

ADMIRAL YI SUN-SHIN, THE TURTLE SHIPS, AND MODERN ASIAN HISTORY

By Marc Jason Gilbert

Though little-known in the West, Korean Admiral Yi Sun-Shin (1545–1598) is a major figure in Korean and Japanese history. His technological and strategic innovations sparked a revolution in Asian naval warfare and initiated both the “modern” naval force and style of combat. These innovations helped Korea repel a series of Japanese invasions from 1592 to 1598, paving the way for more than 250 years of Japanese semi-isolation from world affairs. The ultimate adoption of Yi’s ideas by the defeated Japanese led to their triumph in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, an event that altered the balance of power in Asia and much of subsequent world history.

Like many innovators, Yi Sun-Shin suffered many disappointments due to domestic political intrigues and regional military rivalry. Yet his struggles with factions at the Korean court and difficult relations with Korea’s Chinese allies do more than illuminate contemporary Asian politics. While his prowess as a military reformer and weapons designer has earned him accolades that often border on hagiography, he is also admired for his personal qualities. In the face of one of the bitterest conflicts in human history, Yi Sun-Shin never lost sight of the plight of its victims. Though he bore terrible wounds and calmly faced death with thoughts only for his men and the preservation of his state, his stoicism was not so complete as to protect him from the pain arising from personal disgrace and the loss of close friendships and family. Even Yi Sun-Shin’s success in battle depended as much upon his courage as his brilliance as a strategist. It is thus his humanity, as well as his genius, that is worthy of our attention.

EARLY LIFE OF ADMIRAL YI SUN-SHIN

Lord Admiral (*Chungmu-Gong*) Yi Sun-Shin was born at Seoul into an aristocratic family on April 28, 1545. He married in 1564 and two years later began the study of traditional Korean military arts: archery, horseback riding, and swordsmanship. This was a somewhat unusual interest for a son of the Korean elite, who at the time shared the Chinese Confucian view of military service as an inferior occupation. Though male Koreans owed the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1910) three months of military service every five years until the age of sixty, the well-to-do often contrived “to avoid this obligation, and even to evade military taxes,”¹ a fact of life in Korea and elsewhere, before and since.

Yi Sun-Shin and his wife had three sons: Hoe (born 1567), Yo (born 1571), and Myon (born 1577), who played important roles in his professional life. His characteristic drive and stamina were first noted in 1572 when, during his military examinations, he fell from his horse and broke his leg. He is said to have completed the riding exam after rigging a splint out of a willow branch. After passing his examinations, he served in various staff and command positions. The Korean military service made no distinction between branches of service, so it was not remarkable that his first posting was as a naval commander at the southern tip of Korea in 1580. However, two years later he refused to ignore corrupt practices, earning him the enmity of his immediate superiors, who stripped him of his command; then as now, one’s superi-



Portrait of Admiral Yi Sun-Shin.
Chesungdang (Victory Hall), Hansan Isle.
Image source: <http://www.koreanhero.net/en/AboutYiSunsin.htm>



Painting of "Yi Sun-Shin at Training Camp" by Jung Chang (1978).
 Image source:
http://www.geocities.com/yi_sun_shin_adm/yisunshinImages.html

ors have difficulty enduring criticism when it reflects badly on their own performance.

Yi Sun-Shin accepted an appointment as acting commandant of Konwon fortress on Korea's troubled northern frontier, where his superiors may have hoped he might meet his end in combat. Shortly after he took charge there, his post was assaulted by Manchurian (Jurchen) forces. During this battle, Yi Sun-Shin lured his opponents into a trap, captured the Jurchen leader, and defeated his forces. However, at the end of that same year, Yi Sun-Shin's father died and he was obligated to resign his post to fulfill his filial duties as a mourner, which, according to ancient Korean tradition, lasted three years. A year after returning to service in 1586, he again saw action against Manchurian invaders. While leading a counter-attack, he was wounded in the leg by an arrow, which he removed himself without letting anyone else see his injury. He did so out of a concern that the sight of a commander's wound might demoralize his troops, a principle that he literally took to his grave.

Although Yi Sun-Shin was always careful to attribute his successes to others and share such glory as came his way, his superiors again grew jealous of his achievements and had him arrested. Since Yi Sun-Shin refused to confess to the false charges brought against him even under torture, his accusers had to settle for stripping him of his rank and imprisoning him. In what may have been an act of leniency or even empathy, King Sŏnjo (1567–1608) freed him under the condition that he would fight thereafter as a common soldier. When he bore this demotion without complaint, the King again intervened, pardoning him for his "crimes" in 1588.

