Beyond Yi Sun-Shin and the Ming: The Performance of the Korean Army during the First Japanese Invasion of Korea, 1592-1596
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On April 13th, 1592, about 20,000 Japanese soldiers came ashore at the southeastern region of Korea, hoping to conquer the new land for the Japanese warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi. This was the beginning of the brutal warfare between the Joseon Dynasty in Korea and Hideyoshi Japan, which was later named as the “Imjin War” in Korea. Later, Ming China also joined in the skirmish by sending troops to support Korea. The war ended with the victory of the Korean and Chinese allied force, which drove all the Japanese out from the Korean peninsula. The Japanese also acknowledged their defeat, referring to the war as “A Dragon’s Head followed by a Serpent’s Tail,” meaning something that has an impressive beginning but no real ending. 1

Considering the historical records and academic researchers from both Korea and Japan, there is no doubt that the Japanese failed to conquer Korea. The common perception of the war is that the Korean navy, which was led by the great admiral Yi Sun Shin, is the main cause of the victory, and without its success, Hideyoshi would have succeeded in taking Korea. This opinion is fairly common in Japan. For example, Japanese writer, Tsugio Katano, says that without Yi Sun-shin and his powerful navy, Joseon would become the dominion of warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi, considering

1 Kenneth M Swope, A Dragon’s Head and a Serpent’s Tail: Ming China and the First Great East Asian War, 1592-1598 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 299.

the weak Korean Army.2 Another major perspective, which is often found in Korean historical records, is that the Ming army played a major role in defeating the Japanese, because the Ming had more advanced weapons, especially large firearms. The best example can be found from the record of the Korean King Sonjo, who ruled Korea during the entire war period. After the war, while discussing the distribution of awards of the Korean generals, the king said, “This war was mostly led by the Ming army. Our troops were just following after the Ming army, and we won the battle by a fluke. In our own strength, we could not solely kill or capture one single Japanese soldier and their base.”3 Internationally, American historian, Kenneth M. Swope, also overemphasizes the contribution of the Ming army in his book, A Dragon’s head and a Serpent’s Tail, although it provides fairly accurate descriptions of the Korean army in the early war period. In the book, the author says “the Koreans thanked the Ming profusely by defeating the Japanese, and in acknowledgement of their services, living shrines were erected all over Korea for the Chinese generals involved in the victory, which is far from reality.”4 This adulation of the Korean navy and Ming troops also influenced the historical education of Korea. Among fourteen major Korean high school and middle school textbooks, all of them make negative assessments to the Korean army, or even worse, ignore its role in the war.5 They also contain historical inaccuracies in the explanation of the war, saying that the Korean army

4 Swope, A Dragon’s Head and a Serpent’s Tail, 285.
launched its counterattack after the arrival of the Ming troops. This perspective is mostly based on the continuous defeat of the Korean army in the early period of the war. In fact, the Korean army made a tremendous victory against the Japanese in the Siege of Jinju on October 1592, two months before the first Ming troops entered Korean territory.

The biggest problem of this partial and inaccurate historical approach is that it downplays the role of the Korean army in the war. Under this viewpoint, the Korean army is often disparaged as an archaic and weak military force, which was constantly defeated by the Japanese musketeers. Contrary to this common misconception, I would like to take a revisionist view on the war by highlighting the contribution of the Korean Army and the harm of the Ming troops. Although the Korean navy successfully ruled the sea by winning consecutive victories, it was the Korean army that drove the Japanese attackers out of Korea. I also offer a revisionist perspective on the Ming Army’s performance during the war. Korean scholar, Han Myunggi, has constantly argued that the Ming troops brought more disadvantages than advantages to Korea. According to him, although the Ming troops had advanced firearms and were skilled in military tactics, they avoided engaging in battles with the Japanese. For instance, during the war, the Ming envoy, Shen Weijing, made a secret pact with the Japanese, thereby ensuring Japanese safety during their retreat. Whenever the Korean troops pursued the retreating Japanese, the Ming generals often held the Koreans back. Moreover, the Ming generals could not easily advance their army due to an overextended supply line. As a temporary expedient, the Ming sought self-subsistence from Korea, but they could not secure enough food from the local government, so instead, they ended up sacking Korean villages.

