

# The Really Forgotten Korean War

Hawley, Samuel. 2005. *The Imjin War. Japan's Sixteenth-Century Invasion of Korea and Attempt to Conquer China*. Seoul: The Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch; Berkeley: The Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 664 pages, ISBN 89 954424 2 5

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If the Korean War of 1950-53 is still often labelled the 'forgotten war', then what about the Imjin War of 1592-98? While there are now literally hundreds of works available in Western languages on the Korean War, Samuel Hawley's volume is only the second devoted solely to the Hideyoshi invasions, and the first to give them their full due. Although the war is undoubtedly a key event in world history, even a basic description of its development was until recently unavailable. Previously, the only facet of the invasions that managed to draw the West's attention were the exploits of Admiral Yi Sun-sin and his alleged invention of ironclad 'turtle ships'.

This is a pity, because the Imjin War was a major event in the final stages of the traditional East Asian world order and in the transition to the modern period. The pragmatic, militaristic Japanese, spurred on by the megalomaniac warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi, clashed with the idealistic Confucian bureaucracies of Ming China and Chosŏn Korea. An international war of a kind never seen before, it was perhaps the first example of modern warfare, with the speed, organisation and sheer size of the invading Japanese force unrivalled until the modern period: the more than 150,000 men conquered the 450 kilometres from Pusan to Seoul in just 20 days.

The war is also important in world history as a case study of the effects of Western missionary, trade and military expansion; the muskets that were perfected and used to such devastating effect by the Japanese had been introduced by the Portuguese in the 1540s, while many of the Japanese commanders and their troops were Christian converts. A Spanish missionary accompanying Japanese troops sent back to the West its first eyewitness accounts of Korea, and missionaries or traders also introduced plants from the New World, such as red pepper and tobacco. Hideyoshi's death in 1598 signalled the final retreat of Japanese forces, but his invasions left enduring material and psychological scars on all three countries involved.

## 'Fighting with a river to one's back'

Samuel Hawley provides a comprehensive, in-depth overview of the war, its causes and effects, and the reasons for failure and success in battle. Based on all available English-language secondary sources, primary sources and a few modern Korean studies, the author writes in a lively prose style that includes both dramatic re-enactment of key scenes and more reflective expository passages. The result is an engrossing narrative that reads almost like a novel. Despite the action-packed plot, Hawley avoids reducing actors to stereotypes of heroism or cowardice, good or evil, and does so without ignoring the tragedy of the war.

Although the book offers no new revelations, it accurately reflects current knowledge. In this sense it resembles Stephen Turnbull's *Samurai Invasions*, the only other English language book-length treatment,<sup>1</sup> which is superior in terms of its lavish illustrations but inferior in its detail. Their ordering of events is similar, but their assessment of key issues differs somewhat. One of the most enduring controversies regarding the invasions is whether or not Yi Sun-sin's 'turtle ships' were ironclad. Hawley argues that they were almost certainly not (pages 195-8), while Turnbull leaves some room for doubt (pages 243-4).

Hawley's major strength is his insight on Korean military tactics. While the Chosŏn army suffered from the neglect and discrimination of Confucian officials, it drew heavily from Chinese military classics, which clearly inspired

key military decisions. This is clear in General Sin Rip's defence of Ch'ongju. Hawley shows that his strategy of 'fighting with a river to one's back' was not mere folly but rather based on Chinese military precedent<sup>2</sup>. By cutting off all escape routes for his untrained and inexperienced men, he hoped they would fight for their lives (pages 154-8). While this reliance on Chinese military manuals proved disastrous on land, it worked very well at sea, where the Japanese had no answer for Yi Sun-sin's superior battle strategies.

## Accommodating the lay reader to a fault

The author uses secondary sources responsibly, but the shortcomings of relying mainly on English-language sources are obvious, as many date back to the very beginning of Western scholarship on Korea and Japan. Many primary sources, meanwhile, demand more

rigorous criticism, for they may have served to paint their authors in a flattering light, as may have been the case for Yu Sŏng-nyong's war reflections. Also, a few of the author's generalisations are open to question, for example, that the Koreans did not need Chinese intervention, or that Koreans were good fighters when defending high ramparts and bad ones when standing the ground of their adversaries.

It is disappointing that the author decided to apply romanisation standards very loosely. All diacritics have been omitted, not only the macrons on Japanese vowels and the breves on Korean vowels, but also the apostrophes indicating aspiration. Thus the city of Ch'ŏngju is rendered as 'Chongju' throughout, but with many similar place names (besides Ch'ŏngju there is also Chŏnju and Chŏngju), readers unfamiliar with Korean geography will be confused.



Japanese 'meglomaniac warlord' Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

Moreover, different romanisation systems are often mixed, especially the McCune-Reischauer system and the Revised Romanisation System of Korean; thus we find 'Kwak Jae-u' instead of Kwak Chae-u (Mc-R) or Gwak Jae-u (Revised).

Another annoying feature is the frequent repetition of whole sentences, even paragraphs. Undoubtedly, this is to refresh the reader's memory – the invasions developed on many fronts, and as the narrative moves back and forth some repetition is inevitable – but the author could at least have made an effort to vary his phrasing. Meanwhile, while maps are provided to help readers trace the main stages of the war, they are rather sketchy, and many battle sites are not listed. No maps show battle formations at major engagements.

Perhaps these were editorial decisions in the interest of making the work more accessible to the general reader, but I think they are counterproductive, as they tend to confuse rather than simplify. On the whole, however, the author has succeeded in providing us with a much needed reference work which gives us all the basic facts about a devastating conflict that is crucial in understanding the recent history of northeast Asia. What remains to be done, however, is to move beyond the details of the battlefield into the realm of political, economic, cultural and social history to reveal the larger contours and effects of the Imjin War. <

## notes

1. Turnbull, Stephen. 2002. *Samurai Invasion. Japan's Korean War 1592-1598*. London: Cassell.
2. The expression "*Bei shui yi zhan*", literally "fighting with the river at your back", was often used to mean "either win or die". This expression came from the battle of Jingjinkou, in which the military commander Han Xin deliberately stationed his troops facing the enemy, with their backs to the river, leaving no escape route. The knowledge that there was no way out but victory or death inspired the soldiers to fight harder.

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A turtle ship replica at the military museum in Seoul.