



Problems And Alternatives in the Description of China-Korea Friendship Figures in Korean History Textbooks

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Abstract

Korea and China have a long history of interaction as neighbors, and there are many historical figures who have shaped the friendly relationship between the two countries. Learning about these figures through history textbooks is essential for the future development of the relationship between Korea and China. To find out how the friendly relationship between South Korea and China is portrayed in history textbooks, we analyzed the friendly figures in history textbooks. To do so, we analyzed the Korean high school history textbooks that will be used from 2025. The results revealed a number of problems, including Korea-centered narratives, poor and simplistic narratives, and narratives that do not show friendly facts. In response, this article suggests the following as alternative approaches: “China-Korea friendship perspective,” “emphasizing activities in China,” “organic connection between each person’s activities in China and Korea,” “impact on Chinese society,” and “presenting various data about the person.” Furthermore, it was suggested that the textbooks should include not only the figure, but also the places and events. By shedding new light on the unexplored China-Korea friendship figures, it will not only promote friendship and exchange between Korea and China but also contribute to peace in East Asia.

Keywords : *China-Korea Friendship Figures; Korean History Textbooks; East Asia; Korea-Centered Narratives; History Education*

1. Introduction

Korea and China are working to revitalize their bilateral relationship, which has been stagnant for a number of reasons. The Chinese government’s recent decision to allow South Koreans to travel to China without a visa is expected to increase travel between the two countries. South Korea and China have a long history of friendly relations as neighbors. Shortly after the March 1st Movement in 1919, Koreans established the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai, China, to communicate with China and fight against Japanese rule. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea on August 24, 1992, South Korea and China have established active cooperation in various fields for over 30 years. Since the mid-2000s, South Korean exports to China have grown at an average annual rate of 10 percent, and in 2003, China surpassed the United States as South Korea’s largest export destination. As 2025 marks

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the 10th anniversary of the South Korea-China FTA, it is expected that the relationship will go beyond the existing strategic partnership and become an opportunity to lead peace and economic revitalization in East Asia.

In July 2014, during his visit to South Korea, President Xi Jinping introduced historical figures to highlight the history of China-Korea friendship at a lecture at Seoul National University. He mentioned Kim Kyo-gak, Choi Chi-won, Kim Gu, Jung Yul-sung, Deng Xiaolong, and Jin Lin, emphasizing that the two countries have always helped each other overcome crises. In this way, it is necessary to unearth and highlight the friendly figures in history for the development of China-Korea relations.

While there are many previous studies on China-Korea friendship figures that academically summarize the lives of individual figures who have contributed to China-Korea friendship, none of them have looked at them from the perspective of China-Korea friendship. The only study that has been published from a China-Korea friendship perspective is “China-Korea friendship figures,” which was published in 2017 and profiles 20 Korean and Chinese individuals who have contributed to friendship. The book includes Kim Kyogak, Jang Bogo, Kim Gagi, Choi Chi-won, Ui-cheon, Lee Jae-hyun, Choi Bu, Park Ji-won, Kim Jong-hee, Jeon Byeong-hoon, Guan Hui, Seogeon, Ye Gyeom, Dongwol, Kisun, Gong Gong-kyung, Deng Jia-ryong, Jin Lin, Nam Bang-wei and Oh Myung-je, and Zhang Jian. However, “China-Korea friendship figures” has a limitation in that it is an academic list of China-Korea friendship figures and includes many figures who are not widely known to the general public.

Therefore, this article will first analyze the narratives of China-Korea friendship figures mentioned in Korean history textbooks. In addition, I will suggest alternative ways to improve the narratives of these figures from the perspective of China-Korea friendship. I hope that this will help both Korea and China realize the importance of China-Korea relations and further explore the path to peace in East Asia.

