

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN KOREA

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Chang Soo Moon, ed. 1999. Seoul: Korea Local Authorities Foundation for International Relations.

After reading the first few pages of this text, the reader may be left wondering "exactly what is this book attempting to accomplish?" At first glance, it looks like a college textbook. And indeed, Chapter 1 (Overview of Local Government in Korea) very much reads this way. After an introductory section in Chapter 2 (Structure of Local Government), however, the form of the book takes a dramatic turn.

The Preface opens with a statement of the two purposes of the book, "first, to provide factual information about Korean local politics for those who are interested in Korea's system of local government; and second, to offer definitive reference resources to foreign scholars, students, practitioners, diplomats, and others who have an interest in the evolution of Korean democracy." Referring back to the Table of Contents after reading further in Chapter 2, one realizes that this is more of a "book of facts" than an analytical treatise. In this regard, the book is a solid success: it provides detailed facts about the legal structure of Korea's system of local government. It discusses the evolution and effect of Korea's Local Autonomy Act (and relevant decrees), and a translation of the lengthy Local Autonomy Act is included in an appendix. Clearly, the book is a useful reference on the law of local autonomy for those of us less than fluent in Korean. On the

other hand, politics and democracy are hardly discussed beyond a few rhetorical platitudes in the first and last chapters.

Korea Local Authorities Foundation for International Relations (KLAFIR), as a government-founded institute to support local governments, is a logical source for a work of this sort. While edited works typically indicate the contributions of individual contributors, the fact that this foundation's publication does not do so is not particularly relevant but for the fact that within individual chapters, material is sometimes repeated in various sections. In this case, it is unclear whether there were multiple contributors, or if this could be a problem of terminology, based on the overlapping uses of the term "local government."

As has been well documented in public media, regionalism has been a long-running problem in Korea. Perhaps because of this issue, the book generally avoids the use of the term regional governments -- the term "region" is chiefly used in a short section in Chapter 10 (Issues and Prospects) to describe areas within provinces, rather than the provinces themselves or the historic geographic divisions of the Korean peninsula (Youngnam, Honam, etc.). Instead of referring to regional and local governments, the book uses the terms upper-level and lower-level local governments, which is somewhat confusing even if a proper translation from the original Korean-language text.

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European-and North American-trained policy & administration scholars may be a bit mystified by this term “upper-level local governments.” Although the history of Korea indicates that autonomous governmental units below the national level are “localized” to some degree, language such as “regional governments,” “provincial/metropolitan governments,” or “intermediate-level governments” would offer a clearer reference for the various discussions that take place.

The historical development of government localization in Korea is well documented in the first chapter. Understanding the erratic progression from an “imperial delegates” form of local administration provides a helpful backdrop when considering the current situation, as do the comparatives to Japan and other governments’ local administration histories. More could be added, the “single law” versus “home rule” discussion in Chapter 1 surely deserves more than one brief paragraph if facilitating the understanding of foreign scholars is a principle aim of this material. One might well argue that a lack of freedom to reshape local government to respond to local needs undermines the entire concept of localization of administration no less than the national government’s control of local revenues. Devolution as compared to localization, and a comparison of federalized systems versus Korea’s integrated government approach, would have offered still more areas for conceptual understanding of Korea’s localization process.

There is an extensive and useful collection of tables and figures throughout the text, which display helpful data on local issues, allocations of duties, authority, and responsibilities, statistics. Unfortunately, many of these lack data source attribution, and the book does not include footnotes, references, or a bibliography. These shortcomings seriously undermine the expressed

purpose of offering a “definitive reference” for scholars. Nevertheless, Chapter 2 provides very useful, contemporary information on the demographics involved in managing Korea’s local administrative areas.

An ongoing debate among foreigners in Korea is the translation of terms for Korean governmental units. While there may be no pleasing everyone, this text offers unequal treatment: city is nearly uniformly used (instead of *shi*), whereas *gun* is seldom translated. The use of “autonomous district” for municipal *ku* (*gu* is also used in this book) is a case of a near-meaningless translation, a looser interpretation (such as “metropolitan borough”), at least in the early stages, would have been clearer. The book also suggests that the translation for an urban *dong* is “block,” whereas most foreigners would probably suggest “neighborhood,” “city district,” or “precinct” as preferred terms for municipal subdivisions of this size. A glossary supplement with common translations of the many Korean terms would perhaps be helpful for readers not familiar with the Korean language.

In many areas of the book, the Local Autonomy Act is discussed in a clear and cogent manner, with discussions of practical application and current difficulties. Intermeshed with these factual accounts, however, is conjecture and pure opinion. This occurs throughout the text -- page 266 points out that [o]verall, it seems that the central government in Korea continues to influence and scrutinize too many affairs of local governments...”. Within this same chapter, describing Inter-governmental Relations, it briefly describes the relevant law and identifies difficulties in practice, but does little to discuss how governments are currently working together, both in horizontal and vertical associations. Examples of multi-province and joint-municipal government

affiliations abound in Korea, but instead, each of two dozen or so legally possible associations, and other issues in IGR, are discussed in a short paragraph for each. In essence, Chapter 9 magnifies the shortcomings of current practice in Korean localization by failing to display the successes.

This book shines in Chapters 7 and 8, describing public finance and tax. The earliest pages of the text introduce the problems, with comparison to Japan's "30% local autonomy." It is suggested in Chapter 1 that Korea's situation is much worse than Japan's. Chapter 7 discusses public finance at length, and Chapter 8 focuses on the division of tax revenues between the national and local governments. The tables and figures in these chapters, when considered against the legal requirements reported in Chapter 5 (Function of Local Government) and the information provided in Chapter 4 concerning the institutions of local government, pulls the data together into a meaningful whole.

Chapter 10 (Issues and Prospects), as is customary with final chapters in texts of this sort, is an emotive appeal for further progress in the localization process. It does an excellent job of summarizing those areas that are yet to be overcome in the process of balancing the central and non-central governmental units in Korea.

*Local Government in Korea* is a groundbreaking work, and will be an invaluable aid to foreigners attempting to come to grips with Korea's localization process. Despite a few minor weaknesses, it makes a worthwhile contribution to the advancement of knowledge, and should be on every Korean scholar's reference list. As a further benefit, the full book is available to download from the internet, free, as "zipped" hwp files with full graphics, at: <http://www.klafir.or.kr/eng/sub3/main.htm> (hwp files require Hangu Computer Company's "Arae Hangu" word-processing software, which will operate on any Windows computer).