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Considering these limitations of the Korean navy and the Ming army, the Korean army deserves to get more historical acclaims.

The Background of the War

In 1567, King Sunjo of Joseon came to power in Korea. “Sonjo had ascended the throne as a minor under regency, so he appointed scholars to prominent posts to counter the influence of his maternal relative, who controlled the regency.” As a result, Korean academia flourished in this period with these scholars, such as Yi Hwang and Yi I. Across the sea, a great Japanese warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi was at the final stage of unifying all Japanese warring states. As he nearly completed the unification of Japan, Hideyoshi started shaping his future plans of acquiring more lands, which made him turn his eyes overseas. He first publicly announced his desire to invade China in the ninth month of 1585, and in 1586, “he told Jesuit Luis Frois that he wished to conquer Korea and China because no Japanese ruler before him had ever undertaken such an expedition.” In June 1587, Hideyoshi sent envoys to Korea, hoping to bring the Korean king to his court. Hideyoshi wished to promulgate that he became the sole ruler of Japan, and the Korean king should visit the royal palace for showing his respect. After his arrival in Korea, the Japanese envoy, Yasuhiro, said to his Korean translator with a sigh that “your country will not last long. Having already lost the sense of order and discipline, how can you expect to survive?” Yasuhiro’s words implied the outbreak of the future warfare. Some Korean ministers were concerned about the possibility of Japanese invasion, but others thought the Japanese were just bluffing. In the end, “the Korean court decided to not send its own emissary to Japan, and the Korean king should visit the royal palace for showing his respect. After his arrival in Korea, the Japanese envoy, Yasuhiro, said to his Korean translator with a sigh that “your country will not last long. Having already lost the sense of order and discipline, how can you expect to survive?” After his first negotiation had broken down, Hideyoshi...
sent the second envoy, So Yoshitoshi, to Korea. "Yoshitoshi stayed at the Korean guesthouse for a long time, insisting that he would take Korean envoys with him to Japan." 12 At last, King Sonjo agreed to send Korean emissaries on September 1589. The ostensible reason for dispatching envoys was to celebrate the unification of Japan, but they also intended to observe the true thoughts of Hideyoshi.

Hideyoshi achieved his goal by granting an audience with Korean envoys. Yet, he had maintained an arrogant attitude from the beginning and to the end of the negotiation. "The Koreans were perturbed that the wine they were served was both mediocre and in unglazed cups. Moreover, in the midst of the meeting, Hideyoshi brought his infant son, who proceeded to urinate on him, delighting the warlord and disgusting his guests." 13 Later, the envoys received a reply from Hideyoshi, but its content was so crude and arrogant that one of the envoys, Kim Songil, refused to accept it as it was. 14 The content of Hideyoshi’s letter to the Korean court was basically as follows: “My object is to enter China, to spread the customs of our country to the four hundred and more provinces of that nation, and to establish there the government of our imperial city even unto all the ages." 15

After they returned to Korea, the envoys reported Japan’s situation to the King. This time, the Korean government finally realized the imminent Japanese invasion. The king appointed many prominent military generals in key posts. With his order, governors of each province repaired castles and dug moats, but people in the southern province, who enjoyed peace for a long time, were especially upset about this action. “They were reluctant to do any hard work, and their voices of discontent were loud enough that they even protested in the streets.” 16 Eventually, the people of Gyeongsang province accused their governor Kim Su for excessive labor, blaming him as a warmonger. A few months later, Kim Su was impeached by government inspectors. 17

