

Beyond Yi And Yu

The Quest For Understanding Japan's 1592-1598 Invasion Of Korea

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Introduction

Japan's 1592 invasion of Korea is one of the pivotal events in Asian history. It is commonly portrayed as a foreshadowing of Japan's later emergence as a world power and as an example of the negative consequences to the region when China is weak and unstable. Remarkably, the invasion is often cited, yet its historiography is rarely examined.

In 1972, nearly four centuries after it was written, portions of a Korean government official's account of Japan's 1592-1598 invasions of Korea were translated into English and appeared in an academic journal as "Record of Reprimands and Admonitions (*Chingbirok*)".¹ Two years later a Korean author published *Admiral Yi and His Turtleboat Armada* and provided readers the first book in English about Japan's invasions. Thirty years later, a full translation of *Chingbirok* was finally published as a Korea Research Monograph by the University of California's Institute of East Asian Studies and provided dramatic insight into one of the most violent periods of Korean history.² In the last four years, there have been two other notable publications addressing the conflict- *Samurai Invasion*, by Stephen Turnbull and "Crouching Tigers, Secret Weapons" by Kenneth Swope.³ Each of these works, as well as the increased frequency of articles on the topic, are testimony to heightened interest in the history of the region and to recent efforts to rectify the scarcity of English language accounts of the war.

This essay provides an assessment of the five works and presents them in relation to other significant writings about the 1592-1598 conflict. It is not intended to be a comprehensive bibliography, but it will attempt to introduce the works and provide a framework for understanding the conflict as well as the rise of interest in the subject.

1 Bacon, *Records*.

2 Choi, *Corrections*.

3 Turnbull, *Samurai*; Swope, *Weapons*.

Initial Sources

One of the initial frustrations in conducting research on this topic has been the multiple labels used for the years from 1592 to 1598 when Japan invaded, occupied, and eventually withdrew from the Korean peninsula. Although one author has described the conflict Asia's first "regional world war", there is yet to be a definitive title for the conflict.⁴ Perhaps revealing an initial bias toward the topic, Stephen Turnbull has described it as "Japan's Korean War of 1592-1598". Similarly, the conflict is described as "The Hideyoshi Invasion (1592-1598)" in one of the most prominent English language Korean history textbooks.⁵ Others have labeled the conflict the "Sino-Japanese-Korean War", the "War of the Korean Peninsula", and the "Imjin War".⁶

One title that has not been used, but seems to be implied in several early works is "Admiral Yi's Defeat of Japan". Often described as Korea's greatest hero, Admiral Yi Sun-Shin, was the commander of a naval force in Southeastern Korea during the conflict.⁷ His notable performance during the war (perhaps as much as his personal connections to Korea's Prime Minister), resulted in him being cast as a "god of war."⁸

His diary, *Nanjung Ilgi* (War Diaries) and his formal battle reports, *Imjin changch'o* (Admiral Yi Sun-sin's memorials to court) were among the first Korean language texts to be translated into English and accordingly, carry with them a great degree of influence. Stephen Turnbull describes them as the "two vital compendia giving highly detailed coverage by a reliable witness and the "most valuable primary source material translated at this time" (2002).⁹

Park's Admiral Yi

The scarcity of English language materials covering Japan's 16th Century invasion of Korea is especially evident in *Korea*, a fairly recent bibliographical resource on Korea. Published in 1997, the book contains thousands of English language source materials on Korea's history, geography, religion, culture, and social structure. With the exception of the previously mentioned

4 Swope, *Weapons*, 11.

5 Eckert, *Korea*, 145.

6 Swope, *Weapons*, 11 and 14. Choi, *Corrections*, 1. The term *Imjin* refers to the Asian Zodiac character of the dragon that is frequently used to designate the year of the first Japanese invasion of Korea (1592 AD).

7 Turnbull, *Samurai*, 227, and Park Yune-Hee, *Admiral Yi*, 17.

8 Choi, *Corrections*, 228.

9 Turnbull, *Samurai*, 246.

War Diary and the battle reports of Admiral Yi Sun-shin, only one other book on the conflict is listed.¹⁰ That book, *Admiral Yi and His Turtleboat Armada*, was written in 1973 by Park Yune-Hee, a young journalist and is widely accepted to be the first original writing in English on the subject of the war.

