Beyond Turtleboats: Siege Accounts from Hideyoshi’s Second Invasion of Korea, 1597-1598

Kenneth M. Swope
Ball State University

ABSTRACT
Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s invasions, which lasted from 1592 to 1598, were perhaps the most traumatic events in the history of Korea. The war produced Korea’s greatest national hero, Admiral Yi Sunsin, and it remains prominent in Korean historical consciousness. While Admiral Yi’s exploits are well-documented in secondary literature, and rightly so, far less attention has thus far been accorded to other dimensions of the conflict, most notably the sieges that characterized most of the fighting during Hideyoshi’s truncated second invasion. Even though the allies were seldom able to dislodge or completely defeat the Japanese invaders, they managed to effect a military victory by virtue of preventing the Japanese from launching any offensives and wearing them down through process of attrition. This article examines various accounts of the sieges of the second Japanese invasion of Korea and discusses their tactical and strategic significance. It also considers these sieges within the larger context of early modern siegecraft in Europe.

Keywords: Imjin war, sieges, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Ming-Choson relations, comparative military history

Introduction
The fact that the countries of the Korean peninsula have been at the forefront of the international news scene for the past few years should not surprise any student of Korea’s past. Intermittently throughout its long recorded history Korea, or, more properly, various polities located in what is now the Korean peninsula, have been caught up in power struggles involving militarily more powerful neighbors. As early as the fourth century BCE, the ancient state of Old Choson was invaded by the Chinese kingdom of Yan, which sparked the formation of a successor kingdom, Wiman Choson, which bore many of the hallmarks of more advanced Chinese civilization to the west. This state in turn was invaded and crushed by Han(202 BCE-220 CE) China in 109 BCE. The Chinese then established a number of commanderies that functioned as proto-colonies in the Korean peninsula. States in the Korean peninsula would be attacked again by China under the Sui(589-618) and Tang(618-907) dynasties, though it should be noted that the latter was in fact allied with the Korean kingdom of Silla. These later actions also involved Japanese interests on the peninsula, although neither the exact nature of the Japanese presence nor the precise interests of the Japanese Yamato state on the peninsula have
Beyond Turtleboats

Kenneth M. Swope

thus far been accorded to other dimensions of the conflict, most notably the sieges that characterized most of the fighting during Hideyoshi’s truncated second invasion.3 For while they easily overran Korea’s defenses in the spring and summer of 1592, the Japanese invaders were much less successful in their second attempt to conquer Korea due to vigorous allied resistance by the Chinese and Koreans that managed to check the Japanese advance and force them to retreat to an extended defense line that stretched from the vicinity of Ulsan on the east coast down to Suncheon on the south coast. Even though the allies were seldom able to dislodge or completely defeat the Japanese defenders, they managed to effect a military victory by virtue of preventing the Japanese from launching any significant offensives and wearing them down through process of attrition. In the end, upon the advice of his top generals in Korea, Hideyoshi ordered a withdrawal of Japanese forces, which was already well underway by the time of the tachō’s death in September of 1598.4 This article shall examine various accounts of some of the sieges of the second Japanese invasion of Korea and discuss their tactical and strategic significance. It will also suggest bases for comparison between these sieges and their early modern European counterparts.

Drawing upon my extensive reading of accounts produced by all three beligerents, I have attempted to reconstruct what I believe to be plausible narrative reconstructions of each siege. At the beginning of each narrative I will briefly describe how the events in question are rendered in the dominant narrative interpretation favored by each side. This should not be taken to imply that there are not sometimes differences between the accounts produced even by members of the same side. As you will see with the siege of Ulsan in particular, representations of events could often be clouded by political factors that might have very little to do with what happened and the battlefield was consensus officials often seemed predetermined to see potentially dangerous and subversive cabals everywhere. Keeping this point in mind, I will also draw attention to some of the discrepancies between the Korean, Chinese, and Japanese sources within the individual narrative account of each siege.

Before launching into a discussion of the sieges themselves, a few words about the conflict prior to 1597 are in order. In the fourth lunar month of 1592 a

3 On Yi Sunsin, see Park Yun-hoc(1978). For translations of primary sources produced by Yi, see Huh Byong-kwan, trans.(1989a and 1989b). Recently another extremely important document, the account of Korea’s prime minister during the war, Yu Songyung, known in Korean as the Chonghak, has also been translated into English as The Book of Corrections: Reflections on the National Crisis During the Japanese Invasion of Korea, 1592-1598. The original version of Yu’s text is included in a recent Chinese compilation of materials on the invasion by Wu Fenglei and others. In the rest of this piece, I shall refer to the translation as Book of Corrections and the original as CCB. For a more complete discussion of the historiography of the conflict, see Swope, 2001:157-161, 379-383.

