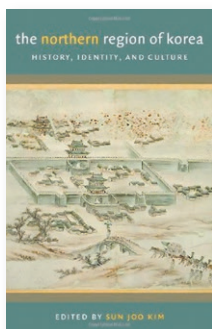


Conceptions of identity in the north

Regional studies are still a rather exotic domain in Korean Studies, as practiced both in the Koreas and abroad. There is very little material on regional and local history. This is especially true for the Northern part of Korea, which for obvious reasons is more remote to most South Korean and foreign scholars who have little opportunity to visit North Korea and even less opportunity to do research there. It seems obvious that the dearth of material on the history of the north published in English is due to that very same reason. Another important factor is the sponsoring of Korean studies by South Korea based institutions, which seems to even more encourage a focus on the South. The book at hand is a step towards remedying these shortcomings of the current state of affairs in academic Korean Studies.

Felix Siegmund



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Sun Joo Kim (ed.) 2010.
The Northern Region of Korea: History, Identity & Culture.
Seattle: University of Washington Press,
ISBN: 9780295990415

IT NEEDS TO BE MENTIONED that there has been some groundbreaking research on the Northern region in Korean language publications in the last 10 years. This is partly due to the clash of Chinese and Korean interests concerning the Northern region. All sides involved have mobilized resources to bolster their claim on the Northern region. Most well-known among these is the 'Research Project on the History and Present Situation of the Northeast Border' by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences - started in 2002 and organized by the PRC's Academy of Social Sciences. This has in turn lead to Korean reactions, which, especially in South Korea, have resulted in publications on the Northern border and activities by such organizations as the Northeast Asian History Foundation (*Tongbug'a yōksa chaedan*). Even long before it became a hot topic for political claims, Manchu history scholars have extensively published on the history of the region – Johannes Reckel and Erling von Mende, for example, being noteworthy among contemporary German language scholars. While there is material available, much of it is not in English. Not a small part of the merit of *The Northern Region of Korea* lies in making available a good state-of-the-art overview on the region in English.

Regional identity

The editor of the volume at hand is Kim Sun Joo, Harvard-Yenching Professor of Korean History, who has already worked on domestic rebellion in the North in the early 19th century. She surely is an outstanding specialist. Indeed, the book seems to already have received a warm welcome in the Korean studies community and the review by Sean Kim (in the *Journal of Asian Studies* 71/2, 2012) has been very favorable. The volume includes eleven articles by renowned scholars in the field, a total of twelve articles if Kim's programmatic introduction on 'Thinking Through Region' is included. The time that the studies in the volume spans ranges from fifteenth century Chosŏn Korea to nearly contemporary times. The main focus seems to be on late Chosŏn in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which is the period that the majority of the articles deals with.

The topics of the articles can roughly be divided into the categories of foreign relations, regional identity, dialectal linguistics, and some articles on various other topics. It is clear that the topical focus is on questions of regional identity and how the North was viewed by insiders and outsiders. Foreign relations are dealt with in the articles by Kenneth Robinson, 'Residence and Foreign Relations in the Peninsular Northeast During the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries', and by Kwon Naehyun, 'Chosŏn-Qing Relations and the Society of P'yŏngan Province During the Late Chosŏn Period'. The articles discuss the Northern region as a place of inter-cultural and inter-national negotiation and exchange.

Regional identity is the topic of the articles by Jang Yoo-seung, 'Regional Identities of Northern Literati: A Comparative Study of P'yŏngan and Hamgyŏng Provinces', and by Jung Min, 'The Shadow of Anonymity: The Depiction of Northerners in Eighteenth-Century "Hearsay Accounts" (kimun)'. Jung does approach the problem from the other end: How do Northerners serve as a mirror for the identity of non-Northerners? The article traces how Northerners appeared in stories and were employed as a literary means to depict the Northern region and the attributes associated with it. Jang on the other hand describes how northern literati defined their identity. The article does point out that there were substantial differences in how literati from different local backgrounds within the Northern region approached this problem.

