

# Interview with Professor Fei-Ling Wang, author of *The China Order: Centralia, World Empire, and the Nature of Chinese Power* (2017)

Georgia Institute of Technology

—  
By Jaewoo Choo  
Kyunghee University

## I. World Order and Global Trends

**Choo:** The “America First” and “Make America Great Again” movements may potentially challenge the global liberal and economic order. With such political rhetoric, the Trump Administration is attempting to amend regional trade practices, such as with regional FTAs, and will probably try to do the same with global institutions. Will such efforts put liberal institutions in danger? Won’t this have a profound effect on the current liberal world order? How far do you see Trump and his administration challenging the current liberal order?

**Wang:** These are great questions that I think are on the minds of many people. I think the answer, to a great extent, is yes; if Donald Trump really means what he has said then liberal international institutions might be in deep danger. But will Donald Trump be able to do what he has said? That’s another question. I don’t think he can do much. I think he can probably affect the liberal international order only at the margins. So I’m aware of the danger but I don’t think necessarily that Trump and his administration will

fundamentally change the current liberal world.

**Choo:** But will China see this as a window of opportunity to challenge the extant liberal order and institutions? Will China jump on the bandwagon or will it continue to embrace and accommodate the current order and institutions? Will it remain with the rest in resisting America's challenge and preserve the current order and institutions or become more aggressive and assertive with its own regionalization schemes such as with One Belt One Road and RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership)? In other words, will China enhance its regionalization efforts?

**Wang:** Yes, I think China has seen Trump's rhetoric as a window of opportunity to challenge the existing world order. Now, I'm not saying the *liberal* world order but the current world order. That's because China's interest is not necessarily how liberal or illiberal the world order is but who is calling the shots—who is the leader. As far as embracing and accommodating the current order and institutions, I think China will continue to do this selectively, as it has done for decades. I think the Chinese have done this very successfully, selectively embracing and accommodating the current world order and rejecting and fending off the parts it doesn't like. But beyond that, with schemes like One Belt, One Road or RCEP, I think China probably is going beyond just selective embracing; it is probably more interested in showing that it could reset some, if not all, the rules. One Belt One Road and RCEP and many other schemes Beijing has been investing heavily in are, in other words, actually representing China's effort to reshape or reset the rules to some extent. I'm not saying to dismantle them completely, but to change them in a piecemeal fashion, one by one. The regionalization effort China has shown much interest in is probably not opposing the kind of globalist stance Xi Jinping is demonstrating. In other words,

regionalization and globalization are merely two processes that China thinks could be of use to it. I'm not saying they're mutually exclusive; they concur. So I wouldn't say that the Chinese enhancement of the regionalization effort necessarily hampers its globalization effort. They're actually glued together.

**Choo:** Can I ask you to elaborate a little more on China being very selective with its engagement? What benefits has China really accrued from selective engagement?

**Wang:** China has gained a great deal. It has gained access to the world market, especially the very profitable market in the United States. The U.S. has constantly been a major source of Chinese trade surplus; in other words, the cash financing China's economy. China has also had access to the market in Japan, Korea, Europe, everywhere. And it has benefitted a great deal from international investment. "Selective" in the sense that China has protected its own domestic market quite well, especially where it doesn't have any competitive advantage or areas that are politically sensitive, like cyber communication, and especially the banking district. This is what we call "selective accommodation" instead of "complete embrace." Every country is trying to be selective, but the Chinese have been extremely successful because they have been consistent and forceful. The American or foreign effort trying to open the Chinese market in many areas has simply been unsuccessful, unlike Japan or Korea or Taiwan, where pressure really changed things. Chinese selective embracement has been very successful because it's been tough, strong, and consistent. The Koreans and Japanese fight for that, too. But they cannot do so much. And now Donald Trump is renegotiating the Korean-US FTA. By joining the WTO the Chinese have very successfully, if you will, outmaneuvered the United States. So that's exactly why the United States was

promoting the TPP.

**Choo:** With BREXIT and the seeming resentment rising in the aftermath in Britain these days, what might be the fate of the EU? Will Britain retreat from its decision? Might there be a domino effect materializing as speculated with regard to a potential exodus by Spain, Greece and the like?

**Wang:** I would say that my understanding about the future of the EU is actually pretty optimistic. I think the EU will get rid of the UK and, without the UK and Turkey, I think it has a future that's bright but leaner and smaller. I'm not worried about the EU collapsing, but I think they have to go through some painful adjustment. They have to sort out how to deal with Great Britain and the Eastern European countries, and eventually decide about not letting Turkey in. In that sense, maybe they also have the leverage to punish the PIGS—the Italians, the Portuguese, the Spanish, and especially the Greeks. So overall the EU might actually have a smaller but leaner and better, more cohesive future, as long as the French and Germans can work together. If they work together well then the future of the EU is actually pretty bright. I'm not that worried about a chain reaction.

**Choo:** What is Europe's take on China's One Belt One Road initiative? What role do you see for the EU? What benefits does that EU foresee in the initiative? What does China expect from the EU? What does China see as the potential role and contribution of the EU?

**Wang:** The Chinese have benefitted a great deal from trade and investment with the EU so I think their attitude towards the EU and BREXIT is kind of ambivalent. On the one hand, they don't necessarily like a stronger, more coherent EU. But on the other, a

divided Europe is not good for Chinese interests, in terms of trade and all that, either. They have deals with all these countries, not just one. I don't think they necessarily want a strong EU, especially one that is a friend of the United States. But they probably don't necessarily want the EU to be completely gone either.