Yi Sun-Shin eventually returned to his country's service as a staff officer and then as the King's personal bodyguard and messenger. Due to the King's continuing interest in his career, he was twice made a magistrate and re-appointed as a commander on the northern frontier, but such patronage only attracted more enemies, who forced his transfer from one post to another. In 1591, Yi Sun-Shin's merry-go-round of appointments led to his arrival in the seaport of Yosŭ as Commander of Cholla Left Naval Station (whereas the British Royal Navy is divided in its command structure into Admirals of the Red, the White,

and the Blue, Korea's naval forces were divided between commands labeled Left and Right.) In Cholla, Yi Sun-Shin began to address a perennial threat, Japanese piracy, which turned out to be but the prelude to the greatest military challenge yet faced by the Korean armed forces, the Japanese invasion of 1592–1598.

THE JAPANESE CHALLENGE

Though for centuries the Japanese had menaced the Korean coastline,² by the early modern period relations improved as Japan seemingly had little interest in continental politics. The Japanese state even took a benign view of Korea's support of the Mongol invasions of their homeland in 1274 and again in 1281, as it recognized that Korea was under Mongol occupation and had little choice in the matter. The failure of these assaults ended the possibility of an Asian *pax mongolica*. However, in the unsettled times that followed, Korea

experienced decades of attacks by Japanese pirates in league with Chinese and Korean freebooters (collectively known as *Waegu*). One such attack in 1371 resulted in the sacking and burning of the Koryŏ kingdom's capital at Songdo (present day Kaesŏng), which may have hastened the end of that kingdom in 1392.³ Mindful of the barbarity and destruction long wrought by its sea-borne enemies, the ruler of the succeeding Chosŏn dynasty, King Sŏnjo, understood the seriousness of a threatening communication he received in 1592 from Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598), who had recently achieved domination over virtually all of Japan. As Hideyoshi confided to Sŏnjo, that achievement was not enough to quench his self-admitted lust for conquest, which apparently embraced not merely Korea, but "all of Asia."⁴ Hideyoshi, who prided himself on his diplomatic skills, informed King Sŏnjo that it was his intention to conquer China and he called upon Korea to "help clear my way" and thus "save her own soul."⁵

King Sŏnjo may have thought Hideyoshi was unbalanced for even thinking of an advance on China. By then, Korea was acting as a vassal of China and Sŏnjo would have had little doubt that China would make short work of the Japanese and Korea as well if the latter aided in the planned assault. Sŏnjo ultimately declined to permit his kingdom to serve as a smooth path of conquest for a state whose bid to become the dominant power in Asia offered Korea little advantage and would expose it to neighboring China's wrath in the likely event that Japan's bid failed.

Hideyoshi responded to Korea's defiance by launching one of the most destructive military assaults Korea has ever experienced, known as the Imjin Wars (1592–1598). The first assault wave of over 24,000 men, carried in over 800 ships, arrived at Pusan in May of 1592. This initial force was commanded by the Christian Lord Konishi Ukinaga and is believed to have been largely composed of Christian troops. These units were later joined by the Buddhist warrior Lord Kato Kiyomasa as the force grew to more than 150,000 men armed with thousands of gunpowder weapons, largely muskets, which the Koreans lacked in great numbers. This enabled the Japanese to reach the Chosŏn capital at Seoul within three weeks, even though they paused along the way to destroy virtually every Buddhist monastery and monument they encountered, which may or may not have been an expression of Lord Konishi Ukinaga's hostility to a rival faith.⁶ Their destruction was not limited to buildings or institutions. Eventually, thousands of skilled workers, from printers to glazed pottery (celadon) makers, were taken

to Japan to improve crafts industries there. Due to logistical issues, the Samurai practice (borrowed from the Chinese⁷) of submitting the heads of their dead foes to claim honors and rewards had to be modified to permit the submission of ears. As a result, Japanese warriors returned to Japan more than 38,000 ears, which eventually were buried at Mimizuka, the “Hill of Ears” in Kyoto.⁸

Four years of war would leave 90 percent of Koreans homeless, their agriculture ruined and the populace on the brink of starvation. The scholar O Huimun, forced to forage far and wide to stay alive, was one of several Koreans who compiled diaries of those times which evoke horrific images of “roads lined with corpses, desolated farmland, victims of mass rapes, suicides of women seeking to avoid capture, and cannibalism among the desperately hungry population.”⁹ Even these scenes paled in comparison with those to be seen at the Korean fortress-city of Chinju. Because it had held out against the initial Japanese onslaught, Hideyoshi sought to make an example of it. According to Donald Liu, the fall of the city witnessed the bloodiest and cruelest of the atrocities committed by the Japanese, the memory of which “is scarred deep into the Korean psyche.” He views Chinju as “comparable to that of the Jews of Masada after the fall of Jerusalem to Roman troops, with Korean soldiers fighting to the death and “Korean women flinging themselves from the ramparts, rather than be sexually assaulted by the invaders.”¹⁰