However, all of these measurements were too late to be of use. Unlike Japan, which had experienced a long-time warring period until its unification, the Joseon dynasty in Korea had not been involved in major warfare for the past 200 years since its establishment, and its state’s military strength was gradually weakened. The early Korean defense system regulated drafting every common man between the ages of 16 to 60. However, due to the long lasting peace, many soldiers were deployed into construction sites such as repairing castles or paving roads, instead of battlefields. When complaints arose among soldiers, the Korean government adopted an expedient; the draftees paid hemp clothes to the officials, then they were exempted from military services. 18 Also, the revival of Korean academia in the early Sonjo period shifted people’s attention from martial arts to literary arts, which eventually caused the weakening of the nation’s defense power. People started despising learning martial arts and concentrated on reading books. King Sonjo was alarmed about these customs, saying “In Gyeongsang province, there is a weird custom. If a child starts learning the Thousand-Character classic and discusses about its contents, the parents will give special considerations to him, but when the child practices archery with bows and arrows, he will be treated with contempt.” 19 Considering all these problematic factors had lasted long enough since the beginning of the Sonjo era, the Korean preparation of the war was just a stopgap measure.

13 Swope, A Dragon’s Head and a Serpent’s Tail, 57; Yu, The Book of Corrections, 30; Sonjo Soo Jung Sillok, 1591/3/1.
15 Yu, The Book of Corrections, 31; Sonjo Soo Jung Sillok, 1591/3/1.
16 Yu, The Book of Corrections, 35.
17 Yu, The Book of Corrections, 34.
18 Dukil Lee 이덕일, “Kal Nal We Eui Yeok Sa: Im Ran Ddae Wae Goon Jeol Ban Eo Seon Back Seong Ee Uot Da” 할날위의역사: 
19 Sonjo Sillok, 1594/8/15.
The Debacle of the Korean Army

On the morning of April 13th, 1592, Hideyoshi launched an invasion on Korea. He divided a total of 158,700 soldiers into nine divisions. At approximately 5 p.m., Konishi Yukinaga’s first Japanese division came ashore to Busan, which is at the southeast end of Korea. The Korean admiral, Pak Hong, who was in charge of defending the Busan coast, was completely unaware of the Japanese invasion. When he saw that Konishi’s force was arriving, he scuttled his own warships and retreated to muster soldiers. The next day, Konishi attacked Busanjin Castle with his 18,700 men at 5 a.m. 20 On the Korean side, General Jeong Bal commanded the garrison with a thousand soldiers, but they were easily outnumbered by the Japanese. Eventually, Jeong was shot dead, and the Korean defense was torn down. The Japanese surged into the castle and slaughtered everyone. The next day, Konishi marched toward the Korean capital, Hanyang. “A prominent Korean general, Sin Rip, volunteered to stop the invaders, contending that he could still crush the Japanese in the proper environment and with surprise.” 24

With thousands of cavalries, Sin marched to defend Ch’ungju, the major transportation point on the road to the capital. “Sin first intended to encounter the enemy at Bird’s Peak, a stronghold that was rugged and easy to guard, but he changed his mind.” 25 Instead, he encamped in T’angumdae, a flatland in the west of Ch’ungju. He tried to lure the Japanese, who consisted of mostly foot soldiers, into vast fields and crush them with a charge of cavalry. If the Japanese army was only armed with traditional weapons such as swords or spears, Sin’s plan would have succeeded. However, in 1543, the Japanese started producing the first Japanese matchlock, Tanegashima, by acquiring key technology from the Portuguese merchants, and a year later, the Japanese first used the gun in battle while capturing Yakushima Island. 26 “During the war against Korea, about a quarter of the invasion forces of 160,000 were gunners.” 27 The Koreans already knew about the Japanese matchlocks, since the Japanese envoy, So Yoshitoshi, laid three muskets at the king’s feet as a tribute three years before the war, but the Korean government never gave a closer look at the muskets. 28 As a result, the Koreans had zero gunners in their entire army. General Sin was also ignorant of the high fatality rate of the matchlock. Before his departure, he discussed the strength of the Japanese army with Korean scholar-official Yu Songnyong 29 . Yu warned him about the power of

21 Yu, The Book of Corrections, 47.
22 Swope, A Dragon’s Head and a Serpent’s Tail, 91.
24 Swope, A Dragon’s Head and a Serpent’s Tail, 93.
27 Noel Perrin, Giving up the gun: Japan’s reversion to the sword, 1543-1879 (Jaffrey: David R Godine, 1979), 27.
28 Park, “Jeon Jaeng Sa Rul Da Shi Se Gue Han Jo Chong,” 33.
29 He is the author of the Book of Corrections.
Japanese musketeers, but Sin replied, “Even if the Japanese have muskets, how can they score every time they shoot?” The fate of the Korean army at Tan’geumdae was already sealed at this point.