**Choo:** It has become an axiom that China wants to build a regional order centered on itself for the foreseeable future. What will it take for China to realize this “dream” of restoring the old Sinocentric order along with its past glory and privileges? How will China attract or appeal to regional states towards this end? Is China equipped with so-called “values” that can appeal to the region?

Wang: Actually, my new book that came out this year addresses this idea of a “China dream” or China order. The book is called *The China Order: Centralia, World Empire, and the Nature of Chinese Power*. I think the “China dream” basically means the restoration of the past glory of the Chinese world order. Under the China order, other countries are allowed to exist autonomously but they have to be lesser in ranking, like a tributary or little brother. That's the essence of it. But whether the dream can be realized is a different question. But the effort to realize this dream, itself, could be consequential.

Now, is China equipped with so-called values that appeal to the region? You bet. For example, the China-order values appeal to many elites in China as well as, I would say, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and all these other places; because authoritarianism appeals to people. You know, we all like democracy and freedom, but deep down we don't mind authoritarianism if we are the ruler. Authoritarianism, world unification, becoming the great emperor—they're actually quite appealing to elites anywhere. Now to the public, who cares, right? But because of education and

indoctrination, even ordinary people in places like China have this worship of the emperor. In China, there has always been worship of the emperor. This goes for Japan and Korea, too: the royal family, the king, the palace, the imperial power. This shows that, deep down, we all have this, as the Chinese call it, “emperor envy,” or emperor worship. Contrary to many people’s point of view, I think the Chinese actually have some values that are quite appealing to the region. Then, of course, who are the people who will try to realize these values? Not everyone can be emperor. All in all, I think that most people will agree democracy is better because not everyone can be emperor. But there might be enough people who want to be emperor and try to be so. And the same goes for world unification. Well, many think a competitive, diverse world is better. But some of us are actually like: “Well, should we pursue world unification? The great harmony—it’ll be great! One single order for everything!” That’ll be the China order.

**Choo:** But isn’t that somewhat contrary to what successive Chinese leaderships have been emphasizing?

**Wang:** Very good! As I write in my book, actually, I think that from Sun Yat-sen onward, Chinese leaders all harbored this “China order” thing, only the idea was voiced in different terms. Sun Yat-sen’s famous saying that “the world is for all” (*tianxia wei gong yi*). Mao Zedong had a similar slogan. I mean, take Tiananmen Gate. There are two slogans. One says, “Long Live the PRC.” What’s the other? It’s “Long live the solidarity of the people of the world.” What does “the solidarity of the people of the world” mean? You never hear that at the White House. No, they say, “We’re for America first,” right? Take Korea, too. When was the last time a Korean president said, “We are struggling for the unification and solidarity of the people of the world”? You never hear that. Rather, it’s “the

unification of Korea” maybe, right? So that’s a clear illustration. Mao Zedong tried to carry out a world revolution, or world unification, and achieve great harmony. It’s the same thing. This is actually an old playbook. I mean, if we look at the Qin Dynasty that unified China 2,000 years ago, it’s exactly the same playbook; you talk about one thing, do the other. When they say, “We support national independence” or “decolonization,” those signal what? To liberate people, first. And then after liberation, what happens? Solidarity: “help *me*.” So here liberation is not like the Western understanding. For liberation, the first step is, freedom is out of your control. And then you help me; solidarity. So that’s the Chinese idea. Therefore, the Chinese leaders have acted very consistently. They always talk about it. And that’s in my book. So to say China has no cultural appeal or no appealing values is wrong. China always thinks about how to be appealing to many Americans. They love the idea. Well, who wouldn’t? I mean, we call it globalization. It’s that idea. If we push the idea one step further, that’s the China order.

The question is not whether we need or want globalization but what kind of globalization? You might get a lot of diversity, competition, autonomy and sovereignty, right? Without that, globalization is the same as the China order. So how do we ensure that? How do we make people independent, sovereign, competitive, yet share the same system? That’s really the dimension we’re facing right now.

**Choo:** So it’s like the Qin Empire trying to achieve unification?

**Wang:** Yes, because for the Qin Dynasty—Qin Shi Huangdi—he wanted war and he got it. And then for the following twenty-seven centuries, China or East Asia was basically united. And, of course, sometimes they see foreigners. But some are far away, and they don’t care. But foreigners nearby—the Koreans, the Vietnamese—are under their

umbrella; they more or less subscribe to this. Even the Koreans, too. For East Asians, the world was united for a long time, until the Europeans came in. But sometimes emperors might not realize there are other countries. Or they just choose to keep them away or ignore them—a deep political function; no foreigners are coming in. Korea, Japan, China, all at the international level, accept isolation policy, the main purpose of which was to keep foreigners out and prevent their own peoples from talking with foreigners. So for China, in the Tang Dynasty, arguably the most cosmopolitan, open dynasty, if a Chinese went abroad without permission, upon return one might be, at worst, beheaded. You had to get permission to go out. And usually it was one way. If a foreigner came to China, it was the same; no return, until Ming/Ching altered the case. The idea behind that is: “Ok, I know I can’t control the whole world, but I can control my world. To protect my people, the rest don’t exist. And they’re insignificant. They’re like barbarians.” Either way, you assume away the rest of the world. Until, of course, they really come in with force.

