

Local Strategies of Integration in Late Chosŏn Korea

Professor Sun Joo Kim discusses how families in the P'yŏngan region constructed 'cultural identities' in order to win family prestige and state rewards in late Chosŏn Korea.

By Cynthia Yoo

Professor Sun Joo Kim of Harvard University came to the CKR seminar series on February 27, 2009 to examine the strategies of local elite families of the P'yŏngan Province, in building regional elite status and winning state rewards in late Chosŏn Korea.



These families, Kim argued, took full advantage of state-reward system which emphasized values such as filial piety, brotherly love and devotion to the King. The benefits of being “exemplary” families could be substantial: government tax exemptions, government posts, honorary titles and erection of commemorative halls.

Professor Kim described how the Suan Yi family constructed, negotiated and embodied their regional culture and status.

One important strategy was to show filial piety by honouring and commemorating family ancestors. The Suan Yi family took great pains to adorn their ancestral cemetery, compose biographies, establish ancestral ritual lands and elevate the official titles of the deceased.

Professor Kim surmised that the Suan Yi family was able to receive posthumous prestigious positions for their ancestors by mobilizing personal connections to influential government officials and perhaps even resorting to bribery.

Another important strategy was to compile lineage genealogy because the ‘remembered’ greatness of ancestors affected the fortunes of the descendants. This was what Professor Kim described as the intersection of “private memory” and “public records.” The Suan Yi family strategy was likened to the construction of public family records by the great families of Renaissance Florence.

Strategic marriage alliances were also key to the regional standing of families. Suan Yi family, like other local elites in the region, strived to establish elite networks through marriage ties. Descendants benefitted also by the great and celebrated deeds of their ancestors, whether through direct bloodlines or marriage. Sometimes these marriages were quite close in kinship through the wives’ families.



Professor Kim concluded that these strategic acts by the Suan Yi family show that ‘rethinking Yangban or Sajok’ might be needed. These regional families did not have access to the capital-based elites. Thus, they decided to create close and mutually-beneficial ties with important local families.

Professor Kim aimed to privilege northerners’ yangban identity no matter how the other elites, especially power-holding elites in the capital, tried to discredit northerners’ elite status.

In sum, the Suan Yi example emphasized the importance of: 1. prominent ancestors; 2. remaining in one locality; and, 3. same surname village.

In direct contrast to the prevailing opinion that there was no “yangban” or aristocracy in the north of Chosŏn, the Suan Yi example showed that there might be different factors in the construction of elite identity in Chosŏn Society.