2. Analyzing Textbook Descriptions of China-Korea Friendly Characters and Their Problems

2.1 Choi Chi-won

In Korean history textbooks, Choi Chi Won is referred to as the ill-fated genius who failed to reform Silla society. The common description in these textbooks is that they present him as a rising star who succeeded in the Tang Dynasty’s Bingong-gwa. However, out of the nine Korean history textbooks, none of them mention Choi Chi Won. In the high school Korean History 1 textbooks Liber, Miraeen, Visang, Cheonjae, and Haenaem, Choi Chi-won is mentioned as one of the six grade and one of the “Three Choi” (Choi Chi-won, Choi Seung-woo, and Choi Eon-wi). The textbooks of the Dong-a and Jihaksa emphasize Choi’s concern for the difficult civilian life in Silla at the time by associating him with the Hapcheon Haeinsa Gilsangtap Pagoda. In other words, the textbooks describe Choi as a person who envisioned a reform plan for Silla’s internal affairs and presented it to Queen Jinsung, but failed. On the other hand, the Hakpyoeng textbook presents Choi Chi Won as a Silla thinker who proposed “Pungryu,” the concept that Korea has teachings similar to Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.

The problem with the textbook descriptions of Choi Chi-won is that they only mention that he was a young man who passed the Tang dynasty’s Bingong-gwa. The only textbooks that explicitly mention that he worked as an official in the Tang are the textbooks of the Jihaksa and the Hakpyoeng. The textbooks only emphasize the fact that he was a brilliant writer who wrote the “Tohwangsogyekmun.” It is also disappointing that the main features of “Gyewonpilgyeong,” a book that provides an insight into the realities of the Tang Dynasty and the interaction between Silla and the Tang, are not introduced in the textbooks (Choi, Kwangsik, 53).

Choi Chi Won used his experience as an official in the Tang Dynasty to promote friendship between the

two countries. Queen Jinseong of Silla chose Choi Chi-won because of his service as a Yulsu official, and because he had witnessed the quarrels and the magistrate's way of governing when he served as a worker under the commander-in-chief of the Hoenam magistrate, Gobyen, who suppressed the Rebellion of Hwangso (Kim Han-shin, 3). During the Tang Dynasty, he interacted with the Tang poets Na eun and Pilihue and learned Tang literary arts and later returned to Silla as a Tang envoy to deliver the Tang emperor's correspondence to the Silla king in response to the Silla king's diplomatic documents (Jang Il-gyu, 16). Choi Chi-won was known in Silla society as a Chinese expert, as he was responsible for writing important diplomatic documents with the Tang, including one that informed the Tang that King Hyogong of Silla would be enthroned. As such, he played a role in promoting Sino-Silla friendship as a Silla official. Choi Chi Won was the provincial governor of Daesan and Busung counties along the west coast of Silla, and he traveled to the Tang Dynasty several times as an envoy (Jang Il Gyu, 4). These examples of Choi Chi Won's contributions to China-Korea friendship should also be described in textbooks.

Dodang students in the late Silla period, such as Choi Chi won, traveled to the Tang Dynasty to learn about China's advanced culture. At one point, the number of dodang students was as high as 105 (Kang Bong-ryong, 2016, 184). Dodang students were such a prominent intellectual group in Silla society that the Silla royal family of King Gyeongmun sought to strengthen its power by recruiting them. Former Dodang Yudang students served as an important bridge for the Silla to interact with Tang Dynasty's magistrates and local government (Lee Jae-hyuk, 46). They were often appointed as local officials on the west coast, such as Choi Chi-won, and were responsible not only for receiving Tang emissaries but also for interacting with foreign local powers, merchants, stowaways, and drifters (Lee Jae-hyuk, 48). More examples of Dodang students' efforts at China-Korea friendship, including these, should be presented in textbooks. The significance of Dodang students, including Choi Chi-won, as symbols of the political, academic, and cultural friendship between Tang and Silla, and their activities in terms of China-Korea friendship should be specifically introduced in textbooks.

2.2 Jang Bogo

In most Korean history textbooks, Jang Bogo is described as a man who led a failed rebellion based out of a military camp called Cheonghaejin in Wando. Of course, textbooks also mention that Jang Bogo connected Silla, Tang, and Japan through Cheonghaejin. However, the textbooks focus on Jang Bogo's rebellion against Silla society rather than his leadership in maritime trade.