## II. North-East Asian Regional Affairs

**Choo:** China’s aspiration for maritime power status has been somewhat perceived as a major challenge to the current regional maritime order and in particular to general freedom of navigation. Will this aspiration devolve into a major source of conflict between not only China and other regional states but the US as well? Do you see the US doing its utmost to quell such a challenge, even resorting to military means?

**Wang:** I do think China is determined to change the maritime order in East Asia. Xi Jinping has said very clearly, “China will be a great maritime power.” China has constructed seven islands in the South

China Sea and made claims beyond the so-called first-island chain. And then you have Chinese submarines, ships, aircraft carriers, and so on. So I think China has invested very heavily in realizing what I call the “blue dream.” China is trying to achieve its blue dream by becoming a great maritime power.

**Choo:** According to a report, there was a difference of opinion between Obama and the Department of Defense regarding US China policy. It was speculated that the DoD wanted to advance an aggressive and hawkish stance, as opposed to Obama’s restraint. What is your take on this?

**Wang:** I think there’s always a difference of opinion between the president and one branch of government.. I don’t think the disagreement between the DoD (Department of Defense) and Obama was necessarily that big. Obama launched his pivot and the DoD fought the order. Even right now, people are also speculating that there’s a difference between Trump and the DoD. Because there should be a pay cut right now; you pay the commander or the general or the admiral. Also, it’s supposedly more hawkish than Trump. But what we know and what we see is only on the surface. The DoD has to follow presidential orders. But it can also affect the presidential mind. So, my take is, if there *are* differences, they’re probably just a matter of degree on how to implement policies. It’s a loop. The DoD can change the presidential view, as well. But eventually—ultimately—of course, the president makes the policy.

**Choo:** You say that China is determined to change the maritime order. In what direction do you see this leading?

**Wang:** That I don’t pretend to know. I can only speculate. I think that, first, China wants to break the first-island chain. That’s completely

standard; they say so. Second, they clearly want to control the South China Sea. To make it a “lake of China” or something. Third, they want to keep the U.S. as far away as possible, maybe to Guam or even beyond. And also they want to venture into the Indian Ocean to safeguard their shipping routes. Or avoid the Indian Ocean altogether to use the harbor in Pakistan—Gwadar. So they are literally trying to alter the maritime order in this region. The main purpose is to keep the U.S. out as far as possible and then become the dominant force in the region.

**Choo:** Maybe that’s where major conflict might appear in the future. It may come along especially with regard to South Korea.

**Wang:** But what I hear in many table-talk exercises—like war game exercises in the U.S.—is that the real war between the U.S. and China will likely start in the South China Sea somewhere. They don’t think it’ll start around Taiwan or Korea necessarily. It’s the South China Sea. Because if the Chinese attack and the Americans lose even—just take one warship—that’s the end of it. One ship amounts to hundreds, even thousands, of American soldiers. That’s a big deal.

**Choo:** It’s like going back to the Opium War.

**Wang:** Yes, that was just one ship. It could be even a Japanese ship, because there’s an alliance, or even a Korean ship. But right now it’s American ships that are quite annoying. They sit too close with us. There’s no island. And from the Chinese point of view that’s very annoying. And if they can sink it they’ll probably sink it. But then what happens after? I’ve been talking to some Chinese friends and they tell me, “Don’t worry, we’ll have the ability to sink American ships soon.” But what after? Take even the American aegis ship,

which has only limited ability to defend against an attack. They can exhaust their aegis missiles and then they are sitting ducks. Then what happens? That's the danger. But from China's point of view it's very annoying. China is concerned with the islands but Americans just hang around and ignore that. That's quite annoying.

**Choo:** And you say that China wants to keep US access to the South China Sea as far out as off Guam. But the U.S. might be pursuing a naval base in Korea—in Jeju.

**Wang:** That's right. The potential for maritime conflict is pretty real and substantial. That's a nightmare for me, by the way, that it could happen.

**Choo:** There are two schools of thought on the rise of China, namely, power transition theory and the Thucydides trap. However, both theories show limitations in defining the “challenger” or “enforcer.” While power transition theory assigns culpability to China for a clash between it and the U.S., the Thucydides trap portrays the U.S. as a “trap builder” and thus war initiator. With respect to either case, do you think the U.S. or China is willing to commit to such consequences?

**Wang:** I think that those theories are too rigid and limiting. Basically, the question is whether a revisionist power will challenge an existing one or the existing one will set a trap to destroy the rising one. Either could be possible and not necessarily mutually exclusive; they can both happen at the same time. The rising power will definitely challenge the old one, and the old one will try its best to contain the other. So I think both theories together would probably explain, to some extent, what's happening now. You can argue from Beijing's point of view that the United States is already setting the

trap. But you could also say that China is setting a trap, too. This is too limiting a theory or description. But I think the consequences will be grave and terrible.

**Choo:** But is any party really willing to allow that?

**Wang:** Yes, both are doing it. We shouldn't kid ourselves about that. The Chinese spend all this money on weapons. What are they for? Taiwan? Do you think the American pivot is for protecting sea-lanes against pirates? No. They are doing it already. Which is to say, it's not clear yet. They're all aware of the consequences. And they are sometimes delusional: "Oh, maybe we shouldn't do that. Maybe you're going to do that." If you believe the hardcore realist analysts like Mearsheimer or Graham Allison at Harvard, then this is happening; it's inevitable, right? Only if there's something drastic will it happen. And you can believe other people—maybe John Ikenberry is one. You know, they're like, "Don't worry." John is an extremely smart guy but I think that on this particular issue he displays too much wishful thinking. It's not that we want a war. I think it just happens.

