

Viewing a Rising China from South Korea and Thailand

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Dedication and Introduction

This paper, like the rest of the papers in this special issue, honours our good friend, Dr Ulises Granados, who passed away tragically in 2021. I first met Ulises in 2010 at a conference in Daejeon, South Korea, and we have been in touch ever since, organizing conference panels or just meeting for a drink when our paths crossed in countries such as Japan, Korea, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand. My fondest memory with Ulises is our five days together in Mexico City, where he displayed exceptional kindness and generosity by showing me around the city, driving me to the pyramids and taking me to various spots in the city. During his visit to New Zealand, Ulises spent a few days with my family, staying at our house and sharing a bottle of tequila he brought from Mexico with us. After his departure, I recall my wife saying, “Ulises is welcome to stay with us any time, he is such a joyful person, it is such a pleasure to host him.” Ulises indeed had this incredible talent of bringing joy and a good mood wherever he went. It is still hard to imagine that he is gone forever, and I will never receive an email from him with a suggestion to organize a conference or to meet up in Japan—a country he truly loved and visited often.

As an academic, Ulises focused on China and its maritime issues and relationships with neighbouring nations. This paper continues his interest by examining the views of China in South Korea and Thailand. I use the methods of discourse analysis to examine the elites’ discourse on the two countries’ relations with China. I will also juxtapose the discourse deployed by the elites with other pieces of evidence. The results of this study suggest that the transformations in the elites’ discourse on China that occurred during the last two-three decades were mostly instrumental.

This comparative analysis focuses on South Korea and Thailand because there are certain important similarities in the two countries’ relations with China that make them particularly interesting for exploring and comparing their perceptions of China. Both share a long history of interactions with China under the tribute system. During the Cold War, both South Korea and Thailand were members of the U.S.-led camp and generally viewed communist China as a major threat to the regional stability. While the post-Cold War transformations in Southeast Asia have been more profound than those on the Korean Peninsula, both countries continued to maintain close security ties with the U.S., and, at the same time, over the last three decades, both have also developed a rather close relationship with China.

In the case of Thailand, trade with China grew exponentially during the post-Cold War years and in 2014 China overtook Japan to become Thailand’s top trading partner. Largely conflict-free and driven by mutual interests, political relations between the two countries have also improved significantly over the years, growing closer and warmer. Visits by top-level politicians are frequent and cooperation between the two countries is extensive. These relations became even closer after the 2014 coup, which was denounced by the U.S. and many other Western countries.

Similar developments can be also observed in South Korea’s relations with China. China’s diplomatic relations with South Korea have not been as smooth as with Thailand, with

issues related to North Korea, maritime disputes, and diverging interpretations of the ancient kingdom of Goguryeo often causing tensions. These disputes, however, have been managed relatively well by both governments, preventing them from causing significant long-term damage. In 2008, bilateral relations were upgraded to “strategic cooperative partnership” and overall, developed smoothly until the 2016 THAAD missiles related frictions. Economic exchanges between the two countries go back to the 1970s but bilateral trade has experienced a rapid growth since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992. In 2004, China became Korea’s largest overall trading partner, the top destination for Korean exports and second only to Japan in terms of imports.

The above shows that from the mid-2000s onward, China’s presence in both countries as well as bilateral relations have significantly deepened. This increasing thickness of bilateral relations has not been limited to trade but also manifested itself in the movement of people in both directions, making their relationship with China rather unique.

In terms of political regimes both Thailand and South Korea were governed by military-led dictatorships during the Cold War but from the late 1980s embarked upon a process of political democratization. Here the similarities end as the trajectories of their subsequent political developments took them into strikingly different directions. While certain problems remain, today’s South Korea is seen as one of the most vibrant democracies in the world, rated as “free” with a total “freedom score” of 83 by the Freedom House. In contrast, Thailand went through three military coups in the last three decades, with the most recent one launched in May 2014. Today, the Thai government is headed by a former leader of the junta that ruled Thailand for four years, and the military continues to play a decisive role in Thai politics and in shaping the public discourse. As such, Thailand took a direction opposite to the South Korean one, to a certain extent returning to its Cold War era style of governance. Not surprisingly, in 2020 Freedom House rated Thailand as only “partially free” with a total “freedom score” of 32.

