

Introduction

Capturing History through a Person

In 2006, North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) issued a set of seven new stamps (Figure 1). Like many other stamp and currency designs throughout the world, historically famous personalities were engraved prominently on them. The seven are: Ŭlchi Mundŏk (n.d.), a general of the Koguryŏ kingdom (37 BCE–668) who defeated the invading army of the Chinese Sui dynasty (581–618) in 612; Yŏn Kaesomun (?–665), a de facto power-holder of Koguryŏ who took a hardliner foreign policy toward Tang dynasty China (618–907); Sŏ Hŭi (942–98), who used diplomatic persuasion to convince the invading Khitan people who established the Liao dynasty (947–1125) to withdraw in 993; Kang Kamch'an (948–1031), a Koryŏ (918–1392) general who crushed the Khitan invaders in 1018; Yi Kyubo (1168–1241), a late Koryŏ scholar-official who composed an epic in which he glorified the legendary Koguryŏ founder, King Tongmyŏng, as a sage; Mun Ikchŏm (1329–98), who smuggled cotton seeds from China to Korea and subsequently revolutionized Korea's clothing culture; and Kim Ŭngsŏ (1564–1624), a military official of Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910)—also known by his revised name, Kim Kyŏngsŏ—who gained great merit during the Japanese invasions of 1592–1598. All except Kim Ŭngsŏ (hereafter Kyŏngsŏ) are



Figure 1. Seven North Korean stamps. From top left: Ŭlchi Mundök, Yön Kaesomun, Sö Hüi, and Kang Kamch'an; from bottom left: Yi Kyubo, Mun Ikchöm, and Kim Ŭngsö (a.k.a. Kim Kyöngsö). From *Chosön up'yo*, 18.

well-known “heroes” from the pre-Chosön period whose names frequently appear in history textbooks from the elementary grades on up in both North and South Korea (Republic of Korea).

Kim Kyöngsö, the only Chosön person in the list, is relatively unknown to the Korean historical imagination, especially in South Korea. Compared to two of his contemporaries, Yi Sunsin (1545–1598) and Kwak Chaeu (1552–1617)—who were deified as “national heroes” because of their military accomplishments during the Japanese invasions as a naval commander and a militia leader, respectively—Kim has been a stranger even to historians.¹ It is curious, then, that Kim “suddenly” entered the pantheon of “national heroes” in the North Korean imagination.² If he is a new invention in North Korean historical consciousness, and if we concur with Eric Hobsbawm that “inventing traditions . . . is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past,” what sort of historical past is there to now bring Kim to the fore of national history in North Korea?³

Moreover, what historical ties around Kim caused amnesia about him in Korea's historical memory?

Kim's life, military activities during the Japanese invasions and against Jurchen encroachment in the early seventeenth century, and controversial imprisonment inside the Jurchen military camp during the last years of his life are the main subject of investigation in Chapter 4. In that chapter, readers will find more nuanced answers to the just-mentioned questions, but the single most important explanation is that Kim was a northerner from Yonggang, P'yŏngan Province. In Chosŏn Korea, men from the northern provinces of P'yŏngan, Hamgyŏng, and Hwanghae were discriminated against in their bureaucratic careers and socially deprecated for their allegedly non-Confucian cultural traits.⁴ In addition, their history and culture have been largely buried under the nationalistic interpretations of Korean history in modern historical scholarship. Just as Pierre Nora indicates that practitioners of "total" history represent only a particular memory while repressing and forgetting others,⁵ so have nation-centered historical studies in Korean historiography fundamentally ignored the particular historical experiences of different regions of the Korean peninsula, and the northern region in particular.⁶ This book is a study of the northern region of Chosŏn Korea, P'yŏngan Province in particular, from a regional perspective and through one man's life. It seeks to fill a gap in Korean historiography—namely, the lack of historical study of this region.⁷

