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.

Regional identity is the topic of the articles by Jang Yoo-seung, "Regional Identities of Northern Literati: A Comparative Study of ‘Pyélyong’ and the Northern Region of Korea: History, Identity & Culture". 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 have received a warm welcome by the Korean studies community and the review by Sun 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 Chosön Korea to nearly contemporary times. The main focus seems to be on late Chosön 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 it relates to supra-regional framework that it is embedded in. In this sense, the book is a very welcome addition to the literature about history and solutions to problems of regional history.

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. Chosön time Pyélyong—an urban center with its own influential elites and all features of Chosön era city life—cannot convincingly be included in the same region as the frontier outpost of Musan or the transit center of Ulju on the Korean-Chinese border. Both the Northern elites and the average peasants have little to do with these 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.

Local elites and modernist scholars of regional history who do not focus on Korea alone.

Felix Stegmund


The book 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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