4 The title taik translates as “reired imperial regent” and was adopted by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1591, when he designated his nephew, Hidetsugu, as his heir. Hideyoshi had attained the lofty title of kampaku, or imperial regent, in 1585.

5 There are far too many general histories of the Hideyoshi invasions to enumerate here, especially in Japanese. For starters, see Kajita(2002), and Ishihara(1963). Also see CNE. I do not read Korean, so I cannot comment on the quality of the secondary literature in that language, though it is certainly voluminous. The primary accounts from all three participants are generally written in classical Chinese, thus allowing me to read them. In the summer of 2006 Sogang University hosted an
force of over 150,000 Japanese troops landed at the southeastern coastal city of Pusan. The stated Japanese goal was conquest of not only Korea, but China and India as well and the Koreans were regarded as but a nuisance to be dealt with along the way to greater things. There had been some warning of the invasion but Korea’s faction-ridden court and army were ill prepared for the onslaught. In particular the Koreans were daunted by Japanese aneubus wakets, which they had been using for decades in Japan but were far less known in Korea. Within weeks the capital city of Seoul had fallen to the invaders and the King Sinjo(t. 1567-1607) and his court were fleeing to the north, stopping at the auxiliary capitals of Kaesong and Pyongyang before finally retreating to the border town of Uiju, on the Yalu River, where they beseeched Ming China, Korea’s tributary overlord, to send military assistance. Although an initial Ming expeditionary force was badly beaten by the Japanese in the summer of 1592, a Ming negotiator managed to arrange a cease-fire with the invaders in order to buy time for the Ming to assemble a more formidable host. In the meantime Korean guerrillas sprang up all over the country and in conjunction with the naval exploits of the aforementioned Yi Sunsin, the Koreans managed to finally stem the tide of the Japanese advance.

In the first month of 1593 a Sino-Korean force of some 30,000 or so troops counterattacked the Japanese garrison at Pyongyang and overwhelmed them with superior firepower, most notably great cannon whose range and destructive power greatly exceeded that of the Japanese muskets. The allies then drove the Japanese south, quickly recapturing Kaesong, before their advance was temporarily checked at Pothetcheopan, just north of Seoul. Though some in the Japanese camp now advocated a temporary retreat or even a retreat, a small detachment managed to burn the Japanese grain stores in the vicinity of the capital and the invaders were compelled to withdraw to fortified camps along Korea’s eastern and southern coasts. A prolonged and bizarre period of peace talks then followed, with both the Chinese and Japanese negotiators deceiving their respective governments even as the Koreans were largely kept out of the process. The end result was that the talks fell apart entirely when Hideyoshi realized the true nature of the dealings and the angry Japanese leader organized a second invasion of Korea, this one punitive, with no “lofty” goals of world conquest.

As indicated above, the second invasion of Korea did not go nearly as smoothly as the first, at least from the perspective of the invaders. While on the one hand they did benefit from a factional intrigue that had resulted in the removal of Yi Sunsin from his position of military authority in Korean naval forces, they also now faced a much more experienced and less daunted foe. Once again Ming China would send help and this time they would blunt the Japanese advance before they even reached Seoul. The result was that unlike the first invasion, the second would see the Japanese on the defensive most of the time and would feature extended sieges. Even though the allies were never completely successful in rooting the Japanese out of their seaside fortresses, known as sujib [Japanese castles], they did prevent the invaders from carrying out any effective offensive actions after the autumn of 1597 and eventually convinced Hideyoshi and his generals that retreat was their only option.

A study of the major sieges of the second invasion reveals much about the nature of warfare in early modern East Asia. One also gets a sense of what the different combatants valued and how they perceived one another. The importance of internal politics and their relationship to events on the battlefield is also revealed. Finally, we can actually hear at least a few individual voices, accounts from the lowly as recorded by Korean, Japanese and Chinese chroniclers. In the rest of this piece I shall briefly examine accounts from the four major sieges of the second Japanese invasion of Korea[Namwón, Ulsan, Sachon, and Sunchón] and discuss them in light of these issues.