This is not the first work on the northern region. In a masterful work on the topic, O Such'ang sets out the two aims of his study: to explicate the characteristics of Chosŏn ruling elites by examining their dealings with the regional issues of P'yŏngan Province; and to investigate how the new social forces that had grown within the circumstances of the region—discrimination against the north—tried to overcome general social problems.⁸ More concretely, he examines how P'yŏngan residents were discriminated against, what sorts of effort kings and officials put into resolving this problem, and how the P'yŏngan people themselves tried to improve the position of their province in Chosŏn politics. In addition, he explains these issues in the context of a larger social and political structure and its changes in the late Chosŏn period.⁹ O's work is the first comprehensive study in modern Korean historiography that focuses on regional issues and is thus the foundation for later studies such as the present book.¹⁰ Yet O's study largely relies on official sources left by central elites, which therefore represent their voices. The present study offers the opposite perspective—a local one—on how P'yŏngan

literati lived in a social and political environment of regional discrimination. Yet the local does not exist without the center. The history of a region makes more sense when it is situated within the dynamic interactions between the center and the region itself. Therefore, the purpose of this book is to resurrect forgotten historical memories of people, family, lineage, and region, and at the same time enrich the social history of late Chosŏn.

This work has a biographical format in order not only to investigate a person's life within the changing world but also to create a space where private and public intersect. I find biographical writing particularly useful for this project because I can place my subject, Yi Sihang (1672–1736), at the center of the historical stage while describing, analyzing, and reconstructing the world around him through his own life story. For that reason, I do not aim to carry out a psychoanalysis of Sihang's personality, nor merely to chronicle daily experiences and monumental life events while glossing over historical, cultural, and geographical context, nor to present a complete picture of Sihang's life. Rather, I intend to analyze Sihang's "subjective identity and its relationship to social organizations and cultural representations" as a central way to understand the issue of "regional subjectivity," as Joan Scott has done for her study of gender.¹¹ By regional subjectivity, I mean a feeling of belonging to a region, subsequent realization of what such regional belonging meant, and striving to voice regional issues through various venues such as political actions and everyday activities, as well as to inscribe them in written words. As a microcosm of history, biography facilitates a deeper understanding of the workings of history and culture at the individual level, and at the same time imparts historical agency to people, allowing historians to shift their gaze from grand structures and hollow theories to the particular and precise experiences of people and groups, the nature and evolution of their identities, and the ways they interact among themselves and with larger entities, including the state. In Korean historiography, biography is not a new lens with which to look into historical pasts. In traditional Confucian historiography, biographies of illustrious as well as evil personalities were an integral part of historical writings, though they tended to be didactic and, in the case of celebrated subjects, essentially hagiographic. Historians in modern times have also adopted biographical writings to study cultural and war heroes of the past, though presentism and teleology tend to leave their work open to charges of being sensational and excessively flattering.¹² Biographical research has recently become popular in history in the West, despite some residual reservations about its validity as a historical

methodology.¹³ By remaining aware of and avoiding the fallibilities of biographical study, my work on Yi Sihang contributes to this growing body of scholarship in historical studies.

Yi Sihang, the agent of the restoration of historical memory of P'yŏngan Province, is an obscure figure in Korea's national history.¹⁴ For the P'yŏngan people, Sihang was not a hero in any sense, although both his contemporaries and regional elites after his death must have known his name, and the latter may have known his writings through his collected literary works (*munjip*), the *Hwaŭn chip* (or *Hwaŭn sŏnsaeng munjip*), published in 1738, two years after his death.¹⁵ The foremost reason Sihang became the object of my study is the availability and content of the sources written by him and about him. Literary works left by P'yŏngan literati are relatively few, and Sihang's predecessors whose collected literary works are extant did not leave much that reveals their lives and thoughts as members of the regional elite.¹⁶ For example, Sŏnu Hyŏp (1588–1653), whom his colleagues lauded as the “Confucius of P'yŏngan Province” (Kwansŏ puja),¹⁷ left extensive writings, but they are mainly poems and discussions of the Confucian classics. It is unknown whether Sŏnu wrote anything in which he expressed his thoughts on regional issues. He was not insensitive to regional problems, regional discrimination in particular. He was recognized as a “rustic scholar” (*sallim*) by the court and called to serve at the court during the reigns of King Injo (r. 1623–1649) and King Hyojong (r. 1649–1659). Yet when he finally arrived in Seoul in 1653, after declining such invitations several times, the court left him waiting outside the palace for many days. He ran out of resources to stay any longer and, no doubt deeply disappointed, went back home.¹⁸ As the problem of regional discrimination became a social and political issue in the mid-seventeenth century, Sŏnu must have felt the injustice of it. Yet we do not have any written evidence with which to analyze his thinking on the problem.