The textbook mentioned that Jang Bogo had military experience in the Tang Dynasty, so that Korean students would know that he had learned about maritime trade and military activities from the Tang Dynasty. The jihaksa textbook included a map showing the extent of Jang Bogo's maritime trade activities. Notably, Jang Bogo's temple in China's Shandong Peninsula, Red Mountain Buddhist Temple, is not mentioned in all nine Korean history textbooks. In contrast, four East Asian history textbooks - Visang, Keumsung, and Cheonjae - mention the temple in their textbooks.

Currently, the East Asian history textbook Visang, Keumsung, and Cheonjae only describes the temple as a place where the Japanese monk Ennin stayed. This overlooks the fact that the temple was founded by Jang Bogo in the Shandong Peninsula of China, but it is a symbol of Chinese-Korean exchanges and was created by the Korean population in China. It was a place where "gonghweom," or certificates for trade activities, were issued and was frequently visited by Koreans, Chinese, and Japanese for trade activities (Jung Soon-mo, 204). In 839, the envoy to celebrate the enthronement of Silla's King Shinmu, the Cheongju magistrate Cho Jajin, visited Beophwawon with 30 officials before departing for Silla (Jung, Soon-mo, 205). Beophwawon was a place for Tang people to communicate with Silla people, so the fact that Beophwawon was built by Jang Bogo and served as a window to Silla for the Tang should also be mentioned in the textbook.

Jang Bogo's knowledge of the military and trade in Cheonghaejin was developed when he served in the Tang army as a young man. He developed his military skills in the battle-hardened Western Zhou army, where he participated in the suppression of the Leesado Rebellion (819), rising to the rank of major general. The Leesado Rebellion was the biggest obstacle to the reforms that had been taking place in the Tang Dynasty. As a result, textbooks should reflect the case of how Jang Bogo as a young man contributed to the reforms of the Tang Heonzong, who carried out the suppression of the Bunjin against the backdrop of the strengthening of the Geumgun (Jung Byung-jun, 99). In addition, during the Isado Rebellion, King Heondeok of Silla dispatched 30,000 Silla troops to help Tang Heonjong in response to Tang Heonjong's edict, so that Korean students can clearly understand the military friendship between Silla and Tang.

2.3 Ssanggi

In Korean history textbooks, Ssanggi is mentioned as a Chinese Huizhou man who suggested the examination system to king Gwangjong. In the textbooks, the examination system was implemented at the suggestion of Ssanggi, but it was described as a system that was implemented by King Gwangjong to strengthen his kingship and to appoint a new generation of Confucianists.

Currently, only the Korean history textbook Dong-A and Cheonjae textbooks on Ssanggi mention that Ssanggi was from Huzhou, China. As a result, students in schools using other textbooks are likely to be unaware of the fact that he was Chinese. Therefore, it is also necessary for the textbooks to mention in detail that Ssanggi was a Huzhou person and what caused King Gwangjong to accept the examination system. In the 950s, exchanges between Goryeo and Huzhou through envoys became active and took place 13 times in nine years (Rahel Plassen, 15). King Gwangjong sought to keep the Khitan in check by interacting with Huzhou, and Huzhou also received military supplies from Goryeo. Therefore, it is important to recognize that Gwangjong was the one who led the exchange between Goryeo and Huzhou, and the diplomatic relations between Goryeo and Huzhou should be described in the textbooks.

In current Korean history textbooks, Gwangjong's decision to implement the examination system was largely influenced by Ssanggi's proposal for the examination system and Gwangjong's desire to strengthen his kingship. However, the subjects of the examination system were organized in a similar way to the examination system held in the early Tang Dynasty. Of the nine current textbooks, only the Cimas textbook mentions the fact that the examination system was a talent selection system practiced by Tang Dynasty. In the future, it should be emphasized that Gwangjong embraced the examination system, which was a successful bureaucratic training system during the Sui and Tang dynasties.

Korean history textbooks explain the purpose of the examination system only as a policy to strengthen Gwangjong's royal authority. However, Gwangjong's successful candidates for the exam, such as Seo-hee, were tasked with diplomatic duties for the popular state. The writing section of the examination, which was administered under the responsibility of the twins, assessed the ability to write Saryukbyeolche, a style of writing used in domestic and diplomatic documents (Rahel Plassen, 42). In this case, it is clear that Gwangjong's intention was to train its officials to write diplomatic documents. therefore, it should be emphasized that Gwangjong's use of the examination system, along with the fact that it was a talent selection system accepted by China, was also aimed at strengthening diplomatic relations with China.