Aptly described as an “enthusiastic account of Korea’s great naval hero”, *Admiral Yi and His Turtleboat Armada* is as remarkable for its nationalistic bias, as it is for its inaugural attempt to present the conflict to Western readers.¹¹ Despite its misleading title, the book is much more than a glorification of the Admiral’s naval prowess. Drawing heavily upon the War Diary and battle reports, Park provides numerous examples of the brilliance, bravery, and patriotism of Admiral Yi. What proves more valuable, however, is the background to the conflict and his analysis of the initial stages of the war.

Presented in the first half of the book, the background and analysis of the conflict are often flawed but they represent an initial contemporary perspective from which to build upon. Two common themes occurring in most accounts of the 1592-1598 conflict relate to the causes of the war and the reasons for Japan’s eventual withdrawal. In his chapter on “War Preparations”, Park attempts to convince the reader that Japan’s military leader, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, lacked sufficient support from his subordinates to carry out an invasion of the peninsula. He states

In fact, Hideyoshi failed to win the enthusiastic support for his adventure from even his intimate lieutenants, although they did not dare openly oppose him. For this reason, it may be safe to say that lack of enthusiasm on the part of Japanese generals foredoomed the invasion from the start.¹²

Similarly, he describes Hideyoshi as “...in everyway unhappy as a family man. His happiness was evidenced, among other things, by the fact that he did not beget an heir until he became 54 years old...”.¹³ These passages reflect Park’s tendency to provide rash unsubstantiated judgment. Indeed, one of the most troublesome qualities of *Admiral Yi and His Turtleboat Armada*, is that it lacks some of the basic components expected from a serious attempt to correct

10 Hoare, *Korea*, 36-40.

11 Hoare, *Korea*, 36.

12 Park, *Admiral Yi*, 56.

13 Park, *Admiral Yi*, 54.

the “distortions and prejudice” he believes that “historians and scholars of Western and American countries (sic) have been misled to believe”. There is no index. There are no footnotes or endnotes. Information provided in the bibliography is limited to titles and author names.¹⁴

Despite these shortcomings, Park’s book is a valuable asset for a non-Korean speaking reader. Although his bibliography is lacking in many aspects, it is an initial point of departure for further study. Notably, in the Korean language publications listed as references, the first two are Admiral Yi’s war diary (*Nanjung ilgi*) and his battle reports (*Changgye chobon*). The third Korean language source listed is *Chingbirok* (War Memoirs) by Yu Song-nyong.¹⁵

Chingbirok

Like the 1592-1598 occupation, *Chingbirok*, has the unfortunate fate of having been given several English language titles, none of which adequately convey either its content or significance.¹⁶ Park’s 1974 translation of the title as “War Memoirs” is misleading because it gives the impression that the book is a collection of personal accounts of combat.¹⁷ It certainly is not. A different translation of the title that first appeared in 1972 is “Record of Reprimands and Admonitions.”¹⁸ The most recent translation of the title has been “The Book of Corrections.”¹⁹ Each of these title translations has its own shortcomings, but all convey to the intent of Yu Songnyong, the author, to pass on his judgment of the war.

Yu’s writings are especially significant because he held several important official positions within Korean ministries before the war and during the conflict he served as Prime Minister. His account of the war was completed in 1604 while he was exiled from the capital.²⁰ Details of his exile are not clear, but based on the content of *Chingbirok*, it can be guessed that

14 Park, *Admiral Yi*, 36.

15 Park, *Admiral Yi*, 263.

16 *Jingbirok* is the English spelling for the translated title. Another spelling, *chingbirok*, has also been used. Its characters in modern Chinese are 懲愆录 (*chengbilu* in pinyin). Translated individually the characters are punish/penalize (*cheng*), caution (*bi*), and record/register/memoir (*lu*).