Conceptions of identity

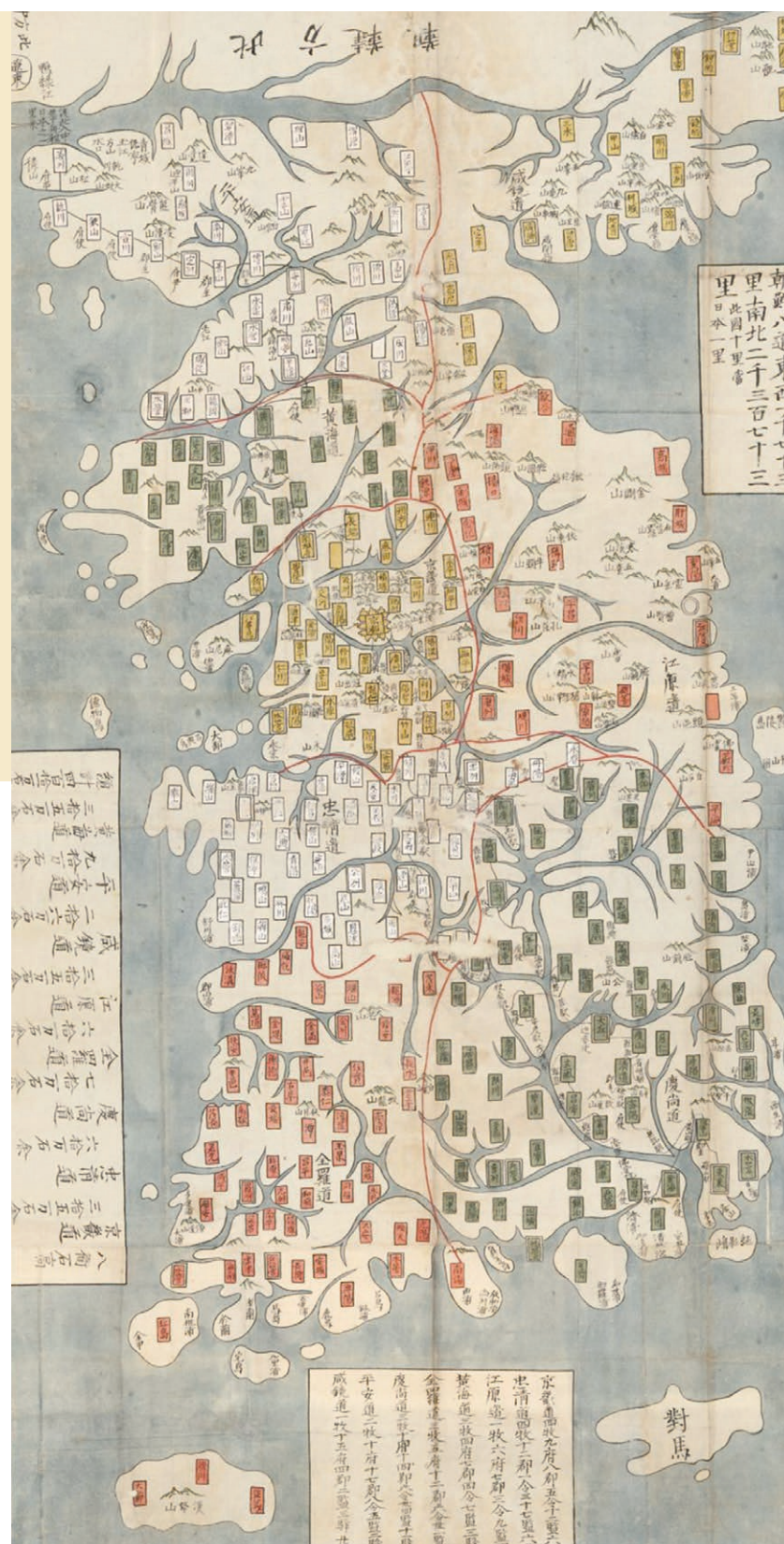
Sociolinguistics are also strongly represented in the articles by Paek Doo-hyeon, 'P'yŏngan Dialect and Regional Identity in Chosŏn Korea' and by Ross King, 'Dialect, Orthography, and Regional Identity: P'yŏngan Christians, Korean Spelling Reform, and Orthographic Fundamentalism'. Both articles deal with the ideological dimension of regional language phenomena. The connection between regional language and politics and the factors that influence the complex problems stemming from such connections are discussed.