The Siege of Namwón
The first important siege of the second invasion was the Siege of Namwón, a fortress city located in south-central Korea. This is the only siege discussed herein in which the Japanese were the besiegers and it offers a fine picture of Japanese battle tactics and strategy. In particular, surviving Japanese sources give us a picture of the vengeful mentality of Hideyoshi’s second offensive. They speak far more of individual glory than they do of larger tactical or strategic issues. There is no sense of the bigger picture, or any larger goal. Destruction and chaos itself seems to be the only goal. Thus it is possible to find both vainglorious accounts of samurai exploits and economic expressions of dismay and remorse amongst Japanese chroniclers, depending upon their relationship to the action.

Indeed, starting with the Battle of Namwón, the Japanese forces also contained some of the most important chroniclers of the second invasion, namely the minor samurai Okochi Hidemoto, author of a book of reminiscences known as Chisen ki[An Account of Korea], and the Buddhist priest Keinen[ca 1534-1611], who left behind one of the most poignant and descriptive memoirs of the entire war, a poem diary known as Chisen nichinichi ki[Korea Day by Day]. This chronicle details the horrors of war with a level of sympathy unrivalled by the vainglorious accounts presented by samurai eager for rewards or the terse accounts typically professed by Chinese and Korean military censors. From the start of his journey as a physician and spiritual advisor to the danyoo Ota Kazuyoshi, Keinen describes Korea as a veritable Hell, in which slavery, wanton slaughter and general human suffering play major roles.

For a more detailed look at the military technologies of the conflict, see Swepe, 2005.
10 The peace talks are treated in Swepe, 2002.
11 Since the Japanese technically never totally withdrew from Korea, it might be more correct to refer to this action as a second offensive.
Chinese and Korean sources on this siege tend to focus upon the tactical mistakes made by the Chinese garrison commander, Yang Yuan, and upon the reluctance or inability of nearby Chinese and Korean units to come to the aid of the beleaguered defenders. In particular in Korean accounts, one notices a willingness to criticize the Chinese for refusing to listen to the good advice offered by their Korean allies, whom the Chinese generally treated as subordinates anyhow. While also holding Yang accountable for the battle's tragic outcome, Chinese sources stress that Yang made the mistakes that he did in large part because he refused to change his tactics to suit the rugged south Korean terrain. Yang was a cavalry commander, who had earned his stripes battling nomadic raiders along China’s northern frontier. He favored flat ground rather than the mountain fortresses that constituted the bulk of Korea’s defenses. This proved to be his undoing for even though he would be one of the few to survive the battle, he would eventually be publicly executed in Seoul for his failures. Additionally, Korean sources in particular emphasize the panic that gripped the populace immediately following the fall of Namwon.

Turning to the action itself, after a series of battles that routed the Korean navy at sea, the Japanese landed on Korea’s southern coast and various divisions advanced towards Seoul “like the outstretched fingers of a hand seeking to extend its grasp around Korea.” Meeting little resistance, a force estimated at approximately 60,000 and including many of the most prominent Japanese commanders, surrounded the city of Namwon in the middle of the eighth month, 1397. It seemed to many observers that Namwon was doomed to fall from the start. Or at least this is the impression one gets from reading the Korean sources on the battle. The Chinese defender of the city, Yang Yuan, and his Korean allies had assembled barely 4000 troops for the defense on the city. In addition to this serious numerical disadvantage, Yang had not made adequate use of the local topography. Nearby there was a sapsung[mountain fortress] typical of the kind of defenses used to protect local populations throughout Korea. Had the allies and locals retracted to this fortress they most likely would have been able to withstand a protracted siege, as the invaders would have had to attack uphill and through forested terrain, as opposed to a level plain where they could easily surround the vastly outnumbered defenders. The Koreans urged Yang Yuan to relocate to the mountain hold, but Yang remained stubborn, exemplifying the high-handed behavior that unfortunately characterized many Chinese officers in Korea. As noted above, it was said that Yang, being a soldier from northern China, was unfamiliar with fighting in such terrain and he preferred the flat ground of Namwon and disdained the fighting styles of southern Chinese troops. This did not mean that Yang refrained from bolstering his defenses, however. He actually did quite a bit, adding walls, digging deeper trenches around the outside of the fortress, setting cannons up atop the main gates, and digging a small reservoir outside the fortress in the midst of which he built a fortification called Yangmajang, that he later altered to incorporate cannon into. He also had a network of fences built in the fields around the city, although ironically enough these would subsequently work to the advantage of the attackers.