17 Park, *Admiral Yi*, 263.

18 Bacon, *Records*, 7.

19 Choi, *Corrections*, ix.

20 Bacon, *Records*, 7-8.

he may have fallen into disfavor due to some aspect of his performance of duties during the conflict. Hints of this may be seen in the book's preface when the author relates

An unworthy person like me, who received an important government position at a time of peregrination and lawlessness, but was unable to uphold the tottering and support the falling, cannot expiate his crime even by death..... Therefore, during this time of leisure, I will narrate in a rough fashion what I heard and saw and summarize in a few words what happened between the years of Imjin (1592) and Musul (1598).²¹

Although, it is uncertain whether Yu's ulterior motive in writing *Chingbirok* may have been to restart his political career, it seems likely that a key purpose of the book was to praise, publicize, and propagandize the actions of a close boyhood friend, Admiral Yi Sun-shin.²² Five of the book's 62 vignettes cover Yi's notable achievements in defeating Japanese naval forces. The final two vignettes are testimonies to his superior leadership and patriotism. Killed in battle during the final stages of the conflict, Admiral Yi appears to be the divine hero for a nation in search of a source of pride after suffering from the atrocities of Japanese occupation, as well as the ideal vehicle for a government official in search of a means to return to the circles of power and redeem himself.

Wilbur Bacon's *Chingbirok*

Besides the amazing coincidence of two boyhood friends becoming authors of the most influential Korean language sources about the 1592-1598 war, there seems to be another perplexing issue regarding *Chingbirok* which concerns a "lost translation" of the work. As noted in the paper's introduction, portions of *Chingbirok* were first translated into English in 1972. They appeared as an article by Wilbur Bacon in the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society's journal *Transactions*. What seems incredible, however, is not that it took almost five centuries for portions of an English language translation to appear- it is that in 2002, when the full

21 Bacon, *Records*, 9-10.

22 Choi, *Corrections*, 37. There are several spellings of the Admiral's full name. To alleviate possible confusion, this paper will continue to use the version which appears in Park's biography of Admiral Yi.

translation of *Chingbirok* was published, there was no mention whatsoever in the monograph of Bacon's work.

Wilbur Bacon spent twenty years in Korea before returning to the United States in 1967 to pursue postgraduate work at the University of California at Berkeley. Unfortunately, he was only able to translate the first seven vignettes of the book before he died in 1971. His work was published posthumously in *Transactions* with an accompanying introduction and eulogy which recognized Bacon by stating "Korean historical studies suffered a great loss" by his passing.²³

Bacon's introduction to *Chingbirok*, obviously written without foreknowledge of his death, is brief but noteworthy. It explains that Yu's book actually consisted of two distinct parts. "The first part, in two chapters, is Yu's personal account of the Japanese invasion with a brief preface explaining why he wrote it. The remaining 14 chapters are documents relating to the war."²⁴ Another notable feature of Bacon's introduction translation is that it acknowledges his translation was based on a North Korean edition of *Chingbirok* that was published in the late 1950's. He cautions that a Japanese translation of the first two chapters of Yu's book appeared in 1966 was also based upon the North Korean edition published but should be "used with care because the translation is overly free and contains errors."²⁵

Bacon's translation of the initial portions of *Yingbirok* represent a pioneer effort to discover and reveal to an English speaking audience the basic elements of the 1592-1598 conflict. His unfinished translation of Yu's memoirs ended in a vignette describing marginal Korean efforts in 1592 to bolster their defenses for what seemed to be an impending Japanese invasion. Accordingly, many of the major questions about the conflict (i.e. to what extent was China involved? What ended the conflict? How severe was the Japanese occupation?) were neither translated nor addressed in the preface. Nonetheless, Bacon's efforts should be recognized for opening the door to a succession of subsequent English language writings about the war.

23 Smith, "In Memory", 5.

24 Bacon, *Records*, 8. The first "part" which Bacon speaks of consists of the 62 vignettes. His translation ended in the middle of the seventh. Some descriptions of *Chingbirok* have called these vignettes "chapters", but due to their length (usually one to two pages) I have used the term *vignette*.