YI SUN-SHIN TAKES COMMAND

Yi Sun-Shin was not caught unawares by the Japanese assault. Upon his arrival in southern Korea, he immediately set about improving Korea’s naval preparedness. He had long studied the strengths and weaknesses of both Korean and Japanese naval practices and knew that the Japanese relied on their greatest martial strength—expert samurai swordsmen and bowmen. To maximize this strength, the Japanese had built broad-beamed ships that carried a large number of soldiers. Their strategy was to approach enemy vessels as closely as possible and rake them with arrow fire until the enemy’s decks were clear enough for infantry to sweep aboard. Stiff resistance was met with fire arrows shot by the bowmen firing at close range. More recently, though the Japanese had chosen not to mount more than one cannon to each of their ships, they were filling their vessels with musketeers. The range of Japanese (smooth bore) muskets was no greater than that their bowmen’s arrows, but the bullets fired by muskets may have had greater penetrating power. As for the invasion armada, according to some Japanese sources, the best and largest of their ships, called *Atakebune*, were ironclad, but were also very slow and thus ill-suited to anything more than coastal operations. The majority of Japanese naval vessels were little more than armed transports, whose commanders could draw on little naval tradition due to the Japanese emphasis on land warfare. Japanese naval forces were thus fearsome in size and deadly in close combat, but had weaknesses that could be exploited.

Like the builders of the caravel in Western Europe, the Koreans built ships with “castles” to better protect their crews from attack by arrows and muskets obtained in Asia from Portuguese and Chinese merchants, and also mounted cannon. Fear of Chinese and Japanese territorial ambitions had led the Korean King Taejong (1367–1423) to create a special gunpowder service unit that experimented with ship-mounted artillery. However, it was his son, Sejong (1397–1450), who made the development and use of gunpowder weapons a priority.¹¹ Korean records suggest that a cannon-armed ship called a “Turtle



Painting that depicts the Japanese landing on Pusan. Chesungdang (Victory Hall), Hansan Isle. Image source: Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:WakouLandingColor.jpg>

Ship” (*Geobukseon* or *Kōbüksōn*) was under construction as early as 1414, but by the time of Yi Sun-Shin’s appointment, no Korean ship of any type of armament was capable of defeating the Japanese.

Yi Sun-Shin lost no time in urging the local boatyards to rectify this problem. Within months they produced a vessel that provided Yi with the naval technology that helped him to seize control of Korea’s sea approaches and thus cut Japan’s lines of communications and supply. His success in this task was pivotal in thwarting Japanese ambitions and has since become so entwined with Korean national pride that it has led to outlandish claims regarding the magnitude of his achievement. It is often asserted that these Turtle Ships were the world’s first armored battleships or ironclad vessels or even the world’s first submarines.¹² They certainly were innovative in design, but, despite Korea’s brilliance in metal-working, it is unlikely that the Turtle Ships carried any true metal armor. Their advantage over the Japanese was their speed and multi-cannon armament: heavy ship armor would have slowed the ships, and, in combination with as many as forty cannon, they mounted and their lack of a keel would have made them so top-heavy as to easily capsize.



Modern Turtle Ship replica at the War Memorial Museum, Seoul, South Korea.
Image source: http://www.koreanhero.net/en/ViewImage.htm?name=Kobukson_2.jpg

Since there were probably not many more than a dozen *Kōbūksōn* operational at one time. Horace Underwood, an authority on the Korean marine, suggests that the emphasis placed by Yi Sun-Shin's admirers on the unique nature of the Turtle Ships' design fails to recognize that Admiral Yi Sun-Shin's true "genius" lay not in the Turtle Ship's design, but in the development of ship-fighting tactics that exploited their strengths: after Yi Sun-Shin was temporarily superseded in command, his successor was ignominiously defeated while deploying the same ships in battle while failing to employ his revolutionary tactics.¹³

Yi Sun-Shin, developer of the "Turtle Ships," addressed the fundamental problem posed by the Japanese tactics and weapons: how could Korean ships avoid being shattered by close range bow and musket fire and boarded by the world's best swordsmen? The answer lay in speed and longer range fire-power. His ships were almost twice as long and half as wide (110 feet by 38)¹⁴ as their Japanese counterparts, making them move much faster through the water, while his cannon could outrange Japanese musket balls. He could thus keep Japanese ships at a distance and pound them into pieces, using perhaps as many as forty 36-pound cannons firing through hatches along its side (additional single cannons were mounted in the mouth of the good luck-attracting dragon's head carved into the prow and beneath the stern transom). In retrospect, Yi Sun-Shin was not alone in producing the first "stand-off" weapon. His English contemporary, Sir Francis Drake (1540–1596), had also abandoned the grapple-board-and-have-at-them style of naval fighting that had gone unchanged for perhaps two thousand years and adopted in its stead the form of naval warfare later pursued from Trafalgar through to Jutland, Cape Matapan and Leyte Gulf.