**Choo:** To what degree do you see territorial disputes developing into a major source of conflict? Are these temporary issues or will they have a lingering effect on regional international relations? What possible solutions are there? Do you see multilateral arrangements as a possible solution? Or will regional states have to resort to bilateralism for conflict dialogue?

**Wang:** Well, there are quite a few territorial disputes in Northeast Asia right now: Japan and Korea, Korea and China, China and Taiwan, China and India, China and Vietnam, and even with Russia. They're all actually minor, relatively speaking, except for China and India.

But all the others are insignificant, especially with Korea and China. What are they arguing for, right? I think territorial disputes will continue to be a source of conflict in East Asia. Managing them requires great care, wisdom, and skill, but I'm worried our leaders may not have that. There's also a dangerous tendency—longstanding territorial disputes could be used by one or two or both countries for whatever; they could become a flashpoint suddenly. For example, there's what the Koreans call Jeodo, which is a non-issue. But occasionally if you mention it you can make an issue out of this. Let's just say that China would like to make an issue of this. It becomes a big flashpoint. But right now they don't want to talk about this. And with the dispute between India and China it's the same thing: it hasn't become an issue yet; it may die down. It's like the Diaoyu or Senkaku islands. Mostly they don't want to make an issue. If they don't want to make an issue, it quiets down. That's where your danger is. With territorial disputes, people just, for whatever reason, don't want to negotiate a peaceful settlement. They just want to keep it or leave it, all or nothing. That really actually sets the trap, if you will.

### III. US-China Relations

**Choo:** Do you see a military clash occurring between the U.S. and China? Why or why not?

**Wang:** I don't see it happening, but it's very possible. Some say it's likely, but it's not happening just yet. Both sides are trying to avoid that now. But both have redlines marked. And each can actually provoke the other.

**Choo:** How about economic relations? Will Trump's administration be able to truly reduce the trade deficit? Is this realizable? Do you see

his rhetoric, such as calling China a “currency exploiter,” or China’s punitive tariff measures for trade malpractice effectively reducing the trade deficit between the two?

**Wang:** I think the economic relations between the two right now are complex, big, and very important, but unbalanced. So like any important relationship, if it’s not balanced, it’s not going to do much. And there’s a danger of some kind of breaking point if we don’t correct the imbalance. It’s almost unbearable now. The U.S., simply because of its size and position, can still put up with it. But I honestly think that it’s in China’s interest to correct that imbalance.

**Choo:** That’s in China’s interest?

**Wang:** I think that’s definitely in its long-term interest. If you keep a very important relationship unbalanced—it’s like a wife and husband, you know, if there is a complete imbalance between them for too long it’s not going to make them happy. And you don’t want to wait for that relationship to collapse. You want to be proactive. Trump actually talked tough but so far hasn’t done much because he is a “businessman” and he wants to make “bargains”: “Okay, I’m not going to do anything about trade now. But you have to deal with North Korea.” But it’s not happening. So we’ll see.

**Choo:** How has China reacted to Trump’s verbal provocations, such as with trade deficit and so on? Will China make an effort to compromise with the Trump Administration? Is there anything on the table from the Chinese perspective?

**Wang:** I think China should, but whether it is doing that or not, I don’t see it just yet. Well, I take it back. The Chinese are doing a little bit now because they are buying American cultural goods; they are sending

teams to the United States to find this and find that. They are trying to appease the United States: “Okay, I’ll buy more of your stuff.” But that is not going to be addressing the fundamental issue, which is, again, the selective thing: The Chinese are not opening up the market where Americans are really competitive. And they subsidize trade on their exports to the United States while closing the door to Americans who may be competitive in some areas like entertainment, communication, banking, consulting, and education. Trump may actually decide, if he’s completely disappointed about North Korea, to punish China. That could be ugly.

**Choo:** The EU seems to be stuck between the U.S. and China with respect to numerous issues. On the one hand, it seems like Trump has difficulty in getting along with some European leaders. On the other, at the G-20 summit it seemed that China was much more on the same page with the EU on global and regional issues. Can we expect further EU-China cooperation facilitating China’s rise as opposed to US-EU cooperation neutralizing China’s rise?

**Wang:** It’s not there. This is like the Chinese or American strategies. Like, “Whatever the other side is not doing, I’m doing it.” It’s like, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” It doesn’t mean that the EU and China are agreeing on some fundamental global issues. First of all, they don’t agree on a host of problems.

**Choo:** What do you see as the Trump Administration’s ultimate policy goal with regard to China? Deterring China’s rise? Managing it? Or perhaps meeting it with both containment and engagement, as with past administrations? In the context of his past rhetoric, where do you think Trump stands?

**Wang:** I think the Trump administration is very young at the moment. We

don't know what's happening. Also, Trump is such an extraordinary president in the way that he governs like no other; his candid rhetoric, his traits, and so on. We don't know. But I think he is probably not moving too far away from traditional American policy. That's some kind of fear for containment and some kind of wish for engagement, or some combination. I don't think the people in Washington have decided to go one way or the other. But I think an increasing many think engagement is just a delusion; it's not working. I think the scale is moving in that direction—more containing, “deal with it, manage it”—away from engagement. Engagement was based on the assumption that we could change China. Now they see, “Well, not only can we not change China, China is growing big and might change us now.”

