

*Voice from the North: Resurrecting Regional Identity through  
the Life and Works of Yi Sihang (1672-1736)*

by Sun Joo Kim

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English-language scholarship produces few monographs on Chosŏn dynasty history each year. A number of factors contribute to this dearth of monographs. From the tightening of budgets among academic publishers and the limited number of graduate students doing premodern or early modern Korea, to the small number of universities hiring scholars researching the era, the field of Chosŏn dynasty history outside of Korea is constrained. Within this small field, however, Harvard University Professor Sun Joo Kim has become one of the preeminent scholars writing in English. As the follow up to her first monograph *Marginality and Subversion in Korea: The Hong Kyŏngnae Rebellion of 1812* (University of Washington Press, 2007) and her edited volume *The Northern Region of Korea: History, Identity, and Culture* (University of Washington Press, 2010), *Voice from the North* is a brilliant piece of scholarship that breaks new ground in English language studies of the Chosŏn dynasty.

Kim's work examines the contest for power among local elites and the center. It is part of the shift of scholarly attention from the center of political and cultural power to the periphery. By deploying a micro view

of a prominent northern scholar, she uncovers the way local literati responded to discrimination from the center and carved out their own power structures in the countryside. Following the life and works of Yi Sihang (1672-1736) of P'yŏngan Province, the work traces the way northern scholars, such as Yi, challenged dominant stereotypes that depicted the north as barbaric, backward, and uncivilized. These regional elites could not attain high positions at the highest levels of the government because of the strong grip capital elites held over access to government posts. But Yi and others around him used writing (prose, poetry, memorials, and tomb inscriptions, for instance) to challenge central discrimination and, in so doing, helped foster an identity not based upon class or other social or economic hierarchies, but upon region of birth.

The book is a concise study, consisting of four chapters with an introduction and conclusion, amounting to 153 pages of analysis. The remaining fifty pages hold two appendixes, extensive notes, a glossary of the *hanmun* (literary Chinese), and a thorough bibliography. In Chapter One, "Remembering Yi Sihang, a Local Elite of Significance," Kim begins her study by examining the life and works of Yi Sihang. Through a meticulous examination of "biographies (*haengjang*), tomb stele inscriptions (*myogalmyŏng*), and genealogies" (15), she traces the lives of Yi Sihang and those regional elite families around him. What emerges from her research is that Yi Sihang epitomized the complexities of the Yangban. He was wealthy, owning several properties passed down to him from his parents and his father-in-law, and he also "accumulated more assets during his service as an official" (44). Yet he was also a Confucian who lived a frugal lifestyle, caring "only about his studies" and using his wealth and status to provide food to the poor, "sick and hungry" (44). He even supported his many relatives. As part of his Confucian worldview, Yi Sihang established a village-level school with the help of other local yangban to support education because "Sihang believed that everyone was capable of learning, regardless of his inborn nature or native place" (46).

While Chapter One establishes Yi Sihang's private life, Chapter Two, "Reciting Life," analyzes his public works to understand how his reputation as a literary scholar brought him close to power in Seoul. We learn that this flirtation with the center was temporary as discrimination against the north prevented him from building status in the capital. As a young student, Yi Sihang studied under such masters as Kim Ku (1649-1704), "a renowned scholar and official who was the magistrate" of a nearby region at the time (58). He passed one state exam after another, attaining the *munkwa* at the age of twenty-eight, but his degree was revoked because of accusations of massive cheating in the scandal of 1699. Kim describes the scandal in terms of the factional struggles of the Chosŏn dynasty as the capital elite intended to consolidate their power at the expense of outside candidates such as Yi. Once his degree was reinstated, however, Yi began his formal career in the government. His list of positions included a traineeship at the Royal Confucian Academy, special commissioner to Kyŏngsang Province, a provincial post in Unsan, section chief in the Ministry of Military Affairs, and a position in a tributary mission to China in 1728.

Chapter Three, "Defending Regional Elite Identity and Culture," extends the themes from the previous chapter. Here, Kim succinctly restates the barriers for men such as Yi Sihang: "Literati from P'yŏngan Province in the late Chosŏn period had long been the target of political and social discrimination by the central elites" (101). But Yi and other literati from his region attempted to counter such discrimination through collective action. One of the more important aspects of this collective regional movement revolved around serious accusations a Royal Secret Inspector leveled against the province in 1714. After accusing them of transgressing Confucian values as barbarians and wild animals, the inspector pleaded with the court to ban local students from taking the state examination as punishment. Such regional discrimination, however, "did not begin with" the inspector, but that "bureaucrats from the center criticized various cultural practices and local conventions that were not

in line with those prescribed by Confucian ideals” (103). Yi Sihang penned the response to the accusations, but he was supported by “all incumbent civil and military officials from P’yŏngan Province who were serving at court” (106). In this response, Yi identified the “slander” as “nothing but retaliation born of personal and familial grudges against the people of P’yŏngan Province” (115). Kim argues that factionalism, for which this period of the Chosŏn dynasty is infamous, did not undermine this “collective movement” (107), suggesting that regional identity trumped political association. Kim interprets this memorial as “egalitarian” (116) in nature and represents local collective resistance to “a process of culturally taming and ‘civilizing’ marginal people so that they would conform to the ideal set by the center” (118).

