

Blooming row over cherry blossom splits China, Korea, Japan

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People jog under cherry blossoms in full bloom in Tokyo on March 29, 2015

A perennial debate over the birthplace of the cherry blossom has taken a fresh turn as a Chinese industry group claims the Asian giant is the tree's true home, rather than Japan or claimant South Korea.

Cherry blossoms have long been associated with Japan, where viewing

the short-lived blooms is an enduringly popular pastime to herald the arrival of spring.

In recent years, some South Korean media have claimed that the country is actually the flower's origin—sometimes provoking prickly reactions in Japan.

But according to He Zongru, executive chairman of the China Cherry Industry Association, both are wrong, and the Middle Kingdom is the blossom's true birthplace.

He cited a Japanese monograph on cherry blossoms which stated that the flower originated in the Himalayan mountains of China and did not arrive in Japan until the Tang dynasty more than 1,100 years ago.

"We don't want to get into a war of words with Japan and South Korea, but we want to assert a fact: Many historical documents confirm that the cherry blossom's place of origin is in China," He said, according to the Guangzhou-based Southern Metropolis Daily on Monday.

"As Chinese people, we have a responsibility to let more people know this history," he added.

For decades, Tokyo has given the prized plant to countries including the US as a gesture of goodwill, and every spring people across Japan gather under cherry blossom trees to eat, drink and admire.

Thousands of visitors line the banks of Washington's Tidal Basin every spring to catch a sight of the city's pink and white flowers, which were a gift from Japan in 1912.



A woman takes a "selfie" in a tree during the first day of the Cherry Blossom Festival in Gucun Park in northern Shanghai on March 18, 2015

In Beijing, the most popular place to view them is Yuyuantan Park, home to more than 2,000 cherry trees—roughly 200 of which were given to China by Japan in the early 1970s, when the two countries re-established diplomatic ties.

Nonetheless the row reflects tense relations among the three Asian rivals, which are frequently at odds with each other on issues including Japan's 20th-century history—when it colonised Korea and parts of China, culminating in World War II—and competing territorial claims in regional waters.

Often, such battles see Beijing and Seoul team up against Tokyo, as when China unveiled a memorial last year to a Korean national hero condemned by Japan as a "terrorist" for killing a Japanese official a

century ago.



A mother takes a snapshot of her daughter in front of a tree during the Cherry Blossom Festival in Gucun Park in northern Shanghai on March 18, 2015

Even so He's message to Seoul in the latest debate was uncompromising.

"Simply put, the cherry blossom originated in China and flourished in Japan," the paper quoted him as saying. "South Korea has nothing to do with it."

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