On April 28, 1592, Sin’s cavalry confronted the Japanese at the field. The Japanese commander Konishi, who had conquered Busan and Dongnae before, split the forces in three ways: left, right, and center. Only watching the central force, Sin overlooked the total strength of the Japanese army and advanced his cavalry. The Koreans attempted to surround the enemy, but when they approached the center, the Japanese musketeers on the left and the right side showed up and began shooting. The attack of the Japanese was so fierce that Yu described that the sound of muskets “was deafening and the sky filled with dust.” The Koreans retreated at first, and then launched their second attack, but again, the Japanese successfully repulsed them with muskets. The location was also an obstacle for the Koreans. “The campsite was surrounded by rice paddies on the left and covered with water plants on the right; therefore, the place was inconvenient for both men and horses to move freely.” Feeling hopeless, Sin committed suicide by throwing himself in a nearby river, and about eight thousand Koreans were killed. After the defeat of Sin, King Sonjo fled northbound and arrived at Pyongyang on May 7th. It was at this time when Sonjo sought aid from the Chinese. Four days later, Konishi’s Japanese forces entered the capital without bloodshed.

The main reason for the continuous defeats of the Korean army arises from the different strategies between Korea and Japan. Traditionally, the Koreans preferred to shoot the enemies at a distance, so during the battle the Koreans prioritized their archers. Instead, before they adopted the muskets, the fighting style of the Japanese was hand-to-hand combat. Armed with Japanese swords and spears, the Samurai often directly charged toward the enemy. Before the Japanese invasion, the Koreans simply repelled the Japanese pirates by shooting arrows while the enemy was charging. However, the Japanese gained the advantage due to the invention of Japanese musket. The Japanese also adopted the volley fire strategy. In the Japanese war formation, the musketeers are in the front line, followed by archers and foot soldiers armed with swords and spears. The front line begins shooting, and they retreat back to the second line to reload. While the musketeers are reloading, the archers start shooting to bridge the time-gap, and then the gunners come forward and shoot again. They repeat this process until the enemy becomes disorganized. Then, foot soldiers charge toward the enemy and engage in hand-to-hand combat. This military tactic maximized the strategic effectiveness by incorporating long distance weapons such as guns and spears and close range weapons, and the Japanese enjoyed continuous victory in the early stages of the war.

The Korean army had never experienced this new pattern of battle before, so they could not respond effectively to the Japanese tactics. Also, like the case of General Sin, they never had enough information about the

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30 Yu, The Book of Corrections, 42.
31 Yu, The Book of Corrections, 68.
32 See Luis De Guzman, Historia de las Misiones (1601).
Japanese muskets. The result was the Japanese onslaught of the Korean soldiers in every battle.

The Rise of the Korean Firearms

Up to now, the readers have probably assumed that the Japanese already determined their victory. Yet, as I mentioned previously, it was the Koreans who won the war. The Koreans had much more advanced gunpowder weapons than the Japanese, and that was the biggest reason for the Korean victory in the war. The Japanese were not the only military to use firearms in East Asia.

The gunpowder was first invented in China and was widely used in Ming troops during this period. Most importantly, the Koreans also had their own tradition of making firearms, though they did not know about the European muskets.

