

Public Attitudes and International Relations Analysis of China-ROK Relations under the Model of Public Diplomacy

Zihan Wang

Abstract As one of the important bilateral relationships in East Asia, a positive and stable China-ROK relationship is of great importance for safeguarding peace and stability in East Asia, and Northeast Asia in particular. In the past 20 years, China and the ROK have ended their confrontational relations formed during the cold war and moved their relations to a “fast track of development”. In particular, with the establishment of a “strategic and cooperative partnership” between the two countries in 2008, exchanges between the two countries have further deepened in economic, scientific, cultural and other fields. However, the impression of the two peoples of each other has not improved in line with the development of bilateral relations. The negative impression of each other has become a negative factor for the further development of bilateral relations. Given this, the paper aims to look back at the evolution of bilateral relations, trace the negative factors that affect the perception of each other, and improve the channels causing the negative attitude of the people through public diplomacy and promote the further development of bilateral relations between China and the ROK.

Keywords China-ROK Relations - Public Diplomacy - Public Attitudes - Nationalism

As countries in Northeast Asia, China and the ROK have exchanges dating back to ancient times and similar history and culture. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, the relations between China and the ROK have developed greatly on the basis of friendly cooperation, with growing cooperation in economic, political, military, scientific, cultural and various other areas. In the political and economic pattern in Northeast Asia, the two countries have played a crucial role in safeguarding peace and stability and in enhancing economic cooperation and trade. However, differences in historical attitudes of the people have affected bilateral relations and hurt the feelings of the people. With friendly relations between the two governments as the backdrop, the paper aims to discuss the reluctance of public opinion to interpret the issues of history, to analyze how to defuse conflicts of public opinion through the model of public diplomacy and to come up with proposals and measures.

Zihan Wang (✉)

School of International Relations, University of International Business and Economics,
Beijing, China
e-mail: adamwang24@foxmail.com

I. Friendly relations between China and the ROK in the past 20 years

1.1 Political communication to safeguard peace and stability in Northeast Asia

The nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula, undoubtedly, is the most important problem that China and the ROK have to face in political relations. The nuclear issue and the issue of reunification of the Korean peninsula are both legacies of the Cold War. The persistent development of nuclear weapons by the DPRK is a serious threat for peace and stability in China and the ROK. China and the ROK have conducted in-depth cooperation and made great efforts in solving the nuclear issue peacefully and in formulating policies on the DPRK. The two countries have maintained cooperation under the framework of the Six-Party Talks to try to revive the talks and solve the nuclear issue. Since the second nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula in 2002, the Chinese government has actively carried out a “shuttle diplomacy” and brought about the first Six-Party Talks in Beijing in August 2003.¹ The ROK has always been an active participant of the talks ever since. By the announcement of the DPRK to walk out of the talks in 2009, China, as a third party, has played lots of mediation. On October 28th, Hwang Joon-kook, head of the ROK delegation to the Six-Party Talks, visited China, the second visit in four months, to discuss the revival of the talks and the nuclear issue.² China has maintained communication and contact with the ROK and has played a crucial role in solving the nuclear crisis and easing the tensions in the peninsula.

Secondly, the identical position toward Japan has also deepened friendly relations between the two governments. Both China and the ROK suffered from Japanese aggression during the Second World War. Both have territorial disputes with Japan. Besides, Shinzo Abe, during his second term in office, has stuck to a rightwing route, denied crimes committed by Japan in World War II, amended the “Peace Constitution”, visited the Yasukuni Shrine, and adopted tough diplomatic policies towards China and the ROK, which further undermined its relations with its neighbors in Northeast Asia and affected peace and stability in the region. There is wide basis and necessity for China and the ROK to cooperate when it comes to relations with Japan. During the Chinese President’s visit to the ROK in July 2014, the two heads of state released a joint statement. It was said in the appendix of the statement that relevant agencies of the two countries would conduct cooperation on the issue of comfort women including joint research, copy and donation of evidence, etc.³ The Chinese side also proposed during the meetings that the two countries jointly celebrate the 70th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People’s War against the Japanese aggression and the end of Japanese colonial rule on the Korean Peninsula in the year 2015. Although it was opposed by the Japanese foreign secretary Fumio Kishida⁴, it was obvious that a similar position and cooperation between China and the ROK has made Japan nervous and brought bilateral relations between China and the ROK even closer.