**Choo:** Will there be more of a downward spiral between the two countries as a result of the security dilemma? Or will there be more dialogue, as witnessed in the past between the two countries, so as to avoid clashes as much as possible?

**Wang:** If I have to choose, I would say the security dilemma is getting worse between America and China. It's already happening between America and China in East Asia, which may not be in China's long-term interest at all since it will be racing against several countries. I think even Taiwan is going to spend more money on the military. And Vietnam, India—everybody is spending. The Chinese expansion of military power may prove to be unwise. And the United States, of course, is engaging with this as well. But the U.S. can do so in a cost-effective way by bringing the Japanese, Koreans, and Taiwanese into this arms war. I think the security dilemma is already happening. Not necessarily completely all the way down to open war but I think it's happening already. It can be managed properly. If the Chinese don't want much then it's easier to manage,

but the Chinese want a lot. So that's the thing. And China uses its muscles to do that. And look at the Japanese. The Japanese leadership are building warships at a pace unseen for a long time. And the Japanese military integration issue in the United States is really deep.

**Choo:** Sooner or later, do you see the arms race being prevented by economic costs? Like with aging societies, pensions, and so on?

**Wang:** Yes, of course. The arms race can be stopped or slowed down by a few things. One is a war. That's a fact, right? And the other is being broke. Like you said, you have pension plans—all these things. Or third, there's the cost of new technology. Nuclear weapons scared the Soviet Union and United States into behaving. This does not seem to be the case for many in East Asia because there's wishful thinking, or maybe Asian thinking, that nuclear weapons will not be used. It's almost too scary, right? But I think the North Koreans are right. They want to have ultimate security. I think the arms race may be slowed down by that but—see, the thing is, if we are in an arms race and I'm getting poorer and poorer because I have pensions, retirement, and the economy is going down, we only have several options. One is to give up. That's not very pleasant. And the other is, "I'm going to use it, before I really get too weak." That's actually very dangerous, if you think about it. In a security dilemma, if one side is going broke, it's very dangerous. The former Soviet Union chose to reform and collapsed. But not all countries are like that. Sometimes you choose to just gamble—to use it. The ideal situation would be that the broken side would stop and surrender, like the former Soviet Union. But that's not really normal. It's actually quite exceptional.

**Choo:** They don't want that to happen with North Korea.

**Wang:** Exactly. If North Korea gets desperate, if it feels it is losing out, it can just launch that.

**Choo:** So you want to bend it but not break it.

**Wang:** You want to bend it, you want to force it, but you don't want to break it. Once you break it then the consequences are going to be huge. I don't think we have the stomach for that.

#### IV. The Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia

**Choo:** North Korea's seemingly incessant provocations, whether with nuclear tests or missile tests, and South Korea's decision to deploy THAAD are two thorny regional issues. With the new leaderships in Korea and the United States, both countries are in search of a way to put an end to North's nuclear aspirations. This won't be easy and it will take some time but there are two possible scenarios in this regard. One is a peaceful solution involving dialogue and cooperation. The other involves demolishing North Korea's nuclear facilities through either surgical or preemptive strikes. What are the chances of such military action? Is this a feasible scenario?

**Wang:** The chances of military action now, actually, are increasingly unknown. Previously I think the chances were almost null, but right now who knows. Is this a feasible scenario? Yes, it's clearly a feasible scenario but the price will be high. How many streets of Seoul do we sacrifice, right? I heard—this is not really official—that the United States and South Korea can destroy all North Korean cannons through an assault within an hour or two. But there could be about ten percent left to fire maybe one or two rounds. Let's just say ten percent of them, you know, one thousand cannons, or mortars or rockets. This is like two shots before they're totally

destroyed. Two shots will be two thousand artillery shots on Seoul. That's the price we will pay. Do we have the stomach for that? If we decide, "We'll take the two thousand cannonballs, let's do it," then, yeah, North Korea can be done tomorrow. But who's to say, "We'll give you the risk of two thousand cannons." That's actually in North Korea's security interest. But if South Korea has had enough of it, they might say, "Gamble it all, let's risk that rather than risking millions down the road," right? It can be that easy. Maybe it's not that scale, maybe it turns out there's just a couple hundred, not two thousand. If the U.S. and South Korean militaries agree, they can probably take out ninety-nine percent in a first strike. Then they have only a hundred cannons left shooting a hundred cannon balls: "Oh, that's all? Who cares." It's not going to be terrible. And those guns are not very accurate, so I think it's feasible. It's just a price. How much can we give? The current price versus the one down the road. Because of nuclear weapons I can envision a worse situation. Compared to that—and with two thousand cannonballs, you know, it's a clear choice in the end, in my view. But this is a laymen's opinion. The military caste probably won't think this way.

**Choo:** The only alternative to military action is dialogue. Thus far, North Korea does not seem to want to engage in dialogue until it completes its nuclear development programs. Do you see dialogue as a realistic or feasible approach? President Moon has claimed that he will be proactive in persuading the North to engage in inter-Korean and multilateral dialogue, i.e. possibly Six-party talks. His confidence seems high as he garnered much support from all surrounding powers, as evidenced in his meetings with his counterparts. What would it take to bring North Korea to the table?

**Wang:** I think the Six-Party talks, or any other talks, are always good. But I don't think we can talk North Korea out of nuclear weapons,

period. There's no chance now. They're not looking back. The North Koreans are thinking they are China in 1964-65.

