

### Book review: Odd Arne Westad: Empire and Righteous Nation - 600 Years of China-Korea Relations

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Gehlmann, M. (2021). Book review: Odd Arne Westad: Empire and Righteous Nation - 600 Years of China-Korea Relations. *International Quarterly for Asian Studies (IQAS)*, 52(1-2), 157-160. <https://doi.org/10.11588/iqas.2021.1-2.15420>

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administrators, and the avoidance of resorting to state agencies. The procedural emphasis is on negotiation and mediation to obtain compensation on the basis of preferred negotiation mechanisms chosen by the affected parties. There is an equally strong emphasis on understanding (*nalehmu*) and on the maintenance of social harmony through de-escalation of conflict (p. 17). There is also a general tendency to work within religious norms as well as spiritual beliefs that reinforce social norms and harmony rather than enforcing punitive prescriptions for offenders (p. 27). Consequently, identity politics is an important aspect of justice provision for ethnic minorities in the country (p. 29). Finally, the common goals of cooperation and development bind the communities and ethnic armed groups, whose mediation is clearly preferred over that of Myanmar state agencies if a conflict escalates upwards for resolution.

*Ganesan Narayanan*

ODD ARNE WESTAD, *Empire and Righteous Nation. 600 Years of China-Korea Relations*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021. 205 pages, 4 maps, €27.00. ISBN 978-0-6742-3821-3

A scholar of Korean history is bound to become knowledgeable in the history of China and the numerous dynasties, states and ethnicities subsumed under this label. Cultural, political, economic, and religious connections and entanglements between the people of the Korean peninsula and those of the Chinese landmass are, irrespective of historical period, simply too significant to be ignored. Consequentially, Sino-Korean relations have proven to be a fascinating but also complex field of study. Past connections between China and Korea have produced historical contradictions that are often difficult to reconcile with historiography that focuses on the modern nation-state and that today produce issues of contention between the Korean states and the People's Republic of China. The contemporary political situation on the Korean peninsula cannot solely be explained as the result of conceptions about this shared history on both sides. Nonetheless an understanding of the historical relationship between China and Korea and modern attitudes towards it are certainly a prerequisite to comprehending and engaging with Chinese and Korean stakeholders today.

In his new book *Empire and Righteous Nation. 600 Years of China-Korea Relations*, Odd Arne Westad sets out to offer precisely this: a concise history of Sino-Korean relations that provides context for scholars of international relations with an interest in the situation on the Korean peninsula. In the brief introduction to his book Westad states his belief that a resolution of the Korea

crisis is predicated on the peaceful reunification of Korea, one that necessarily has to involve China (pp. 2–3). This hypothesis then drives the main question of the book: What can be learned from Chinese-Korean history to solve the current divide on the Korean peninsula?

Writing a history of Sino-Korean relations is, for a host of reasons, an enormous and daunting undertaking. Westad lightens this task by setting the starting point for his historical account in the late fourteenth century, which saw the decline of Mongol rule in both the Chinese heartland and the Korean peninsula and the rise of the Ming and Chosŏn dynasties respectively. Previous Sino-Korean relations are briefly discussed at the beginning of the chapter from a theoretical perspective that points out close cultural connections and then introduces three key concepts: Empire, Nation and Righteousness.

The concept of Empire refers to the rhetorical and practical conjuring of ancient Chinese empires by later dynasties as a legitimation of their claim to power. In relation to these conceptions of imperial ambition Westad discusses how Korea, positioned either at the margins or outside the designs of the Chinese empire, was perceived in China. He concludes that as a constant fixture in Chinese historiography, Korea came to play the important role of confirming the inclusive nature of the empire by accepting its cultural values and therefore, as *the* model vassal, avoided being swallowed up by the neighbouring Chinese empires.

The second key concept, Nation, then discusses Korean notions of self and others. Mostly based on the writings of JaHyun Kim Haboush, Westad's book follows Haboush's analysis that a particular Korean national identity manifested itself when the Chosŏn kingdom was under attack by Japanese forces at the end of the sixteenth century and had to rely on Chinese support. Notions about the loss of territory, the plight of the people, and the destruction of culture were expressed in a national discourse that – although not necessarily comparable to the later Western conceptions – centred around an exclusive Korean identity.