Finally, the “trust diplomacy”⁵ by President Park Geun-hye has uplifted China-ROK relations to a new level. In June 2013 President Park Geun-hye led the “largest trade delegation” to China on what she called “a trip of confidence”. Through the trip, with increased mutual understanding, the two countries planned to conduct cooperation in the political and security arena, which marked the change from “hot economic relations but cold political relations” to “hot economic

¹ Yuanhua, Shi 2005 “The Mechanism of the Six-Party Talk”, International Review. D81(A)

² <http://news.163.com/14/1028/10/A9KV0HG300014JB6.html>

³ Xinhuanet News, 2007, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-07/03/c_1111449615.ht

⁴ People.cn 2014, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2014/0904/c1002-25603904.html>

⁵ Luhui, Yang 2014, “The new partnership between China and Korea and the trust diplomacy by Park”, Theoretical Horizon, D8223.3(A)

as well as political relations”. In May 2014 Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi visited the ROK and stated the bilateral relations had never been better. ⁶In July 2014, President Xi Jinping returned the visit to the ROK with his wife. The two heads of state released a “Joint Statement” and reached important consensus. It can be expected that relations between China and the ROK will be closer with more contribution to peace and stability in Northeast Asia.

1.2 Economic Reciprocity and Win-win Cooperation

First of all, China and the ROK have close trade ties with a huge scale and rapid growth. Economic cooperation between the two countries has developed very fast with rapidly increasing the bilateral trade volume. China has become the largest trading partner for the ROK. The ROK is the third largest trading partner, third largest export market and second largest source of import. The two countries enjoy close and booming trade relations.

Balance Payment for Year

(Unit : USD 1000)

YEAR	EXPORT	IMPORT	BAL_PAY
1992	2,654,166	3,724,941	-1,070,774
1993	5,152,143	3,928,740	1,223,403
1994	6,211,655	5,462,849	748,806
1995	9,160,865	7,401,196	1,759,668
1996	11,394,118	8,538,568	2,855,550
1997	13,572,463	10,116,860	3,455,602
1998	11,943,990	6,483,957	5,460,032
1999	13,684,599	8,866,666	4,817,932
2000	18,454,539	12,798,727	5,655,812
2001	18,190,189	13,302,675	4,887,514
2002	23,753,585	17,399,778	6,353,806
2003	35,109,715	21,909,126	13,200,588
2004	49,763,175	29,584,874	20,178,301
2005	61,914,983	38,648,188	23,266,794
2006	69,459,178	48,556,674	20,902,503
2007	81,985,182	63,027,801	18,957,380
2008	91,388,900	76,930,271	14,458,628
2009	86,703,245	54,246,055	32,457,189
2010	116,837,833	71,573,602	45,264,230
2011	134,185,008	86,432,237	47,752,771
2012	134,322,564	80,784,595	53,537,968
2013	145,869,498	83,052,876	62,816,621
2014	106,084,625	65,653,323	40,431,302

Unit

China-ROK Trade Volume⁷

⁶ <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2014/05-27/6218508.shtml>

⁷ The statistics are from Korea Customs Service, <http://www.customs.go.kr/kcshome/trade/TradeCountryView.do?laoutMenuNo=21031&year=2014&nation=China&nationCd=CN>

Secondly, the development of the China-ROK FTA is another important step in the further development of trade relations between the two countries. It was planned long ago. In 2005, when Premier Wen Jiabao met with then Prime Minister of the ROK, he proposed to launch negotiations on the FTA between the two countries as soon as possible. At the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries in May 2012, China and the ROK formally launched negotiations on the FTA. “Joint Statement” of the two countries in 2014 stated that the FTA Agreement could be expected to be reached by the end of 2014.⁸ It will further improve economic and trade relations between the two countries. At the same time, the two countries also have close cooperation under the “10+3” framework of ASEAN, making important contribution to the East Asian economy.

1.3 Close cultural exchanges with popular “Korean Wave” and “Han Wind”

Good relations between China and the ROK cannot be separated from ever deepening cultural exchanges and cooperation. Cultural exchanges and cooperation between the two countries have developed by leaps and bounds, constituting an important area and social foundation for expanding mutually beneficial and win-win cooperation and deepening the strategic partnership. The “Korean wave” in the form of Korean TV series, films, K-POP, video games and dresses has spread widely in China with great popularity. At the same time, the Chinese culture also has wide and far-reaching impact in South Korea.⁹ “Chinese language fever” and “Chinese culture fever” have come quietly in fashion. Currently, over 300,000 Koreans are learning Chinese. 131 institutions of higher learning in South Korea have set up department of Chinese language. Close cultural ties have made contribution to friendly relations between the two countries.