2.4 Seo Geng

The Song Dynasty envoy Seo Geng saw many aspects of Goryeo society and wrote about them from a Chinese perspective "Goryeodokyung." Seo Geng is mentioned in the Liber, Visang, Jihaksa, Cheonjae, and Hakpyeong textbooks. Seo Geng is not mentioned in the rest of the Cimas, Dong-a, Miraeen, and Haenaem textbooks.

In the textbooks that mention Seo Geng, the "Goryeodokyung" is not mentioned in the text but is mainly

presented as a reference. Students can learn about the clothing of Goryeo merchants, how Goryeo people farmed in the mountains, witnessed the mansions of the nobles, and met Lee Ja-gyeom and Kim Bu-sik through “Goryeodokyung.” However, these narratives only allow students to remember Seo Geng as someone who observed Goryeo society, meticulously recorded it, and wrote the book “Goryeodokyung.” This makes it difficult for students to realize that Seo Geng was a friendly figure of China and Korea. Oddly enough, the Visang textbooks provide “Goryeodokyung” evidence that two masters sent by Song Huizong were influential in the establishment of the Dokwan by Yejong of Goryeo. Seo Geng’s “Goryeodokyung” is a good example of the reciprocity between the two cultures.

The excellent culture of Goryeo was presented in Seo Geng’s “Goryeodokyung.” The Cheonjae textbook emphasizes that the “Goryeodokyung” introduces the excellence of the Goryeo cheongja. From this description, students can understand that Seo Geng played a role in introducing Goryeo culture to China. Seo Geng also introduced the beauty of Goryeo’s najeonchilki in the “Goryeodokyung.” In “Goryeodokyung” He used the word “semilkakwi” to describe Goryeo najeonchilki as fine-grained and elaborate, more beautiful than the that used in Song (Choi Eung-chun, 143). Seo Geng also recorded that the Goryeo people used najeon on the saddles of their cavalry horses. Upon his return to Song in 1124, Seo Geng gave the “Goryeodokyung” to Huizong. This made it widely known to the imperial family of the Song Dynasty, the courtiers of the court, and the intellectuals of the time. Therefore, Seo Geng’s the book of Goryeo is an important book for Chinese people to understand the state of Goryeo society at that time.

“Goryeodokyung” served as a “textbook” for Chinese people to understand Korea at the time. Seo Geng’s “Goryeodokyung” has long been used as a reference for Korea in Chinese literature. In China, “Goryeodokyung” was referenced in history books such as “Songsa goryeojen,” “SokZizhi tongjian gangmujangpyun,” in local journals such as “Hamsun Imanji,” and in encyclopedias such as “Gujintushu jicheng”(Kim Nan-ok, 175). As such, Seo Geng’s “Goryeodokyung” was a resource and travelogue for studying Korean history and culture in China regardless of the era. The fact that Chinese people relied heavily on “Goryeodokyung” to understand Korea should also be included in history textbook narratives.

The significance of the envoys, including Seo Geng, sent by Song to Goryeo in 1123, should also be updated in textbooks. In 1123, Seo Geng was part of a large group of envoys, consisting of two state ships and six civilian merchant vessels, which was a massive undertaking under the direction of the Song Emperor Huizong (Kang Bong-ryong, 2024, 9). The Song dynasty meticulously prepared the envoys for the year-long mission to Goryeo from March 1122 to March 1123 (Kang Bong-ryong, 2024, 28). The size of the Song Dynasty’s 1123 envoys was very unusual at the time, with 158 official envoys and 720 sailors, totaling 878 people. This large-scale envoy was sent to Goryeo before the fall of the Song at the hands of the Zhenggang Event (1126-1127), so it would be good to include the connection between Seo Geng and the envoys he was part of in the textbook as an example of the Song’s friendship with Goryeo.