Elite Discourse and Rising China

Thailand

The rise of China in the twenty-first century had an impact that went beyond the economic interests of the business elites but also on the ways the broader group of Thais of Chinese descent who by now, accounted for the majority of urban elites, viewed and expressed the ethnic element of their identity domestically. Namely, China’s emergence as an economic powerhouse legitimized pride in Chinese origins and many Thai businessmen and politicians of Chinese origin started to openly emphasize their Chineseness[1]. This new pride in the Thai Chinese identity was accompanied by the re-emergence of the elite discourse on Thai-China relationship as kinship, as a relationship between brothers.

The origins of the kinship discourse date back to the first half of the twentieth century but it was re-discovered by the Thai elites in late 1980s, after the normalization of bilateral relations, and since then has gained prominence in depictions of bilateral relations made by politicians, government officials and business elites. This discourse relies on the ethnic proximity between the two nations emphasizing the presence of a large Chinese ethnic minority in Thailand and the close historical ties between the two nations. References to Thailand-China relations as familial one can often be seen in the domestic media and in speeches at events that involve representatives from both countries. In a speech to celebrate the legacy of Kukrit Pramoj, Thailand’s former Prime Minister who established diplomatic relations with China in 1975,

another former Prime Minister, Anand Panyarachun[2], noted the omnipresence of the phrase “Thailand and China are brothers” in the Thai society and presented it as evidence of Kukrit’s legacy and success in drawing the two nations closer together. Wissanu Kreangam, Deputy Prime-Minister in Thaksin’s government (2002–2006), referred to Thailand’s relationship with China as a special one, “rarely seen among other countries,” based on close, family-like ties on all levels of society[3]. In 2005, Thaksin himself referred to Thai and Chinese as belonging to one family during a visit to his ancestor’s tomb in mainland China[4]. The prominence of the “kinship” narrative in Thai elite discourse on relations with China has remained intact despite the various political upheavals in the country. In October 2015, a year and a half after the coup that brought to power the military junta in Thailand, the two countries celebrated the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. During the celebration to commemorate the event, the phrase “Thailand and China are not strangers, but siblings” featured prominently in the speeches of many Thai officials including the Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai[5]. The reference to the brotherly relations between the two nations often features in speeches by the Thai officials directed at the Chinese audience as well. For example, one of the leaders of the junta, General Prawit Wongsuwan, used this phrase in a speech aimed at reassuring Chinese tourists about the safety of Thailand after the 2018 Phuket boat capsizing incident[6].

Some observers, however, argued that the discourse on kinship has been accompanied by a gradual importation of the Chinese authoritarian model to Thailand, pointing to the premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra as the starting point of this process[7].

Indeed, certain domestic and foreign policy developments during Thaksin’s rule support this argument. Thaksin adopted the “Asia for Asians” approach as the main pillar of Thailand’s regional policy and during his rule Sino-Thai relations became significantly closer. It was under Thaksin’s premiership that an FTA between the two countries was signed in 2003, and numerous regional and bilateral initiatives pushed the two countries closer together. In terms of domestic politics, Thaksin neither held democracy nor those that promoted it in high regard. His rule became increasingly authoritarian, leading to some observers referring to it as “parliamentary dictatorship[8].” However, the argument that along with other Chinese products, “Bangkok has imported Chinese authoritarianism”[9] which construes the growth of China’s positive image and Thaksin’s authoritarianism as essentially part of the same phenomenon seems to be exaggerated. It should also be remembered that while Thaksin was indeed becoming increasingly authoritarian, he was also very much a reformer who challenged traditional institutions, fought against the old elites, and enabled the emergence of new actors on Thai political arena[10]. Moreover, Thaksin explicitly rejected any ideology, arguing that in the post-Cold War era, politics were about proper management aimed at solving the country’s problems. When seeking to legitimize a certain policy, Thaksin, rather skilfully, made use of a whole range of ideas that suited his purpose at that moment to convince his audience. When arguing that the essence of the social contract theory was the sacrifice of individual freedom for the general good, he was quoting Rousseau. When justifying his harsh treatment of the opposition, Thaksin referred to the teachings of Buddhadasa—one of the most influential Thai Buddhist philosophers of the twentieth century[11]. Thus, the discourse about kinship with China, should be seen more as a framing device used by Thaksin to legitimize his policies domestically and to appeal to his Chinese counterparts.