II. Negative factors affecting image construction of the two peoples

2.1 Controversy on the relationship between Goguryeo and Goryeo

There is huge gap in the understanding of the two peoples concerning the historical origin of the ROK. The ROK and China are closely linked geographically and historically. The author does not want to dwell on the historical origin of the ROK, instead, comparison will be made between different public attitudes of the two peoples on the relationship between Goguryeo and Goryeo. Goguryeo originated from 37 AD and was overthrown by the Tang Dynasty in 668. The Kingdom of Goryeo was established in 918, and was brought down by the North Korean ruler of Lee in 1392.

The Chinese public attitude and academic view is that Goguryeo and Goryeo are two unrelated dynasties. The general view is that Goguryeo was a political entity in the border area established by ethnic minorities in China and was unified by the Tang Dynasty, while Goryeo was a state established by ethnic groups of North Korea. For the purpose of research, the academic community of China started a project on the history and status quo of China’s North-

⁸ http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2013-06/27/c_116319763.htm

⁹ Sheng, Wang 2007, “15 Years Diplomatic Ties China and ROK: Miracle in The Diplomacy History, Example of Peaceful Coexistence”, *Northeast Asia Forum*, D829.312.6(A)

eastern frontier in 2002, with the short name of Northeast Project¹⁰, which was a large-scale academic project by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and relevant academic institutions and universities in the three Northeastern provinces of China. The aim was to conduct in-depth research into the history of China's Northeast and prove Goguryeo and Goryeo were not related.

On the contrary, the public attitude and academic view of the ROK is that Goryeo succeeded Goguryeo, so Goguryeo is consistent with today's Korea. On December 9th 2003, 17 Korean academic associations including the Korean Association of Ancient History, the Korean Archaeological Association and the Korean Association of Modern History issued a joint statement in the Museum of History in Seoul to demand China to stop including the history of Goguryeo in its history books. Section 18 of New York Times on February 11 2008 ran an advertisement by Yonhap New Agency with the title "Goguryeo", attached to which was a map of the Korean Peninsula when Goguryeo occupied Manchuria in 412, with the words "undoubtedly Goguryeo was part of the Korean history."¹¹ The Chinese government must recognize the fact."

2.2 "Historical sentimentalism" and "China threat theory"

The negative perception of each other also comes from long-existing "historical sentimentalism" and the "China threat theory" played up by the Korean media. Historical sentimentalism is irrational collective memory about the tragic events and insults happening to a nation in history. ROK has always been a small country in terms of size, hence the deep impact on it of big powers. Historical sentimentalism of Korea derives from its special historical relations with China and its colonization by Japan in modern times. In a modern period of transformation, historical sentimentalism tends to demonstrate its power with an irrational face, in particular, irrational features in terms of identity and the most intense nationalism in political arena. At the same time, with China's rising political and economic power, the "China threat theory" has gained currency among many Korean people. All these factors increase mistrust among the people and undermines the construction of positive image between the two countries.

2.3 Contention over cultural heritage and public opinion

ROK attaches great attention to the protection and publicity of culture. It has a ministry of culture, sports and sight-seeing, which is responsible for the cultural strategy of the country. With the goal of "building culturally rich lives and a happy Korea", the ministry is carrying out the strategy of "promoting cultural prosperity on four fronts". ROK pays equal attention to the protection of "intangible cultural heritage". By 2013, it has successfully applied for 16 "intangible cultural heritages".¹² However, among the heritages, "kimchi" and "Jiangling Duanwu Festival" have caused opposition by the Chinese people. Kimchi is common in the daily diet of the Chinese people and originates from China, hence the opposition. Similarly, "Jiangling Duanwu Festival" also originates from "Duanwu Festival" in China, which is also called

¹⁰ Huizhi, Zhang 2013, "China-rok relations 20 years: achievements and problems", Contemporary International Relations

¹¹ YONHAP NEWS AGENCY 2008 http://chinese.yonhapnews.co.kr/n_society/2008/02/12/8200000000ACK20080212001200881.HTML