When the Koreans saw the Japanese coming, most of them fled. Yang requested help from the Korean commander Yi Pongnang (d. 1397), who arrived leading a few hundred more troops only after receiving several urgent missives from the Chinese general. Probing Japanese attacks commenced on the thirteenth day of the eighth month as about one hundred Japanese in the vanguard approached the fortress and launched musket volleys, a tactic that had served them particularly earlier in the war. The Japanese then dispersed themselves in the fields around the city and used the newly erected livestock fences for cover as they attacked in small units of three to five. On the fourteenth the numbers of the besiegers increased and the Japanese unveiled great siege ladders. They also started harvesting logs from the forested hills around the city for use in crossing the moat. Making use of stone and clay walls around civilian homes that had been torched just outside the south gate of the city, the enemy advanced in unison. They also used covered wagons to get closer to the city gates, particularly the west gate.

Because the attackers operated in such small units, the large cannon mounted atop the walls had difficulty hitting them. The main Japanese army, made wary of the power of Chinese and Korean cannon by the experience of the first invasion, took care to remain outside firing range, hoping to goad the defenders into sallying forth. They eventually succeeded in their efforts according to the Korean chronicler Cho Kyungnam. Again we see Yang portrayed as an arrogant hothead who disdains the tactically sound advice of his Korean allies. Yang Yuan was worried that his inability to repulse the endless assaults would expose the weakness of his defenses. He proposed launching a desperate night attack to shock the enemy into at least temporarily lifting the siege, but his plan was rejected. Yang’s Korean allies reasoned that if they mounted a stout enough defense, help might still arrive. But Yang rejected their advice and ordered 1000 volunteers to open the gates and sally forth. The Japanese feigned a retreat and lured the allies into an ambush beyond a

117 Throughout the war there was considerable rivalry between northern and southern Chinese troops and their commanders. The Koreans generally placed more faith in southern troops, whom they deemed more proficient in infantry based warfare and who had a record of battling so-called [japanese pirates] [soson]. See CXL 1040. [Sosong sillok 30th year, bwon 0-2] This is a compilation of Korean sources on the Japanese invasion, mostly taken from The Veritable Records of the Choson Dynasty, or Choson sango sillok. I will include the original bwon and page number along with the citations from this compilation so that readers can consult the original Korean source if they wish. This compilation also contains the specific year, month, and date references for every entry. Also see FBZ 526. This is another Korean account, compiled by a relative of the Korean royal family. As this edition was published in Taiwan, I use Chinese Romanization for the title. The Korean title is Cha’ngching chang. 118 See FBZ 526: Kitajima, 2002:80; Cho Byungsyon, trans. 2002:207, 210.
119 CXL 1061. [Sosong sillok 30th year, 91/19]
120 NC II.144.
121 Cho Byungsyon, trans. 2002:210-211; FBZ 547.

182

183
When the city gates were finally forced open by the defenders seeking to escape, they were confronted by Japanese troops several ranks deep. Many simply bowed their heads and allowed themselves to be decapitated. Yang Yuan, seeing the situation was hopeless, fled the scene on foot with eighteen followers, though some maintained the Japanese deliberately allowed him to escape so he could bring word of the destruction of Namwon to the north. All the other commanders died. Tōtō Takatora was the first Japanese commander to enter the city and was honored by Hideyoshi. All told, some 3000 were killed and nearly 2000 were captured, according to Japanese sources. Keinen noted that men and women, young and old alike, were all slaughtered indiscriminately so the Japanese soldiers could obtain noses, the grisly trophies they sent home for rewards from Hideyoshi.

The collection of noses is one of the most galling aspects of the second invasion for Koreans, but it became a symbol of the prowess of competing Japanese daimyo and a testament to their eternal martial glory. Moreover, the collection of noses was not confined to one's defeated battle foes. Ordinary peasants were also subjected to the indignity so that warriors could inflate their battle rewards. Cho Kyōngnam, in his Namjang chumnak, notes that many people actually survived having their noses severed and that for many years after the war there was an abundance of nose-less people in southern Korea. Noses were pickled in brine and shipped back to Japan where they were inspected by Hideyoshi and eventually interred in a mound in Kyoto erroneously labeled the Mound of Ears (mimizukazaka), which was allegedly erected by the Japanese ruler to show mercy to the ghosts of his victims. Additionally, leading commanders such as Shimazu Yoshitaka sent triumphant letters back to Hideyoshi boasting of their success and family chronicles immortalized these exploits for future generations. A Chinese source says that barely 100 made it out of the city alive.