The development of Korean firearms was started by Choi Museon in the 14th century. The Koreans were already importing gunpowder from the Chinese, so at first, the Korean officials did not agree with Choi’s idea to develop their own gunpowder manufacturing skills. Yet, Choi’s opinion was different. He planned to localize gunpowder production, and more importantly, he believed that firearms would play a critical role in battles, especially against the rampant Japanese pirates in the southern shore of Korea. Since there were no Korean experts in gunpowder, Choi collected Chinese documents, and whenever the Chinese merchants arrived in Korea, Choi always visited them, asking about manufacturing gunpowder. Eventually, Lee Won, who was a master craftsman in producing niter under the Chinese Yuan Dynasty, handed down his method to Choi. Choi and his servants acquainted themselves thoroughly with the manufacturing procedure. On October 1377, Choi suggested to the King about installing Hwatongdogam, an institution overseeing gunpowder and firearm production. The institution would also be in charge of the security of gunpowder manufacturing techniques. The king accepted Choi’s suggestion, and Choi started producing and deploying firearms to the military, which soon turned out to be a tremendous success. In 1380, about three hundred Japanese pirate ships invaded Jinpo, a port located in the southern coast of Korea. The King ordered Choi to drive the pirates out. With commander-in-chief Na Se, Choi deployed his cannon in warships and attacked the Japanese. Almost every Japanese warship was hit and sunk. This battle, which was named as “the Battle of Jinpo,” was the first battle to use firearms in Korean military history.

In 1392, the newly established Joseon Dynasty actively supported the manufacturing of Korean firearms, and under government support, the manufacturing technique of Korean firearms advanced rapidly. “Firearm production and development increased under King Taejong, the 2nd king of Joseon, and by 1415, some 10,000 guns of various sizes, from hand-held weapons to

36 Sungnae Park 박성래, Han Gook Eui Gwa Hak Ja Dul 한국의과학자들 (Seoul: Chaek Gwa Ham Ggae 책과함께, 2011), 267.
heavy cannons, had been issued to 100 provincial and coastal castles as well as the Korean navy." As a result, Choi’s early fireann was improved to Chongtong, an advanced type of Korean cannon. Ranging in size in from smallest to largest, Chongtong was identified as: Sungja, Victory Cannon; Hwangja, Yellow Cannon; Hyonja, Black Cannon; Chija, Earth Cannon; and Chonja, Heaven Cannon. “The largest Heaven Cannon weighed 300kg (660 lb), and its 140mm (5.5 in) bore could hurl a projectile several hundred yards.” It also had a maximum range of 2 km (1.24 mile), the black cannon, which was the most commonly used one, had a 3.8 km maximum range (2.36 mile). This was an overwhelming performance compared to Japanese muskets, which had a maximum of 200m (0.12 mile) and average 100m (0.06 mile) range. “Fragmentation type iron, stones, and a form of buckshot, were often fired from these weapons.” The Koreans also fired large arrows with cannons. The arrows were up to 3m (9ft) long, sometimes tipped with flame, and intended to set enemy vessels or bases on fire.

Therefore, the Korean army did not have individual firearms like European muskets, but they possessed enough gunpowder weapons to counterattack or even overwhelm the Japanese through independently improving gunpowder technology. Yet, while spending 200 years of peace, the firearms stayed dormant in the army, and during the early period of the Japanese invasion, the Koreans were too panicked to use their firearms due to Japanese muskets and volley fire techniques.

41 Haskew et al., Fighting Techniques of the Oriental World, 155.
42 Haskew et al., Fighting Techniques of the Oriental World, 155.
nearby towns and manufactured siege weapons outside the castle. They built a siege tower with four stories and wooden shields, and inside the tower, several musketeers were prepared to shoot.\(^{43}\) The Japanese believed that the Korean army could never destroy their siege tower with its traditional long distance weapons: arrows and bows. Yet, the Korean army surely had more than that. Whenever the Japanese siege towers approached the wall, the Koreans fiercely bombarded them with Black Cannons.\(^{44}\) The siege towers were of no use, and the death toll of the Japanese army increased exponentially. At last, the Japanese stopped their attack on Jinju Castle, and on the morning of October 10\(^{10}\), the whole Japanese army pulled back, and this retreat marked the end of the battle.\(^{45}\) Through using firearms, the 3,800 Korean soldiers in Jinju successfully repelled the Japanese, whose men were almost seven times as many as the Koreans. Although the Korean commander, Kim Simin, died of a gunshot wound, and almost a thousand Koreans were dead or wounded, they killed three hundred enemy officers and tens of thousands of Japanese soldiers.