The last concept, Righteousness, is based on a central virtue of Confucianism and hence reflects on the role played by Confucian thought in the relationship between China and Korea. Adherence in both Korea and China to the interpretation and rearrangement of the Confucian canon by Zhu Xi is seen as a cultural link that simultaneously rendered the vassal relationship to China as well as the national self-assertion of Korea as righteous. Westad's discussion of the role played by Confucianism in the relationship between China and Korea reproduces the conventional picture of a quite static ideology that served as a sort of cultural glue keeping the two bound to each other. However, it is becoming increasingly clear in current research that Korean scholars used Confucian concepts and rhetoric to express ideas of cultural superiority that informed later Korean attitudes towards the Manchu-led Qing dynasty already

during the fourteenth and fifteenth century. While Confucianism certainly shaped the vassal relations between Chosŏn and the Ming and Qing dynasties, it concurrently also contributed to Korean self-assertion.

The introduction of these three concepts at the beginning of the book seems sensible, as they capture the historical circumstances of the late fourteenth century in Northeast Asia. However, the concepts somewhat lose their value for explaining the nature of the relationship between China and Korea as the book progresses. Nevertheless, they serve an important purpose in emphasising Korean agency in the relationship with China. Outside as well as Korean descriptions of Korean history often project the developments of the twentieth century onto the past and tend to portray Korea as a passive victim of imperial ambitions in the region, the proverbial shrimp between two whales. Westad shows Koreans throughout history actively taking steps to ensure the survival of their nation, for example against the always looming Jurchen threat at the northern border (p. 38) and vis-à-vis the Chinese and later also the Japanese empire. Even though the book is concerned with Sino-Korean relations, naturally it cannot exclude Japan from such a discussion, but the focus of the book largely relegates the Japanese to the role of pirates, marauders, invaders and colonisers.

After the introduction of the three key concepts in the beginning of the first chapter, Westad continues with a description and analysis of the major developments in the relationship between China and Korea, from the establishment of the Ming and Chosŏn dynasties until the landing of French troops at Kanghwa Island in 1866. This confrontation with the West provides the main theme for the second chapter, which deals with Sino-Korean relations from the age of imperialism until the end of the Cold War. The normalisation of relations between South Korea and the People's Republic of China in 1992 marks the opening of the third chapter, which discusses current relations up to the 2019 Hanoi summit between the US and North Korea.

In his conclusion Westad states that handling the empire next door was and in a sense still is the main task of any Korean state, and, from a historical perspective, their main achievement. The special relationship that formed out of the engagement between Korea and China still affects their views towards one another today. However, Westad is reasonably careful not to give this historical connection too much influence over contemporary matters of *realpolitik* (pp. 171–173). Nevertheless, he also rightfully points out how perceptions of the past can shape the conception of possible futures among Chinese and Korean policymakers and are therefore important to understand. Here the argument of the book could have profited from a broader discussion of its fundamental premise: why is it only Korean unification that could achieve stability for economic development of the region? And under what circumstances would the People's Republic of China, which also considers itself to be a divided country, agree to such a unification of the Korean peninsula?

In its overall structure the book is dominated by the first two chapters, as they cover the majority of the events in the 600 years discussed by the author. It is a remarkable feat that Westad manages to hit most of the significant historical beats in his streamlined discussion of Sino-Korean relations, while still presenting an engaging and never tedious read. However, his strong reliance on secondary sources has some pitfalls. Although Westad employs a large number of Western and some Korean sources, his trim narration of Sino-Korean relations frequently bases its discussion and interpretation of specific events on one or two reference works. More often than not, this presents no problem, as the cited publications accurately reflect the current state of research, but in a few cases it leads to inaccuracies. For example, the discussion of the Korean *sirhak* movement (p. 65) misses the twentieth century nationalist background of the term; and the mention of the destruction of the General Sherman (p. 78) maintains the impression that the ship was an official US vessel when it was actually a private merchant ship. A somewhat larger oversight is that the Northeast Project, which ran from 2002 to 2007 under the guidance of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, is not discussed in the third chapter of the book. Not only did this academic project draw the ire of the Korean public and lead to a worsening of the public perception of China in South Korea, but its actual research is emblematic of Chinese discourse on its historical empires and its relation to Korea. To this day, accusations of cultural appropriation between the two nations are a common occurrence. However, these minor oversights do not detract from the broader argument of the book.

In conclusion, Odd Arne Westad undoubtedly accomplishes his aim of providing an overview of Sino-Korean relations since the late fourteenth century that can help interested readers gain a better understanding of the contemporary political situation on the Korean peninsula. The concise nature of the book as well as the author's engaging writing style make for a pleasant read. Even though the lengthy historical time span of the book entails some broad strokes, Westad still manages to offer clues about grey areas that demand further enquiry by the reader. Therefore, *Empire and Righteous Nation* can also be considered a valuable introductory reading for students, as it provides a rich foundation for additional conversation.

*Martin Gehlmann*