One of Yi Sun-Shin's talents was that he anticipated that his enemies would ultimately adjust their own war-fighting strategy to meet this new challenge: Japanese ships ultimately came to mount more cannon of their own. However, like Drake, Yi Sun-Shin always remained a step ahead of his foe. His forces were the first to adopt an "in line ahead"

sailing protocol Yi Sun-Shin called "holding onto each other's tail"¹⁵ that enabled each ship to bring its guns to bear upon the same targets as they passed them in turn. He also deployed a tactic called "drawing the fish into the net," the feigning of retreat in order to draw entire enemy fleets into position to attack. Further, he knew that he could not always dictate the rules of engagement. There would be times when his forces would have to come to close quarters with Japanese ships and face their intense close-in fire and skilled boarding parties. In part to offset this advantage, Yi Sun-Shin apparently invented the "smoke-screen," an on-board smoke generator that produced sulfur and saltpeter fumes which he designed to create "a mist so that the enemy cannot see the ship."¹⁶ He also addressed the problem

posed by close-quarters action through the very structure of the Turtle Ships themselves.

Building on evolving Korean practice of cannon use (introduced from China in 1373) and the well-known need for protection for crews, Yi Sun-Shin entirely enclosed his oarsmen and gun crews in iron-bound, four-inch thick wood deck planking all-but-impervious to arrows and musket fire. A recent work by self-admitted non-naval architects argues that the exposed upper planks may have been covered by very thin metal sheets, which may have given rise to the idea that the ships were made of metal or armored,¹⁷ but even this study confirms that Korean deck wood seems to have been more than adequate to this task and obviated the dangers of added weight. More important, and most likely Yi's own idea, was that the curved upper-most deck acted as a roof protecting the crew, who were trained to shove spear points through slots in the decking that were concealed by thatch strewn over the deck and the smoke generated by the ship itself. Japanese samurai jumping down onto a Turtle Ship were likely to either be impaled upon the blades concealed in the deck or slide off its rounded upper surface into the sea.¹⁸

INTO BATTLE: 1592

Having prepared his new vessels and trained his crews, Yi sun-Shin moved around the peninsula to relieve the devastated fleet of the Korean commander, Wōn Kyun, on the southeast coast of Korea. Wōn Kyun so resented this help that while both were still in the field, he plotted to destroy his rescuer with what Yi later described as "an evil heart full of knavish tricks."¹⁹ Wōn Kyun undermined Yi's reputation at court. Oblivious to Wōn Kyun's plot, Yi Sun-Shin focused on the foreign foe and crushed them in a series of naval battles, one so intense that the admiral was wounded, which he concealed from his men. This campaign ended with the triumphant victory at Hansando in 1592, evocatively described by Yi Sun-Shin's nephew in a readily available account detailing with how Yi drew the Japanese from a shallow narrows suitable for the enemies' ships "out to the open sea to destroy them in a single blow." This was accomplished by feigning defeat, after which "Ch'unghmu-kong waved his flag, beat his drum, and

shouted the order to attack. In an instant, our warships spread their sails, turned round in a ‘Crane-Wing’ formation and darted forward, pouring down cannon balls and fire arrows on the enemy vessels like hail and thunder. Bursting into flame with blinding smoke, seventy-three enemy vessels were soon burning in a red sea of blood. This is called “The Great Victory of Hansando.”²⁰

In strategic terms, Hansando was the equivalent of the naval success of the Greeks against the Persians at Salamis. At Hansando, as at Salamis, the tide of an invasion was stemmed, in this case because it destroyed the invaders’ lines of re-supply that were essential for Japanese operations in both Korea and China. Their forces were being decimated by fierce Korean resistance: over a third of the invasion force died in battle within the first year of the war. Koreans, however, were also suffering. The impact of the war was driven home to Admiral Yi by conditions near his naval station. His response, a formal letter to the central government, lends insight into his human sensibilities, as well as suggesting that his skills extended beyond mere excellence in military leadership. After supplying temporary winter quarters for 200 war refugees, he noted that even though they could return to their native homes when peace is restored, “no one can bear to see them die of starvation in the meantime.” Accordingly, after taking a survey of available land, he found a suitable site and instructed the refugees to settle there “and to commence the spring plowing, which they did with gladness.” He also asked for the Court to issue a decree to facilitate such projects generally.²¹