In “Invoking the Memory of Kim Kyŏngsŏ,” Chapter Four, Kim continues this thread of her argument by examining the collection and publication of histories and other public writings. These “cultural projects” (119) were intended to foster local pride around northern heroes. By looking at the case of Kim Kyŏngsŏ, a general in the 1619 Ming-Chosŏn battles against the Manchu, she illuminates the contested nature of memory, the push and the pull between those who constructed public memory in Seoul and those who attempted to counter this image in the provinces. She states: “I weigh existing narratives ... not solely to judge which record is correct but to highlight how historical records can tell us more than the stories written down” (122). Doing so will “help us understand how history was constructed, contested, and reconstructed over and over again” (122). Wanting to curtail the growing military and political power of the Later Jin (the Manchu), Ming dynasty China called upon Chosŏn to deploy troops. Within the framework of the tributary relationship and repaying Ming assistance during the Japanese invasion of the 1590s, the Korean court dispatched roughly 20,000 men, including a crack squad of musket-wielding soldiers. However, the Later Jin routed these Ming and Chosŏn troops, decimating many Korean units. In the fighting, certain Chosŏn generals survived, such as Kim Kyŏngsŏ, a

native of P'yŏngan Province, while others perished in combat such as Kim Ungha. Later hagiographies of Kim Ungha elevated him to the rank of national hero while disparaging those generals who supposedly surrendered to the enemy, survived the battle, and hence were national traitors. Offended by such an interpretation, local P'yŏngan elite rallied to the defense of the image of Kim Kyŏngsŏ, convincing the king to rehabilitate him. By then, however, the image of Kim Kyŏngsŏ as "a man of surrender" (134) was too deeply imbedded in the cultural memory of the dynasty. To further contest this negative image, Yi Sihang wrote poetry in praise of Kim Kyŏngsŏ and a biographical record to exonerate him. Later, other local Confucian officials continued this movement and finally succeeded in convincing the court in 1792 to construct a commemorative shrine for him that would "upgrade [him] to national hero" (139). Local heroes such as Kim Kyŏngsŏ were important because their images were invoked to construct regional identity in order to resist central discrimination.

*Voices from the North* is much more than merely a study of a single figure. It provides important resources and background on the social, political, economic, and international conditions of mid-Chosŏn history impossible to find in English language scholarship. One example of the breadth of the study relates to marriage practices. Kim devotes a section of Chapter One to uxori-locality. This earlier marriage custom, in which husbands moved into the homes of their in-laws, raised their children in this setting, and permitted wives to inherit the property of their parents, is believed to have been eradicated by the Confucianization of Korea in the first half of the dynasty. However, Kim disputes this view. The father of Yi Sihang, for instance, entered into an uxori-local marriage in the late seventeenth century after Yi Sihang's mother "begged her father-in-law" to permit the arrangement (37). Not only was their move an important filial gesture, but it would ensure financial security as she was the only child and hence, she and her husband would inherit their property and wealth. Yi Sihang too "established uxori-local residence in P'yongyang

and lived with his in-laws until they died” (39). Kim explains how uxori-locality provided economic and social privileges through inheritance of land and property, especially “a much more desirable home” in the important city of P’yŏngyang. All these sections and subsections of her study help illuminate mid-Chosŏn life on the margins.

Kim’s work also helps us think about the power of central authority in ways other than the control of the examination system or the monopolization of bureaucratic appointment. For instance, elite families of Seoul flexed their cultural muscles by collecting “thousands of books, many of which were imported from China” as well as undertaking other practices, such as collecting Chinese antiques and practicing horticulture (49). Kim writes of these as more than just pastimes. For her, they are ways powerful elite families could “facilitate . . . social networking” (49), building contacts and influence to consolidate their hold over politics.

To offer one minor critique of the monograph, I found the Introduction slightly defensive. As part of her scholarly frame for the study, Kim defends the kind of history she is undertaking with language that comes across as overly dramatic at times. For example, she seeks to “rescue a people and a region that have been crushed to insignificance” (9). The study of such “trivial” people as Yi Sihang and the events of his life, she explains, help illuminate “a sea of changes during his lifetime” (10). All of this is very true, but the tone of her language reveals a defensiveness, a need to explain why she wrote the book. To me, the superb quality of her writing style, the intricate weaving of her arguments, and the meticulous depth and breadth of her research are all the justification she needs to demonstrate that “the microhistorical investigation of a person” (7) matters.

*Voice from the North* is an important addition to Korean historiography. Written for the specialist in Korean history, it can be dense and theoretical at times, and Kim’s arguments are often in dialogue with other studies of the Chosŏn era. Graduate students working in Korean and East Asian history must read it. The monograph will also be of

interest to historians of China, Japan, and those outside East Asian Studies, especially those who do similar work in microhistory.