In terms of the strategic and military significance of the siege of Namwon, it reinforced Korean notions of the superiority of southern Chinese troops over their northern counterparts. Rivalries between northern and southern Chinese soldiers had simmered since the beginning of China's intervention and southern infantry troops were generally regarded as most effective in battling the Japanese, in part because they were supposedly better versed in the tactics of the late Ming general Qi Jiguang (1528-1588), who had harbored the so-called Japanese pirates in the 1560s in south China. Qi's training manuals were widely adopted in Korea during and

---

22 NC E 145.
23 CSZL 1062 (Sonoulling 30th year, 91 20).
24 SI 779.
25 NC E 145.
26 NC E 145.
27 FR2 548.
29 FBZ 549, Choi Byeonghyun, trans. 2002 212.
30 FBZ 513. This contemporary Ming source contains chronicles of Chinese military actions against foreign and domestic foes in the Longqing (1567-1572) and Wanli (1573-1620) reigns. Also see SDZK 32: Yang Yuan would later be executed for his failure.
31 SI 721.
33 NC II 137.
34 Kriajima, 2002 83.
35 Images of some of these communications can be found in Kriajima 2002 82-83. Shimazu Tadamori allegedly took thirteen heads himself. See Shimazu kokusho, box 21-1a. This is a family history of the Shimazu clan, created from clan histories.
36 See SI 721-722; PBZ 316.
after the war.\footnote{Qi's works have remained in print. For a recent edition, see Qi, 2000. On the impact of QI's thought in Korea, see Sun, 2004.}

The siege also demonstrated the importance of utilizing terrain to the best advantage, something the attackers clearly did. In that way it also proved the superiority of mountain based defenses versus isolated citadels on plains. For when the Japanese advance was checked at Chiksan a few weeks later, they retreated to isolated mountain strongholds rather than face equal or superior numbers in more vulnerable locales. In fact it was strange that Yang even chose to defend Namwon over the nearby mountain fortress because one of the stated goals of allied commanders in the second campaign was to make optimum use of Korea's formidable natural defenses. The defeat also temporarily threw the Koreans into a general panic and refugees scrambled north towards Seoul.

For the Japanese, the battle illustrated their response to the often overwhelming firepower of the allies and was just one more example of the kind of ingenuity displayed by Japanese field commanders throughout the war. It also demonstrated that they appreciated the value of superior numbers, an advantage they did not always enjoy, though it should be noted at this juncture that Japanese accounts from the time tended to exaggerate the number of enemy foes as well as inflate their own head counts in battle, a mistake that has been replicated in at least some of the modern accounts of the war. In fact it is doubtful that the Ming ever had as many as 80,000 troops in Korea at any one time, as opposed to well over 100,000 Japanese soldiers during both invasions. In any case, the victory at Namwon marked the high point for the Japanese during the second invasion. Although they would win future battles, they would never regain the momentum they enjoyed just after the victory at Namwon. This was because the defeat at Namwon galvanized the allied counteroffensive and led the Ming commanders Yang Hao and Ning Jue to dispatch their best subordinates to engage the Japanese south of Seoul, where they halted their advance in a sharp engagement that featured heavy use of firearms.\footnote{See Ledyard, 1988; Sweepe, 2007.} The Korean court also saw the error of its ways and restored Yi Sunsin to a position of authority and in tandem with Chinese naval forces, his fleet managed to cut Japanese supply lines to the west. The result was a tactical retreat along a several hundred mile front along Korea's eastern and southern coasts. The Japanese would essentially be on the defensive for the rest of the war and would face siege after siege before they finally withdrew in defeat.