THE WAR AT HOME, 1594–1596

His naval victories led to Yi Sun-Shin’s promotion as Supreme Naval Commander, but he had little time to enjoy his new command. After a dutiful visit to his mother (who welcomed him and promptly urged him to return to battle in defense of the Korean people),²² he returned to the war to find King Sŏnjo pragmatically negotiating for Chinese support against the Japanese. Yi Sun-Shin knew of the importance of China as an ally,²³ but opposed the constraints of Chinese-led peace negotiations, believing the Japanese were not trustworthy in such matters. When told by a Chinese general to withdraw his forces from before a Japanese camp and “return to his home station,” he exploded in anger, saying, “Which home station do you mean? . . . I am a subject of Korea, and for justice’s sake I cannot live with these robbers under the same heaven.”²⁴ He would later recant his obdurate, if patriotic, tone, which may have been shaped by anger fueled by a bout of typhoid fever and the need to confront a devastating outbreak of plague among his naval forces. That tone, however, was dangerous. Yi Sun-Shin was subsequently able to lead his fleet to a major victory against the Japanese at Changmun-p’o in 1594, but this triumph did not prevent Admiral Yi’s rival, Wŏn Kyun, from exploiting Yi Sun-Shin’s outspokenness and rallying those like himself who resented Yi’s successes.

Wŏn Kyun helped arrange a test of Yi Sun-Shin’s loyalty that was impossible for him to pass.²⁵ This gambit led to the transfer of the admiral’s authority to Wŏn Kyun. It also led to Yi Sun-Shin being dragged off to Seoul in a cage carried by an ox cart, much to the dismay of the public, who lined the route of his journey to protest the humiliation of their hero. After a time, Yi Sun-Shin was released to once again serve as a regular soldier. He again executed these humble duties with great dignity, despite enduring another personal blow: the loss of his mother (his father had died in 1582). However, he was now at the very end of his emotional reserves.



Portrait of Wŏn Kyun (1540–1597), Yi Sun-Shin’s fellow naval commander and ill-fated rival.

Image source: <http://kalaniosullivan.com/OsanAB/OsanSongtanKorHist.html>

After his mother’s funeral, Yi began to grieve over his own plight. “O,” he lamented, “What shall I do? Is there anyone else under heaven in such a pitiful plight as myself?—the sooner I die the better.”²⁶ According to his diary, he broke into tears when dismounting from his horse on arrival at a friend’s house. Later he “sat up late at night all alone, as sadness incessantly swept over me.”²⁷ He bent, but he did not break; his will strengthened by his sense of duty and the solace he drew from local officials who everywhere greeted him with hospitality and respect.

RETURN TO BATTLE, 1597–1598

Hideyoshi launched a second invasion of Korea in January 1597, which was comprised of over 140,000 men supported by over 1,000 ships. This force easily crushed Wŏn Kyun’s fleet, a defeat made bitter by Wŏn Kyun’s attempt to flee the scene of battle, after which he was caught and beheaded. Wŏn Kyun’s disgrace enabled the court to rehabilitate Yi Sun-Shin’s reputation and once again asked him to serve as Supreme Naval Commander, though the King was now closely allied with the Chinese and contemplated the abolition of what little remained of Yi Sun-Shin’s former forces of which only twelve vessels and only 120 sailors remained. Yi Sun-Shin, however, prevented this outcome by famously declaring that, “After all, I still have twelve ships! As long as I live, [our] enemies will never look down on us.”²⁸ He used these resources well enough to resume his victorious assaults on the Japanese and helped saved Seoul from a naval attack, though he lost his third son, Myon, in the process.

In late 1598, Yi Sun-Shin’s ships, together with Chinese naval and land units acting in concert with Korean land forces (which now

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included guerilla units made up of Buddhist monks), drove the Japanese into a narrow perimeter around the southern port of Pusan, from whence they had no option but a fighting withdrawal by sea.²⁹ To prevent the latter, Yi Sun-Shin set aside his reservations and graciously accepted acting in a combined Korean-Chinese naval force under the Ming Admiral Chen Leng. Chen Leng gave him all the freedom he required and together they ended any Japanese hopes of an honorable retreat. On December, 18, 1598, Yi Sun-Shin destroyed a 500-ship Japanese force covering the evacuation. This defeat virtually ended the seven year long Korean debacle which may have hastened the death of Hideyoshi, "who reportedly died of a broken heart over these losses."³⁰ Yi Sun-Shin's nephew recounted that, at the very turn of the tide of this battle, the admiral to the fore urged his men in an assault on a Japanese ship, "a stray bullet from the enemy vessel struck him," whereupon he called out to his oldest son Hoe, "The battle is at its height; do not announce my death!" With these words, he died.²⁹ Hoe and his cousin Wan then removed Yi Sun-Shin's body to his cabin and returned to the battle "banging the war drum and waving the battle flags, thus ensuring nobody knew of Yi Sun-Shin's passing and securing the final victory."³²

