens are so sensitive about Li Ziqi’s video.⁴⁸

The Sina Finance published a commentary that states “it is meaningless to debate over the origin of Kimchi because that the Kimchi is originated from China is a hard fact.”⁴⁹ Those comments reflect that to some extent, the official stand is affected by the popular narratives. Those posts from

⁴⁶ Chunying, Hua, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on January 20, 2021,” accessed on April 8, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1847552.shtml.

⁴⁷ CGTN (@CGTN), “with regard to the Korean netizens’ criticism on Li Ziqi and her video, who should keep a cool head?”, Weibo, Jan. 12, <https://m.weibo.cn/3173633817/4592656938698825>.

⁴⁸ Guanchazhe Net (@Guanchazhe Net), “Kimchi is our food: Korean netizens criticized Li Ziqi for making Kimchi in her video,” Weibo, Jan. 11, <https://m.weibo.cn/1887344341/4592255790745034>.

⁴⁹ Sina Finance (@sinafinance), “80% Kimchi imported by Korea is from this small town in Shandong, China,” Weibo, Jan. 11, <https://m.weibo.cn/1638782947/4592534309835266>.

state-owned media proved that in the era of social media, the Chinese government needs to pay attention to the popular narratives to maintain social stability and make effective policy adjustments.

Conclusion

With the influence of social media, the popular narratives affect policymaking and China-Korea relations to various degrees, but the pressure generated by posts and comments does not yet seem to have significant implications on the Chinese government's standpoint or actions when dealing with China-Korea relations. Nevertheless, in many ways, the Chinese government attaches much importance to these popular narratives, and their responses always have the CPC siding with the Chinese people. In terms of China-Korea relations, the Chinese government may use the popular narratives to show public anger about the Korean government, which makes it more likely for them to gain advantages in bilateral negotiations.

By analyzing major discourse on social media, we see that most of the narratives focus on cultural appropriation and only a small portion of them attack ideological differences, which hopefully won't cause substantial damage to the emotions and psyches of Chinese and Korean people. If this is indeed the case, then China-Korea relations will not be greatly influenced by those negative popular narratives. More importantly, China needs to keep good relations with South Korea due to strategic considerations as well as economic and political partnerships. The influence of Korean culture—in terms of food and culture—can't be dismissed. In contemporary times, this massive influence is demonstrated through K-pop, a genre with power that can't be erased by online conflicts or music-based regulations. Millions of Chinese people are obsessed with K-dramas, K-beauty, K-music, and Korean food. K-pop has been changing the Chinese lifestyle for decades. Similarly, Korean society is deeply influenced by Chinese culture for thousands of years.

At present, there are more and more cultural frictions hindering the potential for friendly mutual exchanges, but I believe shared culture and common strategic interests will connect the Chinese and Korean people closely once again.

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