25 Bacon, *Records*, 7.

Stephen Turnbull's *Samurai Invasion*

In 2002, a book was published that is the most thorough treatment to date of Japan's 16th Century invasion of Korea. *Samurai Invasion*, by British military historian Stephen Turnbull, is a 250 page book replete with footnotes, colorful maps, and relevant photographs that provide the reader with an array of visual cues to the accompanying text. Turnbull's description of the book as "the most original work I have ever done" reflects his reputation as an author who has written extensively on Japan's warrior class.²⁶

Samurai Invasion represents a major step forward in the study of the causes, conduct, and termination of the war. If *Admiral Yi and His Turtleboat Armada* could be considered to be "swing" at the ball, then Turnbull's work is a solid "base hit." Unlike Park's book, *Samurai Invasion* highlights, but does not overemphasize, the significance of Admiral Yi's heroism. Turnbull makes excellent use of Korean and Japanese sources to provide details of weaponry, order of battle, and military personalities who played key roles in the conflict. A major strength of his work is its logic and simplicity. Clearly written for an audience with a background in military history, *Samurai Invasion* also provides readers unfamiliar with the intricacies of pre-modern warfare an opportunity to become familiar with key issues associated with the 1592-1598 war.

Although Turnbull apparently did not have the benefit of access to a full English translation of *Chingbirok* while writing *Samurai Invasion*, he appears to be very familiar with Yu's memoirs. The first four chapters of *Samurai Invasion* contain multiple references to *Chingbirok* and Turnbull often differs with Yu's opinions and conclusions. He never contradicts or downplays Yu's high praise for the combat exploits of Admiral Yi, but recognizes that other military officers may have been unfairly judged. He writes "Yet some of the generals who were to come in for withering criticism from Yu Song-nyong had in the past shown a genuine ability to learn from their mistakes and to make changes."²⁷

Turnbull's work has some serious, but not fatal shortcomings. One author has paid the book the left-handed compliment of being the "first popular account" to provide "a solid general narrative of the war."²⁷ As reflected in its title, *Samurai Invasion* is more about a Japanese attack rather than a Korean experience. Occasional descriptions of immense suffering by Korea's

26 Dr. Stephen Turnbull Professional Services. http://www.stephenturnbull.com/frameset_bookshop.html.

27 Swope, *Weapons*, 15.

population are provided, but the reader generally views the war from the field of battle, not from the perspective of a displaced civilian or shamed government official.

Samurai Invasion may have a predominant military and Japanese perspective, but it does not seem to have an agenda (in the pejorative sense of the word). Turnbull explains, narrates, and offers insight but he does not propagandize or campaign. His frequent attempt to use analogies from European history (i.e. Hideyoshi has the “stature of a deified super-Napoleon”, Admiral Yi is “like England’s Lord Nelson”, and the battle of Hansando is “both the Salamis and Trafalgar of Korea”) are reminders that he is definitely writing to an English-speaking readership. However imprecise the analogies may be, they do not substantially detract from the overall impressiveness of the book.²⁸

Choi Byonghyon’s *Chingbirok*

2002 was a benchmark for English language sources concerning the Imjin War. Not only was Steven Turnbull’s *Samurai Invasion* published, but a completed translation of Yu Songnyong’s *Chingbirok* appeared as a Korea Research Monograph from the University of California’s Institute of East Asian Studies. As mentioned previously, Yu’s memoirs are considered to be one of the seminal source documents for learning about the war. Choi Byonghyon, a writer of Korean fiction and professor of English and Korean literature, supplements the translation of Yu’s original work with an extensive bibliography, translator’s preface, and thirteen page introduction.²⁹

Choi’s introductory essay is insightful and helpful in placing *Chingbirok* into its proper perspective of being an effort to “correct” the record. He notes that although Yu’s memoirs have much in common with the Western concept of history, *Chingbirok* also reflects a “strong moral purpose, which is more manifest in the Oriental tradition.”³⁰ Choi also provides an excellent historical background to the book that begins with the Three Kingdoms period and includes major developments within Japan that led to the unification and the eventual decision to invade Ming China via Korea.

28 Turnbull, *Samurai*, 229, 100, 227.

29 Despite Wilbur Bacon’s prior association with UC Berkeley, his initial translation of the first portions of *Jingbirok* are not included in the three page bibliography. Nor are they mentioned anywhere in Choi’s book. This seems to be an incredible omission.