In contrast, Sihang's writings published in his collected works show his sensitivity to regional issues. In particular, Sihang laid the foundation for his fellow P'yŏngan literati's protracted journey toward overcoming regional discrimination, in that he was the author of the memorial submitted to the court in 1714 protesting the biased report on the province made by a royal secret inspector (examined in detail in Chapter 3). This memorial seems to have been the first collective effort by P'yŏngan elites to address a regional problem at the level of the court, and thus to promote their standing at the national level.¹⁹ In addition, Sihang's compilation of historical materials concerning the aforementioned Kim Kyŏngsŏ (1564–1624), a loyalist hero of the early

seventeenth century, grew out of his intention to correctly and permanently establish Kim as not only a regional but also a national hero, thus becoming a critical resource for P'yŏngan elites of later generations in claiming their moral and cultural legitimacy as national elites (as discussed in Chapter 4).

Sihang also left a variety of writings on his own region and culture, filled with his feelings, thoughts, and analyses. For example, the "Song of the Western Capital" (Sŏgyŏng pu), a long poem of about 4,000 Chinese characters, consists of a conversation between a host of the Western Capital (Sŏgyŏng chuŏn), a guest from the Eastern Capital (Tongdo pin), and a master of the Central Capital (Hando taein). The poem begins with the guest boasting about the history and culture of his native place, Kyŏngju, the former capital of the Silla kingdom (57 BCE–935 CE), and derogating the Western Capital, P'yongyang. Outraged by such an insult, the host narrates the history of his own region beginning with Tan'gun and Kija, Koguryŏ, and Koryŏ, and extending all the way down to his own time, so as to demonstrate P'yŏngyang's and the surrounding region's primary and legitimate place in Chosŏn's history. In so doing, he names the loyal and righteous military men who played a critical role in defending and preserving the country by quelling external as well as internal disturbances, Confucians who earned fame for their literary and scholarly achievements, and exemplary persons of the utmost filial piety, loyalty, chastity, and devotion. The host then lists the most illustrious families of the region, which had been successful in producing higher civil service examination (*munkwa*) passers who took pride in their regional culture, with its emphasis on education and learning. In the end the humiliated guest runs away senselessly after losing the debate, and the master declares that he will help civil administration by hiring talented people from P'yŏngan Province. The poem is a parody meant to highlight the region's memorable historical legacy, from Tan'gun and Kija on, and the accomplishments of P'yŏngan people, and to criticize the prejudice held by central and southern elites and resultant discrimination against P'yŏngan residents.²⁰ Sihang's literary writings of all genres in his collected works are dotted with expressions of his pride in the region and its history. His fellow literati as well as later generations must have read these essays and poems, which no doubt left an indelible impression on their minds.

To reconstruct the small world of Yi Sihang, I heavily rely on the commemorative culture in which Sihang lived. As medieval and early modern Europeanists have noted, premodern culture was essentially mnemonic, and late Chosŏn elite culture was also largely pegged to memory.²¹ In a society

where one's status as an elite was primarily determined by one's pedigree, social elites had to invest in proving and displaying their illustrious ancestry. To do so, they mobilized oral tradition, written texts, and other stories and objects that were available and handed down to them. At the same time, they created texts (such as biographies, genealogies, and collected literary works) and objects (such as tomb steles and shrines) to confirm and preserve what needed to be remembered. The enterprise of elevating the status of dead ancestors for the benefit of the living had many facets. It also required the participation of several social groups, beginning with one's immediate family and descent group but including as well the local community and one's social network. Therefore, the project of commemorating ancestors was at the same time a process that created community. Thus this book, particularly Chapter 1, reconstructs Sihang's cultural community that took part in the memory project of which Sihang was a leader, a participant, and an object as well.