The Chinese model of continuing economic growth combined with the suppression of individual freedoms has been found increasingly appealing by the Thai military that has ruled

Thailand since 2014. Now, calls for embracing the Chinese model were voiced openly by the Thai leadership. In 2016, the Thai press reported that during a Cabinet meeting, Prime Minister and the leader of the junta, General Prayut Chan-o-cha, recommended to his fellow Cabinet members to read Xi Jinping's *The Governance of China*, as both countries are going through a similar period of reforms. In 2018, Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak in an address to the Thailand-China Business Forum, explicitly stated that Thailand can learn from the Chinese model.

Like in the case of Thaksin, it is possible that the Chinese model has exercised a certain influence on General Prayut and associates but there is no definitive evidence to suggest that this indeed has been the case. In interviews with the domestic and foreign press, Prayut emphasizes his patriotism, makes references to Thai culture but never mentions China's influence on his political decisions. Indeed, his list of ten recommended books includes *The Governance of China* but also *Animal Farm* and several volumes on business management[12]. The emphasis on order, economic development and close relationship between the people and the government in the excerpts from the semi-autobiographical volume published by Prayut's party in 2019 for internal circulation[13] suggest certain similarities in Prayut's and Xi's worldviews. Similar ideas, however, can be found probably in writings by any other authoritarian ruler. Thus, it seems that rather than being influenced by the Chinese model, the 2014 coup as well as the subsequent political transformations implemented by the junta were driven by the desire to safeguard the political dominance of the royalist elites that include the military[14]. Just like earlier governments, therefore, the references to the Chinese model should be seen as a framing tool used to justify and legitimize the new rulers' domestic policies and to appeal to China.

South Korea

Since the early 2010s, numerous Korea watchers have argued that China's rise has brought back the historical Confucian tributary system values to the fore of bilateral relations and that South Korea is willingly embracing China as the new regional hegemon[15]. Earlier, a similar idea was voiced by David Kang[16] who suggested that the historical memory of friendly but hierarchical relations with China are integral to Korean national identity and play an important role in shaping bilateral relations. Jin Kai[17] referred to this element of Korean national identity as part of a "cognitive entanglement" espoused by Korean policymakers in which they are torn between two conflicting desires; one to uphold Korea's ties with the U.S., and the other to join's China in the construction of new order in East Asia, or "even to return to the long-gone tributary system as an inferior small neighbour." In other words, this view of bilateral relations suggests that the rise of China reactivated and brought to fore the "junior partner" or "vassal" element in Korean national identity.

Such claims were frequently made during the early years of Park Geun-hye's presidency (2013-2017). Park made efforts from the start of her presidency to enhance state-level relations and build good personal ties with China's leader Xi Jinping, leading to a brief period of close relations between the two countries. However, the relationship ended in mid-2016 after South Korea's decision to deploy the THAAD anti-missile defence system. Park held six summit meetings with Xi and visited Beijing three times in the first three years of her presidency. In 2015, Xi commented that the Korea-China relationship was at its best point in history[18].

During this time, the relationship between the two countries was strengthened by a shared memory of colonization and occupation by Japan. This was achieved through symbolic

measures like establishing memorials for the Korean anti-colonial struggle in China and Park Geun-hye attending China's Victory Day celebration in 2015. However, an examination of official documents and speeches by key policymakers during Park's presidency found no evidence to support the idea of a "junior partner" or "vassal" identity. Korean official documents, such as the annual Diplomatic White Paper, still emphasized the "common values" between Korea and the U.S. While acknowledging the strategic partnership with China, they did not mention any shared values. The working report submitted by Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to President Park a few weeks after her inauguration, which outlined the main issues and goals in Korea's foreign relations, noted the need to balance Korea-U.S. alliance with its partnership with China but neither explicitly nor implicitly referred to any common values or identities shared by the two countries[19]. Likewise, the Joint Statement on Korea-China Future Vision adopted in June, 2013, mentioned shared interests and referred to the two countries' working together towards peace on the Korean Peninsula and beyond, as well as other instances of cooperation, but carried no references to any normative commonalities[20]. To the contrary, during Park's presidency, South Korean politicians continued to emphasize their country's adherence to the principles of democracy and their belief in its universal applicability, including the Asia-Pacific region[21]. A search on Korea's National Assembly parliamentary interpolations' database during the nineteenth (2012–2016) and the twentieth (2016–2020) assemblies with keywords "Korea China common values," "Korea China Confucianism," "Korea China culture" did not bring any results relevant for this study.