The Siege of Ulsan
The Siege of Ulsan is probably the most interesting and well documented of the entire campaign, as the priest Keinen was once again present and there was a major factional crisis amongst the allies in the wake of the battle. It would probably be fair to say this siege could be viewed as a microcosm of the entire second invasion. With respect to the documentary coverage of the events in question, there is again some disparity in the interpretation of events, although all the sources seem to be generally in agreement about the course of the siege itself. Chinese sources focus on the command incompetence of the civil official in charge of the operation, Yang Hao. Among other things, Yang is accused of having an improper relationship with one of his military subordinates, Li Rumei, an official who already had a somewhat tarnished reputation prior to the war in Korea. Yang supposedly made poor decisions so that Li could earn the lion's share of the rewards after the battle was won. Along with other officials, Yang and Li would later be charged with being part of a dangerous cabal, thereby falling into the murky waters of factional strife that frequently engulfed late Ming officialdom. This is particularly relevant in that Yang Hao would later be recalled to service to battle the Manchus in the seventeenth century and the Ming would suffer a crushing defeat that presaged its eventual fall at the hands of these invaders. Later Chinese historians would trace Yang's incompetence back to Korea.

Korean sources, on the other hand, while admitting that the Ming commanders made some huge strategic blunders in this engagement, still tend to defend Yang Hao somewhat, primarily because Yang had been responsible for turning the tide of war the previous summer. As Gari Ledyard and myself have discussed elsewhere, Yang became one of the Chinese heroes of the war from the Korean perspective, and Yang was vigorously defended by his Korean allies against all charges leveled by Ming censors.\footnote{Kitajima, 2002:80-90.} Japanese sources range from the heroic depictions of samurai fortitude and resilience found in daimyo chronicles to the poignant depictions of suffering found in the writings of Keinen. Once more the human dimension of the war is exposed in graphic detail and even victory cannot alleviate the hopeless despair felt by many of the Japanese soldiers.

As the invaders hunkered down for the winter in eleventh month of 1597, the allied commanders resolved to embark on a three-pronged assault, attacking the Japanese forces under Kato Kiyomasa at Ulsan, the forces under Konishi Yukinaga at Sunchon, and those under Shimazu Yoshihito at Sachin. In the months following their retreat, the Japanese had embarked upon a crash program of fortress expansion and reinforcement, much of it completed by conscripts brought from Japan or slaves rounded up from the Korean populace who were forced to work day and night by Japanese overseers, a scene Keinen describes as being reminiscent of Hell itself.\footnote{The Japanese colonial administration conducted extensive studies of the remains of Japanese built castles in Korea during the occupation in the first half of the twentieth century. See Ota, 2002:33-48.} The Japanese constructed a series of rings around the innermost fortress of Ulsan proper, a defense strategy that calls to mind the traditional layout of contemporary Japanese castles and one which was replicated throughout Korea.

An allied force of some 44,800 troops set out from Seoul on January 14, 1598, gathering intelligence and determining to attack Kato Kiyomasa, regarded as the most dangerous of the Japanese generals, first, learning he was at Tolsan, a fort...
shocked besiegers proved unable to prevent the relief force from entering the city, though they still held the outlying areas. The Japanese then shut the gates and waited for reinforcements, hoping the weather might impel the allies to lift the siege. The Chinese continued their assault as a commander named Chen Yin personally braved the arrows of the defenders to set up scaling ladders. Katō Kiyomasa galloped about the battle in white armor urging his men on. For the time being the allies were deterred by the high, stout walls of the fortress. The assembled generals held a meeting in which they decided to cut off the water supply and tighten their hold on the areas around the city, thereby starving them out. Fearing the Japanese would send a rescue force from Pusan, the Ming commander Ma Gui sent two officers to Yangsan and another to Namwon, while still another commander was detailed to guard the water approach from Sōsaenggo. For ten days and nights they besieged the Japanese, all the while under heavy fire from those within the fortress. Again the Ming had trouble getting their heavy cannon up the narrow roads leading to the fortress itself, as their men were exposed to heavy fire every time they tried to advance. It is said that spent shells piled up high within the fortress while the Japanese kept up their dogged resistance. Still, Ma Gui figured that the Japanese would soon be unable to resist for lack of food and water, as he estimated there were perhaps 10,000 Japanese in the city.