**ASSESSMENTS OF YI SUN-SHIN'S CAREER
AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY**

After his passing, Yi Sun-Shin was given the tile of "Lord of Loyalty and Chivalry" or *Chungmu-gong* earned not only for his military prowess, but for his adherence to the highest standards of what was then regarded as "the three essentials for the warrior: humility, discernment, and courage."³³ Alan Burrese noted that:

When Admiral Son Ko-i died in 1598, a letter was found among his possessions. It was from Yi Sun-Shin [n], and in it he wrote, "My life is simple, my food is plain, and my quarters are uncluttered. In all things, I have sought clarity. I face the troubles and problems of life and death willingly. Virtue, integrity and courage are my priorities. I can be approached, but never pushed; befriended but never coerced; killed but never shamed."³⁴

A shrine was built by King Sŏnjo to honor Yi Sun-Shin in 1606. It was the first of many such shrines and monuments, including one at the Korean Naval Academy and the large and impressive statue in downtown Seoul.³³

In time, Yi Sun-Shin's naval innovations became no more than the subject of honored memory in his homeland. Like their Ming allies, the Chosŏn dynasty became preoccupied with the renewed Manchu aggression of the seventeenth century, and there was little naval development thereafter. Still, by his thwarting of Hideyoshi's Pan-Asian

ambitions, Yi Sun-Shin had not merely sustained the tradition of Korean independence, but helped set the course of East Asian history for generations. Had Hideyoshi achieved his goal of conquering Korea and the Chinese Ming Empire, the Manchu invasion may have run a different course, and with it, much of world history.

As the impact of his life on Korean history became better understood, Yi Sun-Shin came to be increasingly memorialized until he emerged as a national symbol of honesty and self-sacrifice. Given the court intrigues and mismanagement that characterized Chosŏn politics and the narrow military regimes that dominated Korea as it emerged from Japanese colonial domination after the Second World War, it is little wonder that post-war Korean nationalist politicians sought to promote the image of the morally and ethically impeccable Yi Sun-Shin, the soldier-hero who defeated Japan, as a model for all modern Koreans to emulate.

The judgment of Admiral Yi Sun-Shin's peers underscores his real (as opposed to represented) achievements. Japanese Admiral Heihachiro Tōgō held him in the highest regard. Tōgō's victory of the Russian Baltic Fleet at Tsushima in 1905 changed the course of the histories of Japan, Russia, and Korea. It stimulated the rise of nationalism in many of Europe's Asian colonies and in many other ways altered the fabric of world history. Yet, according to the Japanese historical journal *History Studies* (May 2002), the "T" formation Togo used in the Battle of Tsushima was derived from a formation devised by Yi Sun-Shin.³⁶ It is little wonder then, that when asked to measure himself against a similarly influential figure, Lord Nelson of Trafalgar, Tōgō remarked "You may wish to compare me with Lord Nelson, but do not compare me with Korea's Admiral Yi Sun-Shin Sun-Sin . . . he is too remarkable for anyone."³⁷

In 1921, British Admiral George Alexander Ballard (1862–1848) directly compared Yi Sun-Shin to Lord Nelson:

It is always difficult for Englishmen to admit that Nelson ever had an equal in his profession, but if any man is entitled to be so regarded, it should be this great naval commander of Asiatic race who never knew defeat . . . and it seems, in truth, no exaggeration to assert that from first to last he never made a mistake, for his work was so complete under each variety of circumstances as to defy criticism . . . His whole career might be summarized by Yi Sun-Shin's remark that, although he had no lessons from history to serve as a guide, he waged war on the sea as it should be waged if it is to produce definite results, and [he] ended by making the supreme sacrifice of a defender of his country.³⁸

Yi Sun-Shin would probably respect this soldierly evaluation of his life (and death) as but a series of duties to perform. However, he was more than a soldier, patriot or, for that matter, a naval genius. Through the inevitable exaggerations clouding our perception of those labeled heroes and the shadows thrown by Yi Sun-Shin's own self-effacement, it is just possible to perceive his role as a good father, a faithful son, a loyal friend, and a humane official. Such a combination of qualities is so rare among world figures that we assume its presence depends upon blemishes concealed by suborned texts or constructed memory. And so it may prove in this case. This short summary of Yi Sun-Shin's career is not intended to close the book on his life, but merely to suggest that it is one a student of Asia's place in world history may derive some profit by opening. ■