¹² UNESCO <http://en.unesco.org>

“Dragon Boat Festival”. Although the “Jiangling Duanwu Festival” is different from the festival in China in some specific areas, it has its root in China. That’s why it has met with strong opposition even indignation from Chinese internet users. Several other issues followed, such as the issue of Goguryeo and Goryeo. Internet users of the two countries began to scold or even insult each other. China and the ROK have similar cultures, both being the representatives of oriental culture. With the rising power of the ROK, it has been trying to get rid of its cultural ties with China and the Chinese culture and create a Korean culture that totally belongs to itself. In the process it has caused great conflict of attitudes. The contention over intangible cultural heritage has seriously undermined the attitude and impression of the peoples of each other, constituting an important factor for the construction of negative images of each other¹³.

III. Let historical attitudes serve friendly relations between the two countries through public diplomacy.

1. Where the problems lie

The term “public diplomacy” was coined by Edmund Gullion of Tufts University in 1965.¹⁴ He defined the purpose of public diplomacy as “to deal with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy, including the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries, the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with those of another, and the contact between diplomats and foreign journalists, etc. Compared with traditional diplomacy between governments, public diplomacy is indirect, which, to a large degree, can change the political landscape of another country and the formulation of policies of that country favorable to oneself.

As a matter of fact, public diplomacy refers to the fact that the government, by its own efforts or through the mobilization of non-governmental forces, tries to communicate and exchange with the public of foreign countries to realize its foreign policy objectives and improve its national image. At the same time, public diplomacy, in essence, is public activities of two-way communication, equal exchanges and the seeking of consensus, which is also called people’s diplomacy. Although the relations at the state level are good between China and the ROK, there is much antagonism and aversion between the people. Given this, the Chinese government should adopt measures of public diplomacy to reduce estrangement between the people.

First of all, the model of public diplomacy should be used to analyze where the problems lie. Governmental relations between the two countries have never been better since the establishment of diplomatic relations 20 years ago. In contrast, public attitude of the people of each other has been quite negative. Therefore, the people-to-people relations need to be improved. At the same time, the negative impression of the Chinese people about the ROK could affect its foreign policy on the ROK, and vice versa. The relations at the governmental level and at the people-to-people level can be demonstrated in the chart. Green arrows indicate positive impact on bilateral relations, while the red arrows indicate negative impact.

¹³ Jie, Luo, 2009 “Do Chinese people and Korean people dislike each other?”, *World Affairs*

¹⁴ Fei, Gao 2005, “Public Diplomacy: Definition, Formative conditions and its Functions”, *Foreign Affairs Review*, D80(A)