The allies stepped up their attack, pummeling the walls with heavy cannon, but to no great effect. The defenders continued to riddle them with bullets from their muskets. One of the Ming commanders managed to ascend the wall briefly, only to be clipped by an enemy bullet. On the evening of the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth month of 1597, the skies clouded over and freezing rain fell, turning the ground around the fortress into a quagmire. Ma Gui reported the allied forces continued to attack, and despite losing 700 Chinese and 200 Korean troops in the process, an equal number of Japanese were killed. Yang Hao also received a tip that Katō Kiyomasa was planning to escape on his own. Further allied assaults claimed many more Japanese lives, and they even breached the wall for a short time before being turned back by the well-prepared defenders. Forty Japanese ships were spotted approaching on the Ulsan River, so 2000 southern Chinese troops and 1000 cavalry were dispatched to guard the riverbank. Captured Japanese reported Katō had fled two nights before. Yi Tékhyo and the Korean general, Kwon Yul, reported that the rains continued to fall and they were hopeful the Japanese would soon capitulate though there were rumors Katō was returning, if in fact he ever left. The battle raged again the following night, as lead from the besieged came down with the rain, inflicting heavy casualties on both the Chinese and the Koreans. At one point Yang Hao pulled the Chinese forces back to rest, telling Kwon Yul to lead Korean troops in the attack. Kwon did so and suffered

4. Shocked besiegers proved unable to prevent the relief force from entering the city, though they still held the outlying areas.

5. The Japanese then shut the gates and waited for reinforcements, hoping the weather might impel the allies to lift the siege. The Chinese continued their assault as a commander named Chen Yin personally braved the arrows of the defenders to set up scaling ladders. Katō Kiyomasa galloped about the battle in white armor urging his men on. For the time being the allies were deterred by the high, stout walls of the fortress.

6. The assembled generals held a meeting in which they decided to cut off the water supply and tighten their hold on the areas around the city, thereby starving them out. Fearing the Japanese would send a rescue force from Pusan, the Ming commander Ma Gui sent two officers to Yangsan and another to Namwon, while still another commander was detailed to guard the water approach from Sōsaenggo.

7. For ten days and nights they besieged the Japanese, all the while under heavy fire from those within the fortress. Again the Ming had trouble getting their heavy cannon up the narrow roads leading to the fortress itself, as their men were exposed to heavy fire every time they tried to advance.

8. It is said that spent shells piled up high within the fortress while the Japanese kept up their dogged resistance.

9. Still, Ma Gui figured that the Japanese would soon be unable to resist for lack of food and water, as he estimated there were perhaps 10,000 Japanese in the city.

10. The allies stepped up their attack, pummeling the walls with heavy cannon, but to no great effect. The defenders continued to riddle them with bullets from their muskets.

11. One of the Ming commanders managed to ascend the wall briefly, only to be clipped by an enemy bullet.

12. On the evening of the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth month of 1597, the skies clouded over and freezing rain fell, turning the ground around the fortress into a quagmire.

13. Ma Gui reported the allied forces continued to attack, and despite losing 700 Chinese and 200 Korean troops in the process, an equal number of Japanese were killed.

14. Yang Hao also received a tip that Katō Kiyomasa was planning to escape on his own.

15. Further allied assaults claimed many more Japanese lives, and they even breached the wall for a short time before being turned back by the well-prepared defenders.

16. Forty Japanese ships were spotted approaching on the Ulsan River, so 2000 southern Chinese troops and 1000 cavalry were dispatched to guard the riverbank.

17. Captured Japanese reported Katō had fled two nights before.

18. Yi Tékhyo and the Korean general, Kwon Yul, reported that the rains continued to fall and they were hopeful the Japanese would soon capitulate though there were rumors Katō was returning, if in fact he ever left.

19. The battle raged again the following night, as lead from the besieged came down with the rain, inflicting heavy casualties on both the Chinese and the Koreans.

20. At one point Yang Hao pulled the Chinese forces back to rest, telling Kwon Yul to lead Korean troops in the attack.
heavy losses in a hail of Japanese bullets. There was reason for hope however as captured Japanese reported the situation within the city was growing worse by the day. They also reaffirmed the fact that Kaot’i himself was still in the city.

On the thirtieth day of the twelfth month, the Japanese sent a letter to the besiegers which read, “We want to negotiate a peace agreement, but no one in the city is literate (in Chinese). There is a Buddhist monk on a boat in the river. If you dispatch an envoy(to meet him) then we can negotiate.” Considering the Japanese situation, the attackers decided not to negotiate. The Japanese still held out some hope, both because they received word that help was on the way and because spies reported there were no cooking fires in the Ming camp, meaning that they were also running low on food.