**Choo:** Exactly!

**Wang:** Yes, not only do they not want to give it up, they want to make more. So talks will not work anymore. You have to give them something. You have to treat them as an equal, like the United States did in Nixon's visit. Or destroy them.

**Choo:** I kind of make the same analogy when I talk about this issue. China probably well understands South and North Korean thinking and strategy and so forth. In the end, does China really expect the only breakthrough to be, say, like with Nixon in '69 and a "dream fulfilled"? In other words, does China see North Korea moving on the same path?

**Wang:** In a way, I think the Chinese are like the Soviet Union during that time: very reluctant to see this happening. But they see it. The Chinese [position] on this nuclear issue, I think, is the worst, of all the parties. Why? Because the North Koreans are not going to give up nuclear weapons. So you have two options, basically. Well, several options, but the main ones are either attack them or accept them. Accepting North Korea will make North Korea not be friends with China anymore, probably an enemy of China. You don't want an enemy right on the border. The Chinese are talking about how the U.N. should have normalization with Korea, but they're not very sincere. If I was in Beijing, I wouldn't like North Korea to defect to the United States and become an American little brother like South Korea. Why would I want that? But that is actually what North Korea wants. And China doesn't want that, kind of like the Soviet Union. And the United States doesn't really care about a nuclear

North Korea because North Korea is small. If North Korea was two or three times as big and could be a conduit to China, you've got a [problem]. But the United States is saying: "North Korea, what can you offer? We have Japan and South Korea already." So North Koreans are having a hard time to realize the dream, you know? The dream. It's the same dream. The North Koreans are working like hell to get there. All the belligerent talk is actually trying to get American attention: "Come on, come on! Talk to me!" And the North Koreans also realize the Six-party talks are not productive; too many parties.

**Choo:** So, in the end, what would be the ideal scenario for China?

**Wang:** The ideal scenario for China, actually, is for somebody, some foreign force, to suddenly get rid of North Korean nuclear weapons without bringing the regime down.

I think if there's a relatively clean surgical strike, China, at the most, would make some protest; it's not going to do anything. But if the surgical strike were messy and South Korean troops had to cross the DMZ, then that's a different situation. But in a very messy situation the South Koreans may have a moral obligation to do that. I always say that South Korea will have no choice if it becomes very messy—if the country collapses or war breaks out and people are dying. And that's when the Chinese probably will respond. For South Koreans the campaign would be very clear: they want to get rid of the nuclear weapons, and then we can either unify or not unify—we talk, fine. But for the Chinese it's more complicated.

**Choo:** So if it's a clear, precise surgical strike then there's a high chance that Beijing will remain acquiescent.

**Wang:** Not only a high chance but almost a certainty, I would say. They'll

make a protest. You'll see them jump up and down like something crazy. But it's just a protest. That's it.

**Choo:** Going back to '64 when the United States wanted to carry out the surgical strike...

**Wang:** No, the Soviet Union wanted to carry it out.

**Choo:** Oh, that was '69.

**Wang:** But going back to '64, the U.S. never wanted to carry out a surgical strike. That was just kind of a low-level talk.

If the United States did attack, I bet you Moscow wouldn't have really reacted. Moscow would have actually been happy. The logics are similar. If in 1966 the United States attacked and took away China's nuclear facility, Russia would have been really happy. But certainly they would say, "Imperialism," you know, "Attacking our socialist brother."

**Choo:** That was the official statement coming from Moscow back then. "The alliance is still effective..."

**Wang:** The irony is that when the Russians wanted to attack, the U.S. actually opposed that. So in this case it would be, if China wanted to attack, the U.S. would oppose. But no, the South Koreans are going to oppose. Let's say tomorrow China decided, "Let's have a surgical strike to get rid of North Korean nuclear weapons." What is South Korea going to do? "No, no, don't! We'll have the fallout!" But analogies are always handicapped. North Korea today is like China in the 1960s only to some extent.

**Choo:** The United States and its allies want tougher sanctions on Pyongyang if North Korea continues with its missile and nuclear tests. However, China's cooperation is essential and vital. Beijing has been fending off United States demands to be more responsible, and cooperative and to comply with demands for tougher sanctions, i.e. cutting off the oil supply to Pyongyang. What will it take to bring China to our side? What will it take for China to succumb to our demands?

**Wang:** One is that if the South Koreans and Japanese talk about having their own deployments, that'll do the trick. Two, if South Korea decides, "We're not fearful of the two thousand bombs anymore; we're going to attack." Those things will make a change, in my mind. In other words, South Korea has to be really tough. It's getting hard. South Korea really has to be showing: "Look, I'm going to get nuclear bombs, if you [China] protect North Korea. Moreover, actually, I wouldn't mind the Japanese having nuclear bombs." That would do the trick. Or, the South Koreans are going to say, "Okay, Americans, you have to bomb North Korea now. I don't care about Seoul anymore. Two thousand bombs, two thousand artillery shells—fine." That would make the Chinese think again. Other than that, I don't think China is going to defend North Korea. They said so. Put these two on the table and China will tend to believe and react. I have long suggested that South Koreans should develop nuclear weapons. I think you should seriously consider that. From an American point of view they won't like that. American policy is non-proliferation, of course. It's a big deal for Washington to accept that. If South Korea and Japan seriously decided to go nuclear, that would make China think; that would change the equation. That would also neutralize North Korean nuclear warheads. I think the North Koreans are not that crazy. They're not going to use nuclear weapons against anybody. Unless they are dying. If South Korea,

China, Japan, Russia all had nuclear weapons, that would cancel out North Korean nuclear weapons. That card is gone, useless. That's a big change. And we have to persuade Americans to go along with that.