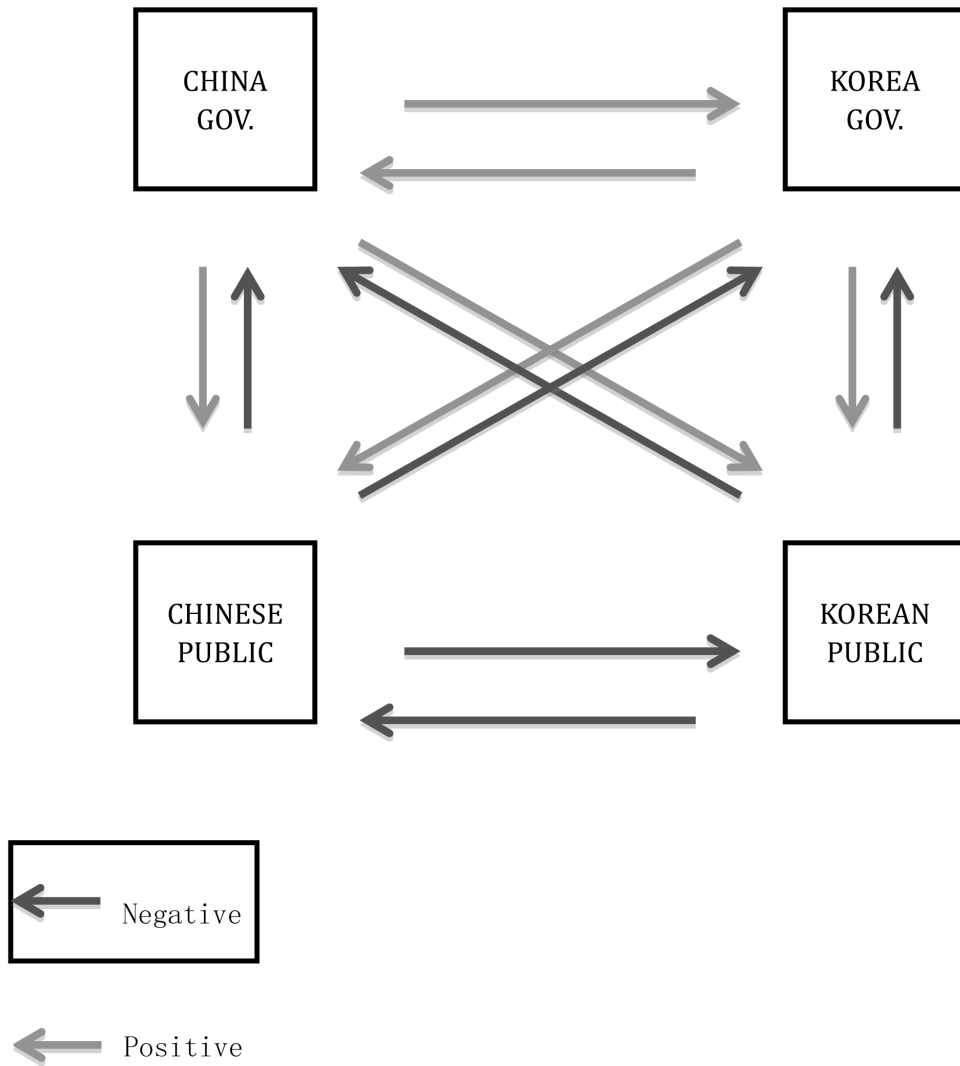


Chart on China-ROK Relations at the Governmental and People-to-People Level¹⁵

As shown in the chart, the red area indicates factors undermining bilateral relations, which cause aversion and antagonism against each other's country and government. The negative factors first affect relations between the people which may also upgrade into public opinion, and negative public opinion may force the government to take negative policies detrimental to bilateral relations. When contentions ran high concerning historical issues between the two countries in 2004, the two governments did not issue a timely statement. They were forced to adopt the line that "scholars should adhere to the principle of separating academic studies from politics, and reality from history so as to correctly understand and handle disputes to avoid

¹⁵ Author made.

hurting bilateral relations.” It is obvious that public opinion cannot be ignored in the handling of bilateral relations.

It is drawn from analysis that public attitude of the people is an important factor affecting bilateral relations. Given the antagonism and aversion existing between the people, it is highly significant to guide public attitude. Therefore, the Chinese government should adopt public diplomacy measures to guide and rely on non-governmental forces to improve public attitude of the ROK on the image of China, and to reduce factors of disharmony so that relations between the two countries would be “at the best level” at both the governmental and people-to-people dimensions.

2 Route to solve the problem

First, mutual trust and understanding between the two peoples should be enhanced. The “trust diplomacy” of the two heads of state in 2014 shows that it is understood at the governmental level that mutual understanding and trust is highly important and that earnest efforts should be made to understand each other and to reach the best results. Therefore, from the perspective of public diplomacy, the government should guide the people in learning about, understanding, and trusting each other. 1) Cultural exchanges between the two countries should be expanded with emphasis on the quality of exchanges. Both countries attach great importance to cultural exchanges and have stressed on cultural exchanges on many occasions in the joint statements and communiqués and during summits of the leaders. Positive results have been produced in such activities as “China-ROK Exchange Year”, “Visit China Year”, “Visit Korea Year”, etc. The public nature of cultural exchanges has been improved. 2) Authentic and objective nature of information must be ensured and supervision on the media enhanced. In order to grab attention, some media of the two countries have engaged in false reporting and the exaggeration of facts by tarnishing each other’s country and people and instigating national sentiments, which is detrimental to bilateral relations.¹⁶ Therefore, the government should call upon the media to adhere to their professional ethics, conduct fact-based reporting, advocate the friendly feelings and in-depth exchanges between the people and create a foundation for the two peoples to change impression of each other from the perspective of the media.