NOTES

1. Cited from Thor May's review of Yang Sung-jin and Lee Nam-hee, *Click into the Hermit Kingdom* (Seoul: Dongbang Media Co. Ltd, 2000) review dated January 30, at <http://Thormay.net/koreadiary/hermitkingdom.html>, referring to pages 141–142 of that work. *Click into the Hermit Kingdom* was originally a CD-ROM exploration of Chosŏn lore, and its printed version is a major resource for the study of that dynasty.
2. In 1393, The Kings of Silla (668–935 AD), the first dynasty to rule over all of the Korean peninsula, carved out a Buddhist cave grotto at Sokkuram in the hills above their capital, within sight of the Sea of Japan [the Korean “East Sea”]. The grotto provided shelter for one of the world’s finest stone-carved images of the Buddha (built c. 751 AD). As Sokkuram was a royal chapel and the Buddha was graced by a jewel mounted on his forehead that caught the dawning light, it has been argued that Silla’s rulers were so “mindful of Japan and the possibilities of invasion” that Sokkuram had been constructed to serve “as protector of Korea against invasion. From Don Liu, “The Future of Korean-American Community: Challenges and Prospects” at <http://www.icasinc.org/2002/2002m/2002mdhl.html>.
3. See Jon Carter Covell, *Korea's Cultural Roots* (Salt Lake City: Moth House, 3rd ed., 1981), 81–91.
4. For the Japanese context of this invasion, see <http://www.samurai-archives.com/hideyoshi.html> and an essay by Cesare Polenghi, “The Reasons, the Chronicle and the Consequences of the Japanese Invasion, 1592–1598,” at <http://www.samurai-archives.com/hak.html>. See also Hitoshi Nakano, “Concerning Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s Signed Letter Dated June 3 rd, 1593,” *Interaction and Transformations* 1 (2003): 273–289.
5. James Scarth Gale, *James Scarth Gale and his History of the Korean People* (Seoul: Seoul Computer Press for the Royal Asiatic Society, Korean Branch, 1983), 261.
6. Though Chosŏn was a Confucian state, Buddhist institutions may have nonetheless been seen as rival centers of power.
7. See Karl Friday, *Samurai, Warfare and the State in Early Medieval 6. Japan* (London: Routledge, 2004): 152–55.
8. For the “Hill of Ears,” see the Web page developed by Kirk L. Phillip for <http://www.orientalarchitecture.com/kyoto/mimizukaindex.htm>. See also http://www.planetkyoto.com/nils/archives/2004_03.html.
9. John Woodford, “Imjin War Diaries are Memorial of Invasions for Koreans,” *The University Record* (University of Michigan), February 22, 1999, at http://www.umich.edu/~urecord/9899/Feb22_99/imjin.htm. See also Kichung Kim, “Resistance, Abduction, and Survival: The Documentary Literature of the Imjin War (1592–98),” *Korean Culture*, 20:3 (Fall 1999): 20–29.
10. Quoted in Dennis P. Halpin, “Human Rights in South Korea: Confucian Humanism versus Western Liberalism,” at <http://www.icasinc.org/2002/2002s/2002sdph.html#fn16a>.
11. Yang Sung-jin and Lee Nam-hee, *Click into the Hermit Kingdom*, 71–82.
12. See, for example, “Admiral Yi, Sun-Shin, The Legend of Choong Moo” at <http://www.natkd.com/legend.htm>.
13. Underwood, *Korean Boats and Ships*, 79–81.
14. *Ibid.*, 74–79.
15. *Ibid.*, 81.
16. *Ibid.*, 77.
17. Shim Sun-ah, “New Book Sparks Controversy Over ‘Turtle Ship.’” Yonhap News Service, February 2, 2005, at <http://english.yna.co.kr/Engnews/20050202/30190000020050202091734E7.html>.
18. Underwood, *Korean Boats and Ships*, 77.
19. Sohn Pow Key, ed., trans., Ha Tae-hung, *Nanjung Ilji: The War Diary of Admiral Yi Sun-Shinn* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1977), 51.
20. From Yi Pun’s *Biography of Admiral Yi Sun-sin*, reproduced in Lee Chong-young, ed. *Imjin Changch’o: Admiral Yi Sun-sin’s Memorials to Court* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1981), 215. A view of the bay can be found at <http://www.fa25.com/mytrip/themetrip.php>.
21. Yi Sun-sin, “Memorial no. 20: Request for Order to Settle War Refugees on Tol-sando Farms,” in Lee Chong-young, ed. *Imjin Changch’o: Admiral Yi Sun-sin’s Memorials to Court* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1981), 86–87.
22. From Yi Pun’s *Biography of Admiral Yi Sun-sin*, reproduced in Lee Chong-young, ed., *Imjin Changch’o: Admiral Yi Sun-sin’s Memorials to Court* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1981), Appendix VI: 219.
