

Specialization and Status: Late Chosŏn Period Magistrates on the Northern Border, 1623–1894

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In late Chosŏn period rhetoric, the border was an area of pernicious wickedness. The perception of threat at and from the border meant that those men appointed to the border should possess uncommon virtue and ability. However, the reality in Chosŏn Korea was that service at most border counties was unappealing and unrewarding. Faced with the difficulties of appointing the right kind of magistrate in all counties Chosŏn officials prioritized only a few counties: Kanggye, Hoeryŏng, and Ch'angsŏng. Using registers of officials (*sŏnsaengan*) in gazetteers and the appointment records of the *Sŭngjŏngwŏn ilgi* paints a fuller portrait of the process and people who staffed border posts along Chosŏn's northern border with China throughout the late Chosŏn period. It makes clear that the key counties at the northern border were at the nexus of border security and status within the bureaucracy.

Keywords: borders, magistrates, Kanggye, Hoeryŏng, Ch'angsŏng

Introduction

“Up at the border, it is different than the interior. People's minds easily become disordered and crooked.” – Yi Sŏnghyo, sent as secret censor (*Amhaeng ŏsa*) to the P'yŏngan border, 1739¹

1. *Sŭngjŏngwŏn ilgi* (SJW) 897.42a [1739/9/9, 12th entry]: 邊上異於內地民心易致驚擾. Citations for the SJW are from Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe [National Institute of Korean History], ed., *Sŭngjŏngwŏn ilgi* [Records of the Royal Secretariat] (Kwach'ŏn: Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe, 2016). Accessed via *Han'guksa teit'ŏbeisŭ* [Database of Korean History], <http://sjw.history.go.kr/main.do>.

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