Secondly, non-governmental cooperation should be strengthened with government support. To change negative impression of each other and uplift bilateral relations is for the benefit of both countries. Therefore, the two sides should jointly take public diplomacy measures to improve public attitude of each other. With the support of the two governments, there have been many academic forums and seminars, providing a platform of exchanges for scholars of the two countries in various fields. It is also helpful for historians to discuss differences on historical issues and to find mutually acceptable solutions.¹⁷ Scholars of the two sides have also had a lot of cooperation on Japan’s misrepresentation of history. The two countries can also cooperate in the cultural industry, such as TV series, films and TV programmes. For example, the two countries cooperated in the shooting of “The War Fire”, a TV series about anti-Japanese aggression. The cooperation greatly boosted bonds of the two peoples.¹⁸

Thirdly, a good image about the country and people should be established. Public diplomacy should start from the change of one’s own image. To strengthen the image of China and the

¹⁶ Zhongjin Piao 2012 “South Korean’s Negative Opinions about the Image of China and Public Diplomacy Channels of China toward South Korea”, *Contemporary Korea*

¹⁷ Zhongjin Piao 2012 “South Korean’s Negative Opinions about the Image of China and Public Diplomacy Channels of China toward South Korea”, *Contemporary Korea*

¹⁸ <http://ent.sina.com.cn/x/2006-05-25/11431096519.html>

Chinese people will go a long way to improve other people's attitude of China. To safeguard national image and the image of the people is an organic and systematic project. It calls for the fundamental improvement of the quality of the people and cultivation and education of the people by the government. It is a general consensus both home and abroad that the quality of the Chinese people needs improving. It cannot be changed overnight. Therefore, efforts should be started from national education to realize the goal step by step. At the same time, to establish a good image requires China to establish a system of discourse,¹⁹ to let people of the other country to know about the politics, economy and society of China, and to let it be understood that they can benefit from China's peaceful rise and development. China should also shoulder more international responsibilities and act as a responsible power.

IV. Conclusion

The relationship between China and the ROK has played a more and more important role in the pattern of international relations in Northeast Asia. Sound relationship between the two countries is crucial for solving the nuclear issue and safeguarding peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. The two countries also make tremendous contribution to economic development and prosperity in East Asia. In response to the problem of antagonism between the two peoples, the Chinese government should carry out in-depth public diplomacy, improve mutual attitudes, increase understanding and trust, improve the quality of its people, set up a sound national image, and let public attitude serve diplomacy to fundamentally bring the two countries closer.

References

- Shi Y (2005) The Mechanism of the Six-Party Talk. *International Review*. D81(A)
<http://news.163.com/14/1028/10/A9KV0HG300014JB6.html>
 Xinhuanet News (2007) http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-07/03/c_1111449615.htm
 People.cn 2014, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2014/0904/c1002-25603904.html>
 Yang L (2014) The new partnership between China and Korea and the trust diplomacy by Park, *Theoretical Horizon*, D8223.3(A)
<http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2014/05-27/6218508.shtml>
 The statistics are from Korea Customs Service, <http://www.customs.go.kr/kcshome/trade/TradeCountryView.do?layoMenuNo=21031&year=2014&nation=China&nationCd=CN>
http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2013-06/27/c_116319763.htm
 Wang S (2007) 15 Years Diplomatic Ties China and ROK: Miracle in The Diplomacy History, Example of Peaceful Coexistence, *Northeast Asia Forum*, D829.312.6(A)
 Zhang H (2013), China-ROK relations 20 years: achievements and problems, *Contemporary International Relations*
 YONHAP NEWS AGENCY 2008 http://chinese.yonhapnews.co.kr/n_society/2008/02/12/8200000000ACK20080212001200881.HTML
 UNESCO <http://en.unesco.org>
 Luo J (2009) Chinese people and Korean people dislike each other? *World Affairs*
 Gao F (2005) Public Diplomacy: Definition, Formative conditions and its Functions, *Foreign Affairs Review*, D80(A) Author made.
 Piao Z (2012) South Korean's Negative Opinions about the Image of China and Public Diplomacy Channels of China toward South Korea, *Contemporary Korea*
 Piao Z (2012) South Korean's Negative Opinions about the Image of China and Public Diplomacy Channels of China toward South Korea, *Contemporary Korea*
<http://ent.sina.com.cn/x/2006-05-25/11431096519.html>
 Qiu Y (2010) Peaceful development and public diplomacy of China, *International Studies* D820 A
<http://ent.sina.com.cn/x/2006-05-25/11431096519.htm>

¹⁹ Yuanping, Qiu 2010, "Peaceful development and public diplomacy of China", *International Studies* D820 A