The Korean army also used the new gunpowder weapon in the Siege of Jinju. The name of this weapon was Pigyok Chinch’onroe, which means heaven-shaking explosive shell. It was first invented in 1592 by Yi Changson, who was the captain of an artillery unit. The heaven-shaking explosive shell was launched through Daewangu, which was similar to modern mortar. This weapon was first used on September 1\(^{st}\) in the Battle of Gyeongju, Korean army recaptured the city from the Japanese.\(^{46}\) While attacking the castle from outside, the Korean army launched the bomb, and it fell in the middle of the yard before the guesthouse inside the castle. Out of curiosity, the Japanese gathered together to see the objects that had just dropped to the ground. Without any knowledge of what they were, they picked them up and examined them closely. “In a few seconds, the bombs exploded with a deafening sound, and the shreds of iron flew up all over the place.”\(^{47}\) In the Siege of Jinju, the bomb caused critical damage to the Japanese who were in close formation.

The great victory at Jinju Castle decisively turned the tide of the war to the Korean side. This was the beginning of several remarkable performances of the Korean army. Receiving news of victory throughout all regions, the Korean army planned to recapture their capital, Hanyang. At this time, the Ming Chinese was advancing southbound, crushing every Japanese force they had encountered. The Koreans planned to collaborate with the Ming and attack the enemy from both sides, North and South. However, this plan failed because the Ming army was defeated by

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\(^{46}\) Sŏnjo Soejung Sillok, 1592/9/1.

\(^{47}\) Yu, The Book of Corrections, 142.
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the Japanese in the Battle of Byeokjegwan, and they stopped advancing. The Japanese army, who were uplifted by defeating the Ming, decided to crush the Korean army and prevent the Koreans from forming a coalition force with the Ming. The main force of the Korean army was stationed at Haengju Castle, a fortress nearby Hanyang. A prominent Korean general, Kwon Yul, was defending the fortress with 2,880 soldiers.

At 6 a.m on February 12th, 1593, about thirty thousand Japanese soldiers launched their siege on Haengju. The Japanese divided their force into seven divisions. The first division was led by Konishi, and he took the lead in the attack with the second division. Yet, Konishi was repulsed by the fierce bombardment of the Koreans. Soon after, the third division advanced with their siege towers, but they faced the same fate as the four stories siege towers in the Battle of Jinju. Although the Korean army was well armed with various firearms, the Japanese only insisted on traditional strategies of siege warfare, such as attacking with siege towers and flaming arrows. When all three units failed to break the defense, the Japanese commander in chief, Ukida Hideie, became furious. He personally charged the castle, commanding his fourth division. Ukida’s fierce attack broke the Korean defense on the outer wall, and the Koreans retreated to the inner wall. At this point, the Korean commander, Kwon Yul, ordered a converging fire toward Ukida’s division, who was positioned at the center, and Ukida was severely wounded by Korean cannons. After that, the 5th division set fire to the wooden fence, but the Koreans extinguished it. The 6th division advanced westward and encountered the Korean monk soldiers, who voluntarily grabbed weapons instead of scriptures to drive the enemy out. The monks threw pockets with lime powder and ashes at the Japanese. Lime powder and ashes cause an exothermic reaction when they make contact with moisture, and so the monks aimed at the eyes of the

Figure 5. Pigyok Chinch’onroe
(Heaven-shaking Explosive Shell).
Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea, “Pigyok Chinch’onroe 비극진전례,” accessed November 30, 2014,

Figure 6. Daewangu (Korean Mortar).
Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea, “Daewangu 대원구,” accessed November 30, 2014,
Japanese soldiers. At 7 p.m., the Japanese started retreating, and this was the end of the siege of Haengju fortress. Among 30,000 Japanese troops, about half of them were killed, and 9,000 soldiers were wounded. Yet, the death toll of the Koreans was only 130 people.