This work is a microhistory: "the reduction of scale of observation . . . and an intensive study of the documentary material."²² In a short essay criticizing quantitative history, which tends to obscure and distort facts and generate an abstract, homogenized social history, and introducing research characterized by analysis of "highly circumscribed phenomena—a village community, a group of people, even an individual person," Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni argue that tracing the names of individuals in such sources as property registers, administrative registers, parish registers, and notarial records enables a historian to find a series of facts and subsequently reconstruct "the interconnections among diverse conjunctures."²³ They go on to say that "the lines that converge upon and diverge from the name, creating a kind of closely woven web, provide for the observer a graphic image of the network of social relationships into which the individual is inserted."²⁴ And because, as Edward Muir points out, "the great strength of the microhistories comes from this sensitivity to the nuances of power and the changes of voice in documents," I pay close attention to minute details and even trivial matters from my sources, in order to zoom in on, and understand, "real life" and personal character to the greatest extent possible.²⁵

Much as this book is a microhistoric investigation of a person, it is also an exploration of the cultural and social landscapes that shaped Sihang's identity. Although born in the remote countryside in a region that was socially and politically marginalized, Sihang aimed high and wanted to become a central bureaucrat, a privilege theoretically available to him as a member of an aspiring elite family. Yet it was not long before he realized his

limitations when it came to success as a scholar-official. Individual ability and talent did not matter much in the world of which he wanted to become a part. Instead, his familial and regional backgrounds determined the path of his bureaucratic career. Sihang upheld the Confucian ideal of employing men of talent regardless of where they came from and became a defender of his regional identity. The court and capital-based aristocrats (*pöryöŏl*), however, had been consumed by prolonged ideological debates and factional disputes.²⁶ The main trend in politics at the time was the concentration and consolidation of power in the hands of a small group of capital-based aristocrats, although the door to bureaucratic offices technically remained open to any qualified yangban through the state examinations.²⁷ The pool of qualified yangban was inexorably growing due to much more frequently held state examinations, which also led to increasing numbers of higher civil service examination degree-holders.

This broadening of the elite base satisfied the aspiring marginal elites to the extent of securing their loyalty to the dynasty. Yet the real power brokers in the center never dreamt of relinquishing power to the marginal elites. An exploration of Sihang's life journey therefore displays how he negotiated the various challenges he faced as a person from P'yöngan Province, how he built up the comfortable boundaries of his social and political life, and how he became the agent of his own self. He was not much different from his colleagues from the same region, except that he was probably more vocal in advocating regional elites' equal standing because of his great skills in literary arts, which facilitated his extraordinary personal ties to prominent ministers in the capital. Friendships between men of disparate status could and did exist, and the wealth and refined lifestyle that Sihang created allowed him to enjoy the high culture of the learned elite at the time. Yet what friendship could do for one's worldly success was clearly limited if one's native place was not prestigious, as we will see from Sihang's life story. I should note here that it was not just the literati from P'yöngan Province or the other northern provinces who were politically discriminated against. Evolving factional strife from the late sixteenth century onward, regional associations with a particular faction, and the concentration of power in the hands of the Patriarchs faction (Noron) from the early eighteenth century resulted in very limited access to real power at the court for marginalized elites from southern provinces as well. Yet, the bureaucratic discrimination that southern elites suffered originated largely from politics and to a less degree intellectual orientations, rather than regional and cultural backgrounds.²⁸