2.5 Ahn Jung-geun

In Korean history textbooks, Ahn Jung-geun is described as the man who shot Hirobumi Ito in Harbin and authored “Oriental Peace Theory.” Korean history textbooks first state that Ahn Jung-geun shot Hirobumi Ito and was martyred in Harbin and Lushun, both in China. Liber, Visang, Jihaksa, Dong-a, and Cheonjae textbooks on Ahn Jung-geun have separate chapters on Ahn Jung-geun’s trial process, the characteristics of Ahn Jung-geun’s “Oriental Peace Theory” and Ahn Jung-geun’s shooting of Ito Hirobumi in relation to the “Oriental Peace Theory.”

In East Asia history textbooks, Visang, and Jihaksa textbooks, where some of Ahn Jung-geun’s sources are presented, the fact that both Chinese and Koreans were victims of Japan is emphasized. However, most of the material is not presented in the text, but only in learning activities, which fails to fully demonstrate

the significance of “Oriental Peace Theory” in East Asia history.

Current Korean history textbooks do not describe the impact of the uprising on Chinese society at the time. In the aftermath of the uprising, the revolutionaries touted it in the *Minwoo Ilbo* as a just cause for freedom, equality, and humanitarianism that would revive Korea (Son yeom-hong, 60). A short time later, revolutionary novelist Hwang Sejong wrote a current affairs novel “Korean Blood” about the uprising in Namwolbo to inspire patriotism among the Chinese people (Son yeom-hong, 70). Based on these examples, textbooks should also present the fact that the Ahn Jung-geun trial was an event that united Chinese revolutionaries and Korean patriots in the spirit of anti-Japanese solidarity.

Ahn Jung-geun emphasized the friendship between Korea and China many times in his “Oriental Peace Theory” in the East. However, textbooks lack this narrative. In *The Peace of the East*, he argued that if Japan continued to invade Korea and China, Korea and China should sign a pact with the West to confront Japanese imperialism. In the *Hearing Letter*, Ahn advocated that Japan should return Lushun to China and clearly pointed out that China was a victim of Japanese imperialism (Hyun Kwang-ho, 388). In the future, textbooks should reflect Ahn’s advocacy for China-Korea friendship in the “Oriental Peace Theory” and the *Hearing Letter*.

The fact that South Korea and China have made several attempts to locate Ahn’s remains is also not mentioned in Korean history textbooks, and this needs to change. In 2008, the Ministry of National Veterans Affairs, with the cooperation of the Chinese government, exhumed the remains of Ahn Jung-geun at Wonbosan, behind Lushun Prison, but the search was unsuccessful. In November 2024, South Korea’s Ministry of National Veterans Affairs and China’s Ministry of Veterans Affairs again discussed cooperation on exhuming Ahn’s remains in 2025, the 80th anniversary of the country’s liberation. The exhumation of Ahn’s remains is still an example of South Korea and China’s joint response to historical issues and should be mentioned in textbooks as an example of China-South Korea friendship in the field of history.

3. Alternatives To Textbook Narratives About China-Korea Friendly Figures

This study analyzed the narratives of China-Korea friendship figures in Korean history textbooks and found them to be lacking in many ways. In particular, the main limitation of the Korean history textbooks is that they are not based on the perspective of China-Korea friendship. Therefore, we propose the following five concrete alternatives to improve Korean history textbooks from the perspective of China-Korea friendship.

First, an analysis of Korean history textbook narratives about Choi Chi-won, Jang Bogo, Ssanggi, Seo Geng, and Ahn Jung-geun reveals that they are written from a Korean-centered perspective. In other words, while there are many narratives about these figures’ activities in Korea, there are few narratives about their activities in China. Examples include Choi Chi Won only stating that he tried to reform Silla’s internal affairs, Jang Bogo only mentioning that he was dissatisfied with Silla society and rebelled against it, Seo Geng only stating that he wrote the “*Goryeodokyung*,” and Ahn Jung-Geun only stating that he shot Ito Hirobumi for the sake of Korea. Therefore, the narrative of China-Korean friendship figures in history textbooks should be reoriented from a Korea-centered perspective to a China-Korea friendship perspective. If this is done, students will be able to read the textbook narratives and understand the history of Chinese Korean relations in the context of each person’s life.

