



**Special Review**

# Current Status of Korean Studies in China

Volume 24 Number 1

June 2021

[www.kci.go.kr](http://www.kci.go.kr)

The Review of Korean Studies



## Editor's Note

LEE Kang Hahn

In early 2019, the *Review of Korean Studies* planned a series of special reviews examining Korean studies around the world. The aim at the time was to examine Korean studies in our neighboring countries first, then expand to examine Korean studies in other countries as well. For the 2019 Winter issue of the *Review of Korean Studies*, we invited four scholars to review the current status of Korean Studies in Japan. It took some time, but we returned to this angle and here we are, introducing to readers four outstanding reviews examining the current status of Korean Studies in China.

China has been a country with which Korea has probably the longest relationship, and not to mention a most layered one. The relationship between the two countries was certainly heavily influential to the Korean peninsula, but it was also complicated and multi-faceted. Accordingly, it was only appropriate for us to plan this occasion, so that we could embark on an academic venture to examine the current status of Korean Studies done from the perspectives of the Chinese.

Unfortunately, regardless of general diplomatic relations, recently the Korean and Chinese public spheres have not been on the best of terms as desired. Old conflicts over historical issues that have been going on for decades are now newly accompanied by some controversies over the origin of some distinguished Korean traditions.

This special review was not planned as a counteraction to the former, and also did not expect any new quarrels like the latter to develop. However, in light of recent events, it becomes clear what historians could and should do more. Instead of joining public quarrels or taking sides, the paramount task of historians would be to help others keep an open mind, and be honest to ourselves, while asking the others to do just the same thing. History and legacy is not something that one could steal from another. If there is ever such an attempt, the attempt itself would reflect on whoever tries that, and we don't

have to respond in kind. We should only continue our endeavors to understand what Korean culture really is, how it is different, and how it stays the same with the rest of the global culture, and keep in mind that it can be seen in different colors in the eyes of our global friends. This Special Review is in support of that goal, and thus presents the following four reviews.

Dr. Jung Wanjin at Seoul National University reviews Chinese scholar Zheng Chunying's 鄭春穎 *Research on the Costumes of Goguryeo* 高句麗服飾研究 (2015). She praises the comprehensive nature of the book, and commends the author for consulting a vast array of documents, tomb murals, and excavated artifacts. Dr. Jung also recognizes this book as the quintessential accomplishment of collecting all the relevant data together in one place. However, this book is also not without its own shortcomings, and as one of the leading scholars on the subject in Korea, Dr. Jung aptly points them out. Insufficient review of relevant Korean research and overlooking of prior key studies is the first problem to be mentioned, while also criticized is over-categorizing Goguryeo customs without accounting for certain realistic concerns. Most of all, failing to properly appreciate the indigenous and unique nature of the Goguryeo costumes, and rather trying to unnecessarily define them as not only under Chinese influence but part of the Chinese legacy is apparently a problem not to be ignored. According to Dr. Jung, such China-centric perspective intentionally or unintentionally generates the effect of turning the author's effort into a study of Chinese Han costumes and not Goguryeo ones.

Professor Jung Donghun of Seoul National University of Education reviews three books authored by Chinese scholar Chen Shangsheng 陳尚勝. The first one is *3,000 Years of Cultural Exchange Between China and Korea* 中韓交流三千年 (1997), *Collected Articles on the History of Sino-Korean Relations* 中韓關係史論 (1997), and *A Study on the History of Traditional Chinese Foreign Relations* 中國傳統對外關係研究 (2015). Prof. Jung praises the author's audacious and ambitious take on an enormous and daunting task of covering three millenia of exchanges between China and Korea, on various fronts as well as in diverse areas. It is indeed a monumental task to document a history of exchanges from political exchanges to economic trades, and from social dialogues to the sharing of lifestyles. Then again, there can be some problems that are destined to develop in such an attempt, and there are some opinions of the author that differ from those of the Korean scholars. And there is the issue of Prof. Chen trying to use a single, grand concept (the "tribute system") to define

the relationship between the two countries that had developed for such a long time and had many elements that contributed to it. According to Prof. Jung, it is an effort that possibly contradicts the author's other comments.

Professor Kim Ho of Gyeongin National University of Education reviews acclaimed Chinese scholar Zhao Guang's 葛兆光 book *Imagining a Foreign Place* 想象異域-讀李朝朝鮮 漢文燕行文獻札記 (2014). Prof. Kim deeply agrees with the author's suggestions that have been made over the years for a peaceful coexistence among China, Korea, and Japan, and his urge to rebuild trust and understanding among people of the three countries. Yet Prof. Kim also has an issue with how the author evaluates the nature of certain Korean travelogues produced by Joseon intellectuals on their journeys to China, as the author considers the perspective of the Joseon people, who criticized their Qing counterparts for losing the civilized way without no conscious effort to retrieve it, as stubborn and rigid. Prof. Kim argues that the Joseon scholars' view of Qing may be interpreted that way, but if we are to look deeper, the people of Joseon among all three countries were actually the only ones who saw the merits of the old way, remembered how the three countries were able to coexist and communicate with each other under a common goal, and therefore aspired to rebuild such bond. Prof. Kim argues that was the reason the Joseon intellectuals were so demanding of Qing, and suggests such stance and attitude is not only relevant but very much needed, particularly in this day and age.

Dr. Hwang Byoungju at National Institute of Korean History reviews Chinese scholar Jin Guangxi's 金光熙 *Marginal Man's Notebook of the History of Contemporary Korea* 大韓民國史 (2014). Jin Guangxi is a Chinese citizen but also a native Korean, and as Dr. Hwang pointed out, his such heritage does seem to provide the author with a dual identity between countries, between peoples, and between perspectives. Dr. Hwang also recognizes dual qualities all over Jin's book, of which the content has apparently been claimed to be left wing and right wing at the same time, possibly the result of being reviewed by people with different views. Dr. Hwang defines the nature of this book, which harbors the perspective of not only a Korean or Chinese but to be more accurate a Korean living in China, as literally hybrid, with unique strength and weaknesses. As a book on the contemporary history of Korea, which was a complicated time for not only the Korean people but all countries that were involved with South and North Korea, the scope of this book is quite impressive. But Dr. Hwang emphasizes the fact the contents should nevertheless be cross-checked from

various angles. After carefully examining the author's documentation of facts, he points out quite a few errors made by the author that should not go unnoticed.

We at the *Review of Korean Studies* humbly commend all the scholars for their efforts, as they graciously agreed to provide us with inspiring reviews. It is with great pleasure and pride for us to present their insights to the readers. At a time like this, when people living in countries that are geographically so close to each other still feud over cultural legacies and dispute their most minute historical views, this special review feels only relevant. All things said, communication among parties is everything. Yet the effort to do so is always in short supply. We hope this special occasion would help similar efforts to literally stockpile in the future.