There also are articles on a wide variety of other topics: Yumi Moon's 'From Periphery to a Transnational Frontier: Popular Movements in the Northwestern Provinces, 1896-1904', Bruce Fulton's 'Subversive Narratives: Hwang Sunwŏn's P'yŏngan Stories', Donald N. Clark's 'The Missionary Presence in Northern Korea before WWII: Human Investment, Social Significance, and Historical Legacy', German Kim's and Ross King's 'The Northern Region of Korea as Portrayed in Russian Sources, 1860s-1913', and Mark E. Caprio's 'Images of the North in Occupied Korea'. These articles, while not obviously connected by subject or common approach present a very welcome opportunity to look at different facets of the region from without and within.

The common theme of the articles seems to be the attempt to come to grips with the changing conceptions of identity in the North at different points of the historical process. While this might seem quaint in itself – there surely is no lack of studies on identity – it is done very convincingly. The subject, as well as the current state of publication in the English language on the topic lends itself very well to this approach. The articles blend together and nothing seems forced. The shifting balance of identity between marginal existence as a frontier zone and an existence as an integrated part of the Chosŏn state is portrayed vividly. Also, in our days of jargon-laden publications, the lucidity of the arguments made and the understandable language of all the texts in the volume is noteworthy. One can only congratulate the contributors and the editors for their remarkable success in creating a very informative and approachable book.

Shared identity?

One potential problem can be identified, however. Possibly the construction of a Northern region in Chosŏn history is not the ideal approach to questions both of relative regional power and of local culture. The situation in the north is so complex that at least parts of its history do defy the image of Northern uniformity that the notion of a Northern region



seems to necessarily convey. The article by Jang Yoo-seung seems to point this out in a reasoned way, as the difference between the provinces of Hamgyŏng and P'yŏngan is stressed. Of course, it is entirely justifiable to begin the enormous undertaking of including the North into the landscape of Korean historiography with a simplified regional overlook. However, further studies will come to the point where it will be necessary to look at regional dissonance *inside* of the Northern region as well. Chosŏn time P'yŏngyang – an urban center with its own influential elites and all features of Chosŏn era city life – cannot convincingly be included in the same region as the frontier outpost of Musan or the transit center of Ŭiju on the Korean-Chinese border. Both the Northern elites and the average peasants have little to do with those parts of the Northern society that lived off the trades of smuggling, poaching and other illegal activities. They probably do not share a common identity. Be that as it may, the volume at hand will serve as a solid basis for future studies on these lower-level problems of regional/local identity. In this sense it is a happy coincidence that the articles are covering as wide a field as they do and that they show different approaches and solutions to problems of regional history.

The book is a very welcome addition to the literature about the past of the north of Korea, about which there are only few other works in English. It is full of important information and insightful studies, so that it can serve both as an introduction to the historical northern part of Korea as well as an outstanding example of how regional history can be researched and written in a way that shows its role in the supra regional framework that it is embedded in. In this particular respect, the book should also be of interest to scholars of regional history who do not focus on Korea alone.

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Chosŏn chido (1730).
Copied in 1730
from an original
map drawn ca. 1451,
possessed by
Matsubara Masaki.
Watercolor and ink.
Courtesy Library of
Congress Geography
and Map Division,
Washington D.C.