**Choo:** In light of this, it looks as though the Trump Administration's China policy will still hinge on the economy. From that perspective, is it possible for the two nations to cooperate on North Korean issues?

**Wang:** The United States and China cooperating on North Korean issues is possible but not very likely. The Chinese line is very clear. The American line is "no nuclear weapons." Trump had this wishful thinking that Xi Jinping would help him because he worries about trade. Xi Jinping has almost no influence in Pyeongyang other than the "all-out solution." And China does not want that. Trump says, "I'm disappointed." Well, you should be disappointed. What were you thinking? The Chinese leverage is very minor, other than the all-out, final solution. But in the final solution, Pyeongyang can collapse. And that's not a desirable scenario. So I think there are limits to building cooperation or unity.

**Choo:** What's your take on THAAD deployment to South Korea? Do you see it as the beginning of many more US deployments of sophisticated and highly advanced weapon systems to the peninsula? Does this only signal the beginning, in other words? Can we expect the U.S. to deploy more such weapon systems as part of its containment strategy? I raise these questions because of the unprecedented way in which the United States "leaked" its plan to deploy THAAD on its military bases on the peninsula. Why do you think the United States has been "leaking" this plan since 2014 despite the lack of need to do so?

**Wang:** Did the U.S. leak the plan in 2014?

**Choo:** In late 2013 or early 2014, Obama started talking about how “US bases in Korea might need to defend themselves” or how “US bases are in need of better defense against North Korea’s missile attacks.”

I raise this question because American behavior has been somewhat unprecedented in this regard. With all the deployment of weapons and weapon systems to US military bases in Korea, the U.S. always did it in a discrete way. Up to date, we don’t really know the sophistication of the weapons and weapon systems installed in the bases. But for some reason they decided to be open with respect to THAAD. So I was wondering if this was an indicator meant to test China regarding the U.S. plan for more deployments of advanced weapons—did they just want to test the Chinese reaction?

**Wang:** That’s a good question. I’m not military, so I’m going to answer intuitively, but I think it’s entirely South Korea’s sovereign decision. Americans aren’t going to mind; they’re allies, right? Once they decided to do it, whether it’s good for them or bad for them is irrelevant. I think for a third country like China to be really angry about this is natural because China is affected. But there is only so much you can do. These are just sovereign countries; you bargain, you trade. President Park and President Moon, also, said that the Chinese did not offer enough to bargain. So it’s an ongoing issue. I think that President Park bargained hard with Xi Jinping, again, as Trump is bargaining with Xi Jinping: “If you do something about North Korea, I won’t punish you on trade issues.” President Park Geun-hye tried really hard: “I’ll be nice to you.” It can be something like that. “I’m not going to deploy THAAD if you do that.” Well, Xi Jinping didn’t do it. But he did make the gesture, to be fair. He didn’t go to Pyongyang. He made gestures. That’s it. They cut off

some trade. That's not going to do the trick. In that sense, of course, China is really unhappy; North Korea, as well. But in my view, the Koreans ultimately have to make the decision. This has to do with safety, security, and sovereignty. You do things to safeguard yourself; that's a sovereignty issue. But the Americans probably want this, too. So that's probably the "leak" issue. If they did manipulate this and leak it out, they probably had this in mind. It's sort of making the Chinese unhappy deliberately and the Chinese are trapped. I think the Chinese are probably smart enough—well, the Chinese reaction is bad but I think the reaction is... What do you think about the reaction, seriously?

**Choo:** China's counterargument against the claim of sovereignty is: "Well, the US military bases are out your jurisdiction. And it's all a common area so you don't get to manage or operate the THAAD system. You basically have no rights to access the system. So what are you talking about here?" Which is understandable. The common argument is valid, that's for sure. So that's why I think we've lost some ground in our argument against China over the THAAD issue because, strictly speaking, it's not a sovereignty issue. Because THAAD is being deployed to US military bases for the defense of US military bases.

And now the whole economy is getting affected. We never expected China's punitive measures to last this long with respect to such a wide range of economic areas and fields. Overall, we're fed up with China's reaction because it does not seem to want to talk about it. They're just shutting us out. We try to patch up things but...

**Wang:** But do you think that's probably because Xi Jinping is personally unhappy?

**Choo:** I guess so, too.

**Wang:** I think he probably thought that he and President Park Geun-hye got along quite nicely and South Korea is making too much money from China with a trade surplus and so on. And that's when you do the deals and you didn't do it. Kind of personally. But what do you think? Essentially, it's going to continue?

**Choo:** Yes, as of next month, August, the sanctions and punitive measures will have continued for one year already. But usually if you look back at some other cases, like with many of the European cases, Chinese action over political conflicts only lasts about a year or two, max. So by the time it is winding down in the first year, China always sends out the signal to patch up things, but so far China hasn't shown any intentions of anything like that. The only possible clarification that I can detect from the Chinese side occurred in March and April when China came out and said, something like, "Okay, pull out the bone from my neck."