23. *Ibid.*, 216.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Accounts vary, but Yi Sun-Shin was apparently ordered to destroy some Japanese naval units far out at sea under conditions in which he could not but fail. It is suggested by some that there were, in fact, no Japanese naval forces operating in that area. Yi Sun-Shin knew this, but the court was so set against him, there was no way he could decline the mission or otherwise prevent his “failure” to complete this assignment from being interpreted as anything other than as an act of disloyalty. That is, if he failed to engage the non-existent force, it would be perceived that he was a coward or mole who warned the enemy to absent themselves. For this rivalry, see Eric Niderost, Yi Sun Sin and Won Kyun: The Rivalry that Decided the Fate of a Nation, *Korean Culture*, 22:4 (Winter 2001): 10–19.
26. Sohn Pow Key, ed., *The War Diary*, 262.
27. *Ibid.*
28. This is a commonly used paraphrase of a letter to the court in which Yi wrote, “Your humble servant still commands no fewer than twelve ships. If I engage the enemy fleet with resolute effort, even now, as I believe, they can be driven back. The total decommissioning of our navy would not only please the enemy, but would open up for him the sea route along the coast of Chungchong Province, enabling him to sail up the Han River itself, which is my heart’s greatest fear. Even though our navy is small, I promise you that as long as I live, the enemy cannot despise us.” This dramatic rendering can be found at <http://www.koreanhero.net/en/TheMajorNavalBattles.htm>.
29. The last entries of Yi Sun-Shin’s diary suggest that the Japanese had resorted to peace overtures to cover their withdrawal. See Sohn Pow, *War Diary*, 342–343.
30. Bruce Cummings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 77.
31. Cited in a selection from Yi Pun’s multi-volume *Biography of Admiral Yi Sun-sin* reprinted in Lee, Chong-young, *Imjin Changch’o: Admiral Yi Sun-sin’s Memorials to Court*, 237.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Perhaps Yi Sun-Shin’s most enduring personal legacy are the popular quotations derived from his war diary, or *Nanjung Ilgi* (See Sohn Pow Key, ed. *Nanjung Ilji: The War Diary of Admiral Yi Sun-Shinn* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1977) that embody the values of a number of Asian traditions from Daoism to Sŏn (Jpn., Zen) Buddhism. Admiral Yi Sun-Shin wrote, “A warrior must master three roads, four obligations, five skills, and ten keys to security, along with three essentials, among other principles.” He wrote that “the three roads are knowledge of the world; understanding of things as they are; and wisdom toward humanity . . . the four obligations are to provide national security with minimal cost; to lead others unselfishly; to suffer adversity without fear; to offer solutions without blame . . . the five skills are to be flexible without weakness; to be strong without arrogance; to be kind without vulnerability; to be trusting without naïveté; and to have invincible courage. . . . The ten keys to security are purity of purpose, sound strategy, integrity, clarity, lack of covetousness, lack of addiction, a reserved tongue, assertiveness without aggression, being firm and fair, and patience. . . . The three essentials for the warrior are humility, discernment, and courage.”
34. Remarks by Alan Burrese, originally published in the *Korean Daily*, March 19, 1997 available at <http://members.aol.com/ABurrese/YiSunShinSunshin.html>.
35. A shrine was erected at his Hyonchungsa near Yi’s family home close to the port city of Asan. The site includes an exhibition hall that displays a portrait of Admiral Yi a painting describing his life, his War Diary, his long sword, an archery field, and a reconstruction of his private residence. This residence can be virtually visited at <http://www.lifeinkorea.com/Travel2/skyongsang/327>. Other images and virtual tours of shrines devoted to his memory are readily available on the Web, including <http://www.lifeinkorea.com/Travel2/Skyongsang/327>, which offers a virtual tour of a turtle ship.
36. See article “Admiral Yi Sun-sin, A Korean Hero,” at <http://www.koreanhero.net/en/TheMajorNavalBattles.htm>.
37. See Tae-chun Kim, Yi Sun-sin’s Fame in Japan, *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 47 (June 1978): 93–107.
38. George Alexander Ballard, *The Influence of the Sea on the Political History of Japan* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, reprint of 1921 edition, 1972), 66–67.

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