Although my research minutely examines “trivial” events and practices, my approach does not shy away from the structural examination of history, in which the analysis of evolving institutions and systems is the main ingredient. My goal is to rescue a people and a region that have been crushed to insignificance “under the weight of vast impersonal structures and forces.”²⁹ It is also complementary to the *longue durée* approach, which focuses on continuities in history over a span of hundreds of years but largely ignores specific moments in the dynamic lives of individual people.³⁰ When investigating events and characteristics of a single person, a small group of people, a region, or an epoch in depth and in detail, the so-called trivial ceases to be “of little worth or importance.” Rather, accumulations of minute details often lead to the explanation of larger social and cultural changes in society. Individual actions, strategies, and choices that sometimes contradict social and cultural norms enrich our understanding of the complex and fluid nature of systems and institutions. Thus, in discussing my subject I avoid the deterministic traits in the structuralist as well as functionalist perspectives while not losing sight of historical and social contexts.³¹ Borrowing Peter Burke’s words, I try to make “a narrative thick enough to deal not only with the sequence of events and the conscious intentions of the actors in these events, but also with structures—institutions, modes of thought, and so on—whether these structures act as a brake on events or as an accelerator.”³² Making the link between particular and general, and between trivial event and structure, has thus been a strategy of writing the present study.

This book is also partly a history of mentalities, although it is not a psychological analysis of a person or an era. I become an uninvited visitor to the inner workings of Yi Sihang’s mind by closely reading his literary works and noticing things that have not previously been observed, for he left his inner imprints in his writings. His collected works are a great resource through which to comb for clues about his life and thought. It is true that the collected works do not give the reader the opportunity to see Sihang’s daily habits, as Liu Dapeng’s diary did for Henrietta Harrison, inviting her into Liu’s daily routine, beginning with his writing an entry in his diary the first thing each morning.³³ But Sihang’s collected works, like those of other literati, do provide colorful life stories through poems, essays, travelogues, anecdotes, biographies of Sihang and his close associates, letters, commemorative writings, and so on. Even very artistic and seemingly abstract works such as poems contain moments of ecstasy, frustration, and sorrow from the author’s life, as well as criticism and praise of events and people. And

the fact that the poems are arranged in chronological order in his collected works helps reconstruct the trajectory of events in Sihang's life.

Sihang was not a nationally renowned scholar-official, yet because he served at the court for a while, we have some official records that bear his name. We can also view social and cultural conditions of the time through the lens of the events to which Sihang was directly and indirectly related. Sihang had several highly recognized historic people as friends, about whom much archival material is available. It is beyond the scope of this work, however, to closely investigate all the writings left by Sihang's famous friends. Therefore, this work is partially prosopographic, for those who were closely intertwined with Sihang have been examined and incorporated into this study to shed light on the larger social environment that affected him. We do not know if Sihang kept a diary. If he did, it has not come down to us. There are relatively rich records on the 1714 memorial movement, of which Sihang was one of the leaders, though not as rich as for the trial of Menocchio (the subject of the microhistoric narrative by Carlo Ginzburg) or for the story of Martin Guerre (both the real one and the imposter) and his wife Bertrande, an intriguing criminal case that caused much controversy after being reconstructed by Natalie Zemon Davis.³⁴ I nevertheless gathered the rather fragmented sources in the texts left by Sihang and in other archival materials, and then attempted to "focus on the details of everyday life where we can see how social structures and ideologies interacted in practice," as Harrison strategizes.³⁵

Although scholars who emphasize structural changes and progress in Korean history schematize social and economic development throughout the late Chosŏn, the aggregated data and evidence often do not present what those changes meant to people—or, indeed, how people felt about the changes around them. By bringing one person's life to the fore, we can witness a sea of changes during his lifetime. Late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Chosŏn Korea was an era of swift political changes and factional politics, especially under King Sukchong (r. 1674–1720), who allegedly manipulated factional strife to serve his monarchical interests. Political problems surrounding royal succession from King Kyŏngjong (r. 1720–1724) to King Yŏngjo (r. 1724–1776) created turmoil that affected almost every official at the court as well as many rural literati, often in very bloody and devastating ways. The division of Westerners (Sŏin) into the Disciples faction (Sorŏn) and the Patriarchs faction had become concrete toward the later years of Sihang's life.³⁶ How did this tumultuous political environment affect

Sihang? What were his responses to political changes and challenges? Did factional politics shape the fate of the marginal region and regional elites?

