I was first inspired to research China’s historical and modern relationship with Korea in Professor Leah Zuo’s History of China I class. I was drawn to the Chinese perception of ethnic minority groups and neighboring states. Korea, specifically North Korea was intriguing because unlike many former kingdoms and peoples, it had never simply been incorporated into the Chinese Empire. However, within the modern Chinese territory in its Northeastern borderland there is a decidedly Korean flavor and a large community of Chinese-Koreans.

The Sino-Korean relationship has traversed a long history, but my current project begins during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), when the Korean Peninsula was under the rule of the Joseon Kingdom (1392-1897). During the Ming, Joseon became a tributary state and benefitted from a close relationship with China. Having accepted tributary status, Joseon had to acknowledge the Mandate of Heaven, the central political philosophy in the Chinese tradition and pay an annual tribute. However, Joseon officials did not simply bring gifts, worship the emperor as divine, and leave. The Chinese rewarded outsiders not based on physical resemblance but on cultural merit or how well they fit imitated or adopted Chinese culture. Joseon officials effectively emulated Chinese culture, but also actively interacted with Ming literati. And it was not too difficult for the Koreans as their own culture, like many other East Asian countries’, had been profoundly shaped by the Chinese such that Chinese influences had blended with Korean tradition to form a unique Korean national identity early on. However, Joseon was treated and thought of as a “Little China.” From scholars to the general public, the Chinese often regarded Korea as an unimpressive imitation of China, a satellite revolving closely and (for the most part) dutifully around the central planet.

I have just completed my summer research trip in China, specifically, in Beijing, the capital city, and Dandong, a northeastern border town that’s central to China’s role in the Korean War and where many Chinese-Koreans reside. My research focuses on that older Chinese perception of Korea as a “Little China” and its relationship with the modern period through China’s interactions with North Korea. Specifically I am focusing on the Korean War period as the beginning of my quest into the modern era. Because a reasonable collection of official documents are available in the United States now, in China I focused on searching for documents that relate the general public’s perception. The sources I gathered in China center on visual materials primarily propaganda such as posters, operas, play scripts, music sheets, soldiers’ journals, textbooks, newspapers, and periodicals. Most of these sources were created during or immediately after the Korean War. I have been lucky to encounter documents of all aforementioned kinds in China and, in addition, some nice surprises. Some of those surprises have come in the forms of a chance encounter with the son of a Chinese, Korean War veteran and the Korean War museum in Dandong, devoted to illuminating the Chinese side of the story.

All in all though, the modern sources seem to show the overall perception of North Korea during the War as a “little brother”, a smaller copy, that cannot properly defend itself and is in need of guidance does not differ much from the Sinocentric viewpoint of Joseon as a good but weak replica during the Ming.

I hope to continue and expand my research through my time at Bowdoin and to conclude it at the end of my senior year. I plan to continue reading and annotating the sources I brought back from China and concentrate on improving my Chinese language skills. I hope that one day my research can contribute to a broader understanding of the Sino-Korean relationship, challenge the Sinocentric scholarship about ethnic minority groups in China, and help establish better relations, diplomacy, and more transparency between the United States, China, and the two Koreas.
Graphs/images/figures (if applicable)

Faculty Mentor: Insert professor’s name here in bold

Funded by the (insert fellowship name, e.g., Rusack Coastal Studies Fellowship, Kibbe Science Fellowship here in bold)

References (if applicable)