The Koreans could overcome numerical inferiority with great tactics and outstanding weapons. In the siege of Haengju, the Korean army used the cannon Chongtong, the mortar Pigyok Chinch’onro, but they also had rockets and rocket launchers. The Korean rocket Singijeon was first invented during the reign of King Sejong, the 4th King of Joseon. The Koreans have preserved the blueprint of Singijeon, and the International Astronautical Federation officially recognized it as the oldest rocket blueprint in the world. The first step for firing Singijeon is to put gunpowder in the propellant and block its end with many folds of paper. The next step is to install a bomb on the propellant and drill a hole on the upper side of the propellant and the bottom center of the bomb. Lastly, the two holes should be connected with a fuse. The reason for this process is to trigger an automatic explosion of the propellant when the rocket almost arrives at the target. Singijeon is classified with three different sizes: big, middle, and small. The biggest rocket is 5.6 m (220 in) and has a 70 cm (27 in) propellant. The small Singijeon has an arrowhead instead of a propellant.

“Singijeon was launched through Hwacha, which was the equivalent of a modern rocket launcher as it consisted of a...”

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honeycomb-like framework mounted upon a wooden cart pushed by two to four men." Generally, one Hwacha could fire about 100 Singijeon.

In order to counteract the Japanese musket, the Korean army mobilized almost every firearm that they could use in the battle, including cannons, mortars, rockets, and rocket launchers. This active use of firearm often enabled the Koreans to defeat a large number of enemies with small soldiers, and while the Korean army was repeating these great victories against the Japanese, the pace of the war became more advantageous to the Korean side.

The Ming Rescue?

Since their retreat to Pyongyang, the Korean government had continuously sought aid from the Ming army. Due to the northbound advance of the Japanese, the Ming Chinese also felt the seriousness of the war and sent Ming troops in July. The Ming tried to stop the Japanese in Korea before they could arrive in China, and compared to the Chinese mainland, it was easier to confront the Japanese in the Korean peninsula, which is narrower. At first, the Ming general, Zu Chengxun, attacked P'yongyang castle with 5,000 soldiers, but the Japanese easily defeated them. The Ming realized that the Japanese army was no pushover and enlarged the size of the Korean expeditionary force. In December 1592, about 42,000 Ming troops crossed the Yalu River and arrived at the northern province of Korea. The administrator, Song Yingchang, and the supreme commander, Li Rusong, who was a rising young general, jointly led the force. The Ming force consisted of cavalry and foot soldiers armed with cannons. In January 1593, Li arrived at the P'yongyang castle and launched an attack, bombarding the Japanese with his cannons. "Faced with a desperate situation, the Japanese soldiers fought back with all their might, and Li allowed them to escape to avoid casualties among his own troops." That night, Konishi ran away with the entire army, crossing the frozen river.

Yet, that was the first and the last Ming victory. After recapturing P'yongyang, Li swiftly moved to the south. Overconfident, he was so rushed and neglected that the Japanese reassembled their troops. "All Japanese forces in the western province of Korea gathered in Hanyang to find a way to fight the Ming army." About 30,000 Japanese were waiting for the Ming at Byeokje post station, a lodging house along the main road to China near Seoul. When Li heard the report about the nearby enemy, he rushed to the station with a couple thousand cavalry, leaving his main army behind. "The cavalry Li brought had no firearms with them; all they had were daggers with dull blades." During the battle, the Ming cavalry was completely overwhelmed by the Japanese musketeers, and Li retreated with heavy causalities. Although the battle ended in a Chinese defeat, Li tried to evade his responsibility for the defeat by sending a false report. In the report, he said that "the number of the Japanese army was more than 200,000. They are so many that is hard for us to deal with them with a small number of soldiers of our own." Li retreated to the nearby city, Kaeseong, and never advanced again until the end of the war. The Ming never showed enthusiasm in fighting against the Japanese.

The Ming took a different stance from the Korean government. The Koreans wanted to drive the Japanese out from the Korean peninsula by using all means. However, the Ming wished to prevent the Japanese from breaking into Chinese territory. Therefore, the Ming was less enthusiastic in fighting against the Japanese. When the Ming accomplished their primary goal by defeating the Japanese in P'yongyang Castle, they wished to make a peace treaty with the Japanese and leave Korea as soon as possible.
as possible. As a result, the Ming envoy, Shen Weijing, held secret peace talks with Konishi, without notifying this to the Koreans. Here, Konishi offered a deal to Shen, saying that he would retreat and go back to Japan if the Ming stops attacking. Shen accepted, and the Ming let the Japanese army retreat freely. Whenever the Korean army tried to pursue the Japanese, the Ming generals stopped them, and the Japanese could gain time for reorganizing their troops. Therefore, the Ming’s mixed attitude toward the Japanese delayed the end of the war.