**Wang:** "Whoever tied the bell should untie it." That means that they still want to get rid of THAAD.

**Choo:** Yes, exactly. But other than that they don't seem to show any leniency.

**Wang:** So the THAAD deployment is going to continue?

**Choo:** It has to—one squadron is not going to do it.

**Wang:** One squadron is not enough. So how many squadrons are enough?

**Choo:** Usually to be effective, in theory they need at least, what, four?

**Wang:** Okay. So they'll still continue to deploy. And at the present moment they're basically saying, yes, right? President Moon went to Washington and basically said, yes, right? Did President Moon surprise some liberals?

**Choo:** Yes, he goes to D.C., changes his mind, and butters up Trump. Then he sees Xi Jinping at the G20 summit and says, "We've got another year so relax."

**Wang:** Xi Jinping was expecting him to be different.

**Choo:** Yes, exactly. But Xi Jinping wasn't fooled because he already knew what Moon said in Washington D.C.

**Wang:** So that meeting at the G20 was not really useful?

**Choo:** No, not in my eyes.

**Wang:** So the sanctions will continue?

**Choo:** Yes. We are about to go into the second year.

**Wang:** Okay and do you expect any enhancement of sanctions? My students actually reported—they did some research and found out that Hyundai car sales in China are really decreasing right now.

**Choo:** Yes, the other day there was a reader report saying that Hyundai Automobiles has prompted a China tax scheme.

**Wang:** To deal with the situation?

**Choo:** Yes. And they just opened up a new factory.

**Wang:** I know they were trying. And their own factories are already having problems with the cars. And one report from my student was saying that the Chinese are now buying more Japanese cars.

I think THAAD makes Xi Jinping himself personally unhappy. I think he's personally involved in this. And if that's the case, the Koreans are going to have to act—the Chinese lose money, too, but the Koreans lose more. Against the Chinese capitalists, “Well you lose more, I lose less and let's see who can last.” And if Koreans can find substitutes then it shouldn't be a problem. I mean, for tourists, you can find substitutes; South East Asians for example. But for the sales market, China's big. What should the South Korean government do? It's a tough call: money or security? At the present moment I think he made the decision already. He went to Washington and signed all the papers and so on. South Korea is valuing security more than money, which is normal.

**Choo:** And so we get another slap in the face from Washington: they want to mandate US free trade...

**Wang:** I know, but I wouldn't worry about that. Trump says many things. He's losing credibility quite a bit.

**Choo:** Yes, that's what happened with President Park, too. He's walking the same path.

**Wang:** Yes, he's still in office but his credibility is gone. The revision or renegotiation of FTA with Korea, in my opinion, is more for political propaganda at home than really doing something about it. He doesn't even know the details. He had an interview recently—the day before yesterday—with some reporters from the *New York Times*. He was mumbling a lot. And the *New York Times* didn't

publish it—it was too “mumbly.” And he comes and says, “Hey, why didn’t you publish that interview?” “Oh, we thought it was a little too informal. You probably don’t want us to publish.” He said, “Go ahead and publish it.” And they published it, today. And you read it, it’s terrible “mumbling, mumbling.” It’s like, “Oh, China has 8,000 years of history.” What is he talking about? I wouldn’t take his threats seriously... if I were the Korean government I wouldn’t worry about the Korean FTA being renegotiated. It’s going to be bureaucrats talking about this and that; maybe they will give and take.

**Choo:** China’s punitive economic measures due to political conflicts have only lasted a year or two at max in the past. There were numerous cases with European states. The first year of such measures by the Chinese government with regard to South Korea is approaching its term in August. However, there appears no sign that China will call an end to the sanctions. Do you see them continuing into the second year or for the foreseeable future? Do you see any solution to the China-Korea conflict as a result of the THAAD deployment? Assuming no more deployment of THAAD and other highly advanced weapons and weapon systems in the future, what should the South Korean government do?

**Wang:** I think that Beijing has been viewing Korea as a potential for a united front. Beijing has hoped Korea to somehow keep its distance from Japan and maybe, eventually, leave the United States. That’s been the hope for a long time now. That explains a lot of things: why Beijing never criticizes South Korea openly, and why the Chinese netizens, if they dare to criticize anybody in Korea—leaders like President Park—are censored. But criticize the United States government? Sure. Criticize Abe, the Japanese Prime Minister? By all means. So they have high hopes. I think that THAAD and also

the North Korean nuclear program have really dashed that hope. I think that China is actually wounded with the pain of that, also. So the policies against South Korea, in my opinion, are almost like a reflex. It's not even calculated, it's just a reflex; a fear of this pain. So in the long run what does that mean? That means the Koreans still have to make the call. Do you want to be a US ally? Or do you want to change your situation? If Koreans make a decision, "We want to be a US ally." Simple. Then, well, the honeymoon between Korea and China is not going to continue. That's simple. But if the Koreans say, "We're going make a decision, adjust a little bit," leaving the United States a little bit to be more neutral, then maybe the honeymoon will come back again. But then Korea's position will be precarious. It's almost like playing with fire. North Korean nuclear weapons are going to be there; they won't get rid of them. And in the future, who knows what the Chinese are going to do. So Korea probably has to be prepared for some hard times in terms of economic relations with China. I think Chinese trade with Korea is still structurally complementary. But the level of complementarity is decreasing. A few years from now the Chinese demand for Korean products will probably go down. Therefore, the Korean surplus against China will not be that easy anymore; the golden egg will no longer be there. That's really important. But even then, the overall picture is that the Koreans have to balance between security and money; and balance the inter-Korean relationship against the Chinese relationship.