Second, the textbook should provide a rich description of the activities in China of the China-Korea friendship figures. The textbooks only describe Choi chi won as an accomplished writer in the Tang Dynasty, but they do not provide details on what positions he held in China, who he interacted with, and how he lived in China. Only one textbook Hakpyeong that Jang Bogo spent his youth in the Tang Dynasty. The lives of

Ssanggi and Seo Geng in China are not mentioned at all, leading students to believe that they were Korean, not Chinese. However, Ahn Jung-geun was born and died in China, so his activities in China are naturally described in the textbooks. Therefore, it is necessary to enrich the textbook narrative by describing the activities of friendly figures in China.

Third, there should be an organic connection between the Chinese experience and the Korean experience of the friendship figures. Choi Chi-won, Jang Bogo, and Ssanggi drew on their academic, military, and practical experience in China to serve in Korea. If they hadn't had that experience in China, they wouldn't have been able to do what they did in Korea. Unfortunately, Korean history textbooks separate the Chinese experiences of these friendly figures from their Korean activities, and their Chinese experiences are often omitted or downplayed in the textbooks. This needs to be changed so that students can understand each person's actions in relation to each other rather than separately as "Chinese" and "Korean."

Fourth, the impact of the actions of friendly figures on Chinese society should be fully described in textbooks. Currently, history textbooks only briefly mention historical facts about these figures. "Choi Qiwen passed the Tang's Bingong-gwa," "Cheonghaejin, established by Jang Bogo, connected Tang, Silla, and Japan's trade," "Ssanggi suggested Gwangjong to implement the examination system," or "Ahn jung-geun shot Hirobumi Ito in Harbin in 1909." These are short descriptions. Furthermore, they are presented as references rather than in the textbook text, which limits the overall understanding of China-Korea friendship figures. It is difficult for students to gain a broader understanding of the impact of China-Korea friendship figures on Korea and China with such short descriptions. Therefore, textbooks should fully describe the impact of these figures in China, such as Choi Chi Won's involvement in the Goryeo's government, the historical significance of Jang Bogo's Beophwawon, the Chinese repercussions of Seo Geng's The "Goryeodokyeong," and Ahn Jung-geun's role in inspiring anti-Qing consciousness among the revolutionaries.

Fifth, textbooks should include a variety of new sources describing friendly figures from China and Korea. For example, the narrative of Choi Chi Won should be enriched with references to the Hapcheon Haeinsa Gilsangtap Pagoda and other Chinese sources that mention Choi Chi Won. It would also be good to include anecdotes about the natural monument Hamyang Sangrim, a huge forest that Choi Chi Won created to prevent flooding. History textbooks should also actively promote Jang Bogo's crusade against pirates in China and Korea, which revitalized the East Asian trade routes between Korea, China, and Japan. Enriching textbooks with both Korean and Chinese sources on these friendly figures will allow students to develop a multilayered and multi-layered approach and understanding of these figures.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we analyzed the narratives of friendly figures in Korean history textbooks and discussed the problems and ways to improve them. While it is understandable that Korean-centered narratives are written in Korean history textbooks, considering the impact of narratives in history textbooks on relations between countries, history textbooks should be written from the perspective of friendship rather than conflict. In this regard, South Korean history textbooks have been found to lack a pro-China narrative. In the future, Korean history textbooks need to actively and positively address not only the relationship with China, but also Korea's relationship with other countries.

In addition to the five people mentioned in this article, there are countless other friendly figures between China and Korea. Deng Xiaolong, Jin Lin, and Jung Yul-sung, who were mentioned by President Xi Jinping during his visit to Korea in 2014, are not even mentioned in Korean history textbooks. Therefore, Korean and Chinese historians should conduct research to discover new China-Korea friendship figures from

historical sources. It is expected that the inclusion of various sources on China-Korea friendship figures and new China-Korea friendship figures in textbooks will help strengthen China-Korea friendship.

To summarize, this article suggests that Korean history textbooks should focus on China-Korea friendship figures from the perspective of China-Korea friendship, emphasize their activities in China, connect their activities in China and Korea, show their impact on Chinese society, and provide a variety of sources about them. Based on these, the textbooks should not only include China-Korea friendship figures but also places and events. Furthermore, by shedding new light on unexplored China-Korea friendship figures, we should not only promote friendship and exchange between China and Korea but also contribute to peace in East Asia.

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