Quotes from Chinese classics and references to cultural similarity and long history of cultural exchanges between the two nations are indeed occasionally made by Korean officials in their discussions with the Chinese officials, the public, and the media. Rather than expressions of a "junior partner" or a "vassal" identity, these should be understood as framing tools aimed at creating certain familiarity and commonality between the Korean "self" and the Chinese "other" while delivering a certain message. For example, when talking to the Chinese media, South Korea's ambassador to China, Noh Young-min, used a quote from Confucius to explain the existing difficulties in two countries' relations and the need to start from relatively minor issues to achieve an overall improvement[22]. Park Geun-hye herself extensively used quotes from Chinese classics at a speech she gave at Tsinghua University during her June 2013 "trip of heart and trust" to Beijing. She also emphasized the centuries long history of interactions between the two peoples and the cultural familiarity the Korean people, including herself, experience during their visits to China. Park also mentioned the "Chinese dream" and noted that Koreans are also pursuing the Korean dream. She did not, however, draw any parallels between the two nations, except for the vague "pursuit of happiness" by both peoples[23]. Such statements can hardly be interpreted as something more than a rhetorical device commonly used by politicians and diplomats aimed at showing respect and familiarity with the audience's culture. Moreover, it could be argued that precisely the lack of common values and identities makes historical and cultural references so important when Korean leaders attempt to establish certain proximity with the Chinese audience.

Conclusion

The above analysis of the elite discourse in Thailand and South Korea shows that in both cases the narrative on common history and culture is used instrumentally by the elites and can hardly be attributed to any perceived commonality in values or norms or China's ideational influence

on policy-making elites. In terms of the broad public, there is an abundance of public opinion polls tracing the dynamics of public attitudes towards China in South Korea and, to a lesser extent, in Thailand. In a nutshell, these surveys show that people in both countries see China as an important regional and global player which exercises growing influence in the region. The favourable/unfavourable attitudes towards China in South Korea have fluctuated greatly, depending on the state of bilateral relations. In the 1990s and early 2000s, these attitudes were mostly favourable, but during the Goguryeo-related historical controversy in the mid-2000s, and since the THAAD related tensions from 2017 onwards, the unfavourable view gained dominance.

Polls related to Thai public perceptions are rather scarce but those that exist, suggest that during the past two decades, the Thais have generally maintained a favourable view of China and see it as an important and positive external influence on their country and the region more broadly[24].

The above-mentioned polls consist of general questions about feelings towards a certain country or its influence, and do not offer any evidence regarding the ideational impact of the rising Chinese and its model. There are other sets of large surveys such as Asia Barometer and World Values Survey, which do not engage specifically in gauging public attitudes towards the Chinese model but nevertheless can offer some hints regarding possible identity shifts in the two countries. These were analysed elsewhere[25] and the analysis suggest that over the last few years, compared to the early 2000s, the public in both countries find authoritarian values more acceptable. These shifts can be attributed to a variety of domestic and global factors, unrelated to China, but we cannot ignore the possibility that the relationship between the rise of China on one hand, and the shift towards authoritarian values in South Korea and Thailand on the other, is not simply coincidental. We can conclude that the ideological challenge of the Chinese model should be taken seriously by proponents of democracy in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.

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***This paper is an updated digest from Alexander Bukh, “The productive power of rising China and national identities in South Korea and Thailand,” *The Pacific Review*, 35-4 (2022), 676–704.**



Ulises Granados and Alex Bukh at IPSA World Congress in Brisbane, 2018