In addition, the Ming placed extra burden on the Korean government for logistics. The Ming army planned to rely on the supply of the Ming merchants, but most of them were not willing to travel to Korea because of its far distance from the Ming capital Beijing. To make matters worse, some Ming merchants embezzled a large sum of supplies, which worsened the logistical problem. Eventually, the Ming made the Korean government responsible for supplies, saying that they will leave Korea if the government fails to meet their need. Hundreds of thousands of Korean soldiers and civilians were forced to transport supplies for the Ming army. Since most of them lacked means of transportation such as cows or horses, they had to carry a load on their back. Some people even ran away to avoid carrying the load.

The Ming also used violence during the transportation process. In January 1593, the Ming generals arrested and flogged several Korean high officials for neglecting their food transporting duty. The Korean officials pressured local governors, to serve food for the Ming army and disregarded the Korean army and the people, who suffered from severe food shortage. Later, the Ming army changed their plan to self-subsistence on the spot instead of relying on their merchants. Yet, while fighting the Japanese since April 1592, the Koreans had consumed all the reserved food in 1593. Since they were unable to secure food from the Korean government, the Ming turned their eyes to private houses. The Ming army became robbers, plundering several Korean towns, and Ming soldiers often raped Korean women. The Ming troops were so despotic that the Korean villagers hid themselves in the forest during the daytime and buried food and furniture in the ground when they heard that the Ming troops were coming.

The Ming had always caused harm to the Korean officials and people until they left Korea. Some Ming commanders even justified this inconvenience, arguing that since the Ming army bears the Heaven’s will, the Koreans should serve them. The Korean government deliberately ignored the harm of the Ming army. Since they were relying on Ming power, they were reluctant to criticize their allies. While the Korean government kept silent, the Korean people and soldiers cried in distress. Like this, the Ming had engaged in some battles during the war, but they were clearly not the welcomed one as Kenneth Swope described in his book. The Korean King Sonja, Korean officials, and Korean people always felt disappointment and embarrassment from the Ming army.

Conclusion

The first Japanese invasion ended in a Korean victory, and the Japanese failed to conquer the Korean peninsula. Although the
Koreans had experienced an enemy onslaught at the early stage of the war, they recovered from the damage and successfully blocked the Japanese advance. On both sides, firearms played a key role in the war. The Japanese used muskets and volley fire techniques, and the Koreans made counterattacks by using large cannons, rockets, and mortars. So far, the common misconception was that only the Korean navy actively used firearms, such as naval cannons, and contributed to the victory of the war. However, supposing from the developments of land battles, such as the Siege of Jinju and Haengju Fortress, the Korean army also used various kinds of firearms and played a significant role in defeating the Japanese. The Ming army also supported the Koreans, fighting against the Japanese. However, compared to previous records such as Kenneth M. Swope’s *A Dragon’s Head and a Serpent’s Tail*, the Ming also inflicted much harm on the Koreans. They excessively demanded supplies from the Koreans, which caused food shortages to Korean soldiers and civilians. Moreover, the Ming lacked the will to engage in direct combat against the Japanese and signed a secret peace treaty with them to avoid further conflict. Considering all the records, the argument that the Ming Army totally carried out the war should be reevaluated. Therefore, regarding the Korean victory of the first Japanese Invasion, the spotlight should be given to the Korean Army, which truly deserves more acclaim.

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**Images**

Fig. 1. Park, Jaekwang 박재광, “Jeon Jaeng Sa Rul Da Shi Se Gue Han Jo Chong 전쟁사절대시쓰개한조종.” _Gwa Hak Gwa Gui Sool_ 과학과기술 41 (2006): 31-46.