Sihang's lifetime also coincided with a period of some monumental social and cultural changes that are often subsumed under the broad rubric of "the Confucian transformation of Korea" in honor of Martina Deuchler's seminal work, though she perceives more gradual changes beginning with the founding of the Chosŏn dynasty and culminating in the seventeenth century.³⁷ I explore how P'yŏngan elites responded to and participated in the changes in family rituals and practices (such as marriage, inheritance, and funeral and ancestral rites) that touched every elite household. I argue that by this time conducting proper cultural practices was central to yangban or *sajok* identities, and that P'yŏngan elites strove to meet the ritual and cultural expectations that the elites of other regions honored to claim such identities.³⁸

There was no legal definition of yangban during the Chosŏn dynasty, although scholars have tried to trace the boundaries of yangban status by examining various official and unofficial sources that delineate the qualifications of yangban. They have also examined the cultural milieu of yangban in Chosŏn Korea.³⁹ According to Song Chunho, by the late Chosŏn period, the most important qualifier for yangban status had become one's pedigree. In other words, one had to be able to identify a prominent ancestor (*hyŏnjo*) in one's bloodline.⁴⁰ Mutsuhiko Shima, in his ethnographic fieldwork, noticed that whereas the really prominent ancestors of whom the members of a lineage can boast are those far back in history, those who are actually central to the activities of a lineage association (*munjung*) are more recent but humbler. From that observation, he argues that "remaining" in one locality, and also in a fixed social position, is probably the most crucial matter for yangban-ness.⁴¹ Kim Sŏngu, in his recent study, also highlights that the foremost condition for the ruling yangban (*chibae yangban*), which accounted for only 5 percent of the total population in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Korea, was to form a same surname village (*tongsŏng ch'on*) and lineage association.⁴² Scholarship and office-holding were idealized, yet it was rare for yangban in the countryside to engage in meaningful scholarship, and even rarer for them to have access to bureaucratic offices in the court.⁴³ Therefore, conforming to various cultural practices in their everyday lives, mostly by adhering to the Confucian norms and rituals, became a more important and visible index for being yangban.⁴⁴ For northerners, it remained difficult to obtain a central post, although their chances increased over time as the number of munkwa passers from the north in-

creased dramatically in the late Chosŏn period. As I have argued elsewhere and contend again in this study, northern elites conducted their cultural and social lives as they imagined yangban of other regions did.⁴⁵ Yet central elites (and probably southern elites as well) were biased against northerners, asserting that there were no yangban in the north. And northerners felt this prejudice as most hurtful and insulting.⁴⁶

At the heart of yangban identity and its proof are genealogies. One of the reasons late Chosŏn elite families invested in the compilation of genealogies was to prove their connections to the world of officials as the possibility of members of their family holding central posts became increasingly dim.⁴⁷ The key element in genealogy was to identify the most prominent ancestor in one's pedigree—usually someone who had lived in the late Koryŏ or early Chosŏn period and had held central bureaucratic posts. There are lineages that clearly descend from identifiable great scholars and ministers of the late Koryŏ and early Chosŏn periods. However, the very existence of the prominent ancestors claimed by local descent groups—not to mention their “greatness”—is historically unverifiable in many cases. Likewise, for a majority of northerner yangban descent groups, there is usually no mention in official histories of their prominent ancestors from centuries earlier. The culture of compiling and publishing genealogies did not extend back to when these prominent ancestors lived, for the first known genealogy in Korea was published in the fifteenth century, with only a handful published before the seventeenth century.⁴⁸ It was from the seventeenth century on that many local elite families began to be concerned about keeping genealogical records. Some families did have family records they could consult to reconstruct their ancestry, but most had only an oral tradition and faded memories of their ancestors. Therefore, some engaged in outright fabrication in compiling records on their remote ancestors; others left holes and inconsistencies in their family records. Many small, unrecognized local families tried to link themselves to well-established lineages in their reconstruction efforts. All this apparently followed a trend of the time—namely, to identify prominent ancestors who in turn would verify the yangban status of their descendants.