30 Choi, *Corrections*, 2.

The essay, however contains some gross oversimplifications that without qualification are insufficient and misleading. In one such instance, he credits Korea's guerrilla armies and Chinese military intervention (reinforced by the Admiral Yi's naval forces) for stopping Hideyoshi's imperial intents, and continues "The Chinese army defeated the Japanese at Pyongyang, Yi Sungshin destroyed Japanese fleets, and the Korean volunteer guerilla armies, an estimated 22,200 soldiers, harassed the Japanese throughout the country."³¹

Condensing the major events of the six year conflict to this brief passage might have been understandable for an essay as brief as the one Wilbur Bacon wrote for his 1972 translation, but for the thirteen pages of text Choi provides, a more thorough treatment of the conflict should have been provided. Choi's translation will not be remembered for its introductory essay, however. It is the masterful presentation of Yu's complete memoirs, for the first time in English, that will cause this book to appear on future reading lists and bibliographies covering the Imjin War.

Kenneth Swope's "Crouching Tigers, Secret Weapons"

Earlier this year, the *Journal of Military History* published an article about the Imjin War by Kenneth Swope, a professor of history at Ball State University. The title of Swope's article, "Crouching Tigers, Secret Weapons: Military Technology Employed During the Sino-Japanese-Korean War, 1592-1598" reveals the central theme he attempts to develop - that contemporary understanding of the conflict is essentially flawed because it underemphasizes the critical role technology played in the conflict. To continue the metaphor of a player at bat, Swope's article is a solid hit, but it's a foul. He connects with the ball, but he swings too hard and goes in the wrong direction.

Swope's major point, that history has ignored the central role weapons technology played on the peninsula from 1592-1598, has merit. He makes a convincing case that Chinese artillery and naval canon were instrumental in the defeat of Japanese forces and that previous authors have erred in missing the significance evolving military technology in the conflict. His criticism of Turnbull, is especially scathing. Swope writes

First of all, Turnbull relies entirely on Japanese and English-language secondary materials, augmented by a few translations of

31 Choi, *Corrections*, 6.

primary sources. He uses virtually nothing written from the Chinese perspective, not even widely available English-language reference works or monographs. He also leaves out much important Japanese scholarship.... As a result the work is one-sided and presents a rather flawed interpretation of the war.³²

The strength of Swopes' article is the emphasis it places on considering new sources (particularly from Ming China) and on taking into account possible bias from previous sources. He is especially critical of Japanese historical writings of the period that "exaggerate the prowess" of the samurai forces, yet he seems to turn a blind eye to the possibility that Yu Songnyong's accounts of the conflict may be similarly flawed.³³ Toward the end of his article, however, he does call into question one of the accounts of Admiral Yi's naval battles when he writes "Korean sources have tended to give Yi and his ships almost all the credit for defeating the Japanese. Though this is an exaggeration in my opinion...."³⁴

"Crouching Tigers, Secret Weapons" is a bold and critical article that is likely to stimulate response and further research about the Imjin War. Swope notes that his next book will be focus on the Ming Chinese response to Japan's 16th Century invasions of Korea. If his book is as critical and provoking as his article, it is certain to attract additional scholarly attention.

Conclusion

Western scholarship on the 1592-1598 Imjin War has evolved considerably since Wilbur Bacon's translation of the initial portion of *Chingbirok*, was published in 1972. The three writings which have appeared in the last several years especially reflect the scholarly process of authors building upon the work of previous writers and of reevaluating their sources of knowledge. Additionally, they reflect an acceleration of interest and works on the conflict which appears to correspond with the increasingly greater role the nations of East Asia are playing in world affairs, interpretations of previous inter-regional conflicts such as the Imjin War are likely to experience a corresponding increase.

32 Swope, *Weapons*, 15.

33 Swope, *Weapons*, 32.

34 Swope, *Weapons*, 32.

Similarly, the prominence of some Korean, Japanese, and Chinese historical figures may be called into question. Specifically, a serious academic reevaluation of the characterization of Admiral Yi Sun-Shin as the “greatest Korean patriot,” seems to be in order. His military achievements during the conflict significantly contributed to the withdrawal of Japanese forces from the peninsula, but *Chingbirok*, as well as Swopes’ recent article, seem to reveal his battle exploits have been exaggerated.

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