Elites all over the country were in more or less the same cultural boat. Yet it is only northerners' yangban identity that was challenged in the late Chosŏn—and that continues to be questioned even in current historical scholarship.⁴⁹ Northerners often claimed that their prominent ancestors had originally relocated to the north because of banishment or the government's population relocation policy in the early Chosŏn period. Some of these

prominent ancestors are connected to historically well-known figures, while other ancestors' connection to the southern branches remains ambiguous. Northerners were very cautious in reconstructing their ancestry, especially when they tried to establish blood connections with southern branches and renowned historical personalities.⁵⁰ As Song Chunho indicates, fabrication could have taken place, yet fabrication was easily disclosed.⁵¹ If northerner genealogies were faulty, so were those of southerners. What is important is why local elites invested so much in remembering their prominent ancestors and putting them on record.

In her study of local elites in South China, Helen F. Siu points out that the claims made by major lineages of the region that their ancestors had originated from the cultural centers of North China may have been a cultural response to the political economy of late imperial China. In other words, these lineages actively appropriated the cultural symbols of the larger polity to consolidate their position on the local political stage and to safeguard their economic interests (expanded landholdings, wealth, and power) in the emerging agricultural and commercial center. Siu argues that a long history of settlement, lineage power, literati pretensions, and ritual practices reinforced positions of power pursued by the local wealthy and were a way to exclude their contenders.⁵² Similarly, compilation of genealogies and claims of prominent ancestry, along with other commemorative projects, helped local elites in seventeenth-century Chosŏn Korea solidify their elite position and, ideally, prove their qualification to participate in the court. Financial aspects of this commemorative culture could be speculated upon as well, but would be harder to prove because yangban literati did not openly discuss their economic situation.

This dominant cultural language permeated local society through aspiring local elites, who adopted notions from the political center in that particular historical moment and applied them to their daily life. Northerners claimed that their ancestors came from yangban of the center or of the south at a particular time and in a particular cultural context, appropriating cultural symbols of the central elite and their power, in an effort to render themselves eligible to be legitimate elite members of the state. The reality was that they never reached the top of the center, but their claimed ancestry enabled them to participate in the central bureaucracy and gave them a competitive edge in local politics, as well as economic advantages. The state, for its part, had no reason to censure northerners' reconstruction of their ancestry and subsequent assertion of yangban status because local elites,

with their claimed privilege of access to the center, were instrumental in ordering local society.⁵³ And this was true not only of northerners but also of people in the southern provinces.⁵⁴

The kinds of sources I introduce in this book are “marginal” ones to scholars who narrate Korean history from the perspective of the center. The official sources in particular are usually silent about the social realities of P’yŏngan Province and the people living there. Moreover, official reports about this region sometimes present a distorted picture of its social conditions because the reporter evaluated things there from his own perspective. Sources from the periphery, in contrast, have been marginalized as unworthy or unreliable. In this book I argue, in emulation of Ginzburg and Poni, that “a truly exceptional document can be much more revealing than a thousand stereotypical documents.”⁵⁵ Natalie Zemon Davis also supports using unusual cases, “for a remarkable dispute can sometimes uncover motivations and values that are lost in the welter of the everyday.”⁵⁶ Thus marginal cases and sources can provide “clues to or traces of a hidden reality”—clues that are not usually present in centrally produced documents.⁵⁷

When historiography has been defined as the history of memory, or the study of what has been remembered,⁵⁸ subjects such as Yi Sihang, his family, and the region have been ruled out, because such studies largely focus on narratives on nation and historical development from ancient times to the present. This study is the story of a person, and thus addresses the complexity of individual life by staying close to human experiences. Sihang was a marginal man when viewed from the center, yet he was an extremely privileged person who enjoyed a bureaucratic career, literary fame, and wealth and leisure. He was also a socially conscientious man who utilized his human, material, and intellectual resources when acting as an advocate of his region. He took a conservative stance, like many regional elites in his time and after, and sought change in peaceful ways that were acceptable in the ideological milieu of his time. Because he was such an ordinary man in this sense, Sihang’s life and work provide us with a useful window through which to observe political events, social and cultural practices, and intellectual trends in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The world we “discover” through Sihang’s views—which is thus a regional one—is different from the one popularly imagined in Korean historiography past and present, which looks, rather, at the center and the nation.