Finally, three days later, just as Japanese resolve was crumbling and they were on the verge of capitulating, Konishi Yukinaga arrived by sea with a large relief column. Konishi was initially reluctant to advance, seeing the numbers arrayed against him. Instead he sent a force of 3000 crack troops upriver to see if there might be a weakness somewhere in the allied lines. Yi Tōkyōnyō saw this and sent word to Yang Hao. Yang then asked Yi what he felt they should do. Yi replied that allied forces should be able to hold the relief columns off until the city fell but Yang was less sure, pointing out that thus far they had attacked the city for several days to no avail but with grievous losses. As it turned out, at least two probing assaults by the relief column were turned back. In addition to this fact, the great sleet that had been falling for days continued, seriously hindering the assault, and the cold and lack of adequate fodder conspired to kill many horses.

Reports came in suggesting as many as 60,000 Japanese troops were on the way to rescue the garrison at Ulsan. Therefore, Yang, apparently believing he was about to be flanked, fled the field, causing the entire allied army to break ranks. The Japanese were overjoyed. They emerged from Ulsan to attack the Chinese and Koreans as they fled, killing over 10,000, according to some accounts. Countless weapons and suits of armor were reportedly abandoned as soldiers fled for their lives. The allied troops might have been completely wiped out had it not been for the valiant efforts of Mao Guqì and another Ming commander, who turned back the Japanese onslaught with heavy losses. On the other hand, according to the Chinese general Li Rumei, while some 3000-4000 Chinese and Korean troops were killed, they also inflicted significant casualties on the Japanese, which forced them to break off their counterattack.

The Ming Military Commissioner Yang Hao returned to Seoul, dispatching his subordinates to other strategic locales with orders to prepare for another offensive.

While this defeat was extremely disheartening for the allies, it did not really change the course of the war, though it could be argued that the failure at Ulsan prolonged matters. The Japanese were still not of a mind to launch any more offensive and in the face of certain future assaults by even larger allied forces, many Japanese commanders pushed for an end to the war and advocated a general retreat. Perhaps the greatest damage done took place in the aftermath of the siege as the battle was initially reported as a victory to Chinese officials back in Beijing.

When contrary reports of the outcome started rolling in and a vociferous Ming military censor with an axe to grind got involved, the defeat emboldened large segments of both Chinese and Korean officialdom, including the Korean king himself in a storm of controversy that threatened to undermine the entire Sino-Korean alliance. In the end Yang Hao was dismissed and King Sönjo nearly abdicated his throne.

In terms of siegework, the siege of Ulsan comes the closest to a classic siege amongst the four under discussion here. The allies pressed the attack for a total of thirteen days and were prepared to starve the defenders out. They almost definitely would have succeeded had the relief column not arrived and may well have succeeded even with the arrival of the relief forces if Yang Hao had decided to make a stand at the river that led to sea and prevented the reinforcements from effecting a landing. Again we see the importance of firearms as the Japanese were able to repulse assault after assault with concentrated musket fire. After Japan’s defeat in the Battle of Pyöngyang in 1593, they had adopted the general strategy of establishing themselves in high fortified positions with narrow approaches so as to negate the effects of superior Chinese firepower. Attacking forces would therefore be subjected to concentrated musket fire along narrow approaches, inevitably sustaining heavy casualties.

This principle was very much in evidence during the siege of Ulsan. The rugged terrain and narrow approaches leading up to the fortress made it difficult for the allies to get their big guns into position for use against the fortress walls. Instead they had to come in waves and tried to burn out the defenders with fire arrows as recorded by Keinen: “Since the doors had not yet been installed in the gate, the Chinnamen were able to swarm inside, and they started shooting furiously with fire arrows from alongside the walls and from the bottom of the stone parapets. The smoke was so thick that no one could keep his eyes or his mouth open.”

54 Li Guangqiao, 1650:593.
57 SJ 745; Elson, 1988:36; F22561.
58 On the arrival of the Japanese relief column and the panic it caused, see Shimaya kobushi 216b-7a.
59 F22595-960.
60 CXSL:19725/Sönjo sôgung sillok 31* year, 31-7.
61 For Chinese investigations of casualty figures, see CXSL:1420/Sönjo sillok 31* year, 107-29.
62 See M/IBM 2178; F22566-569.
63 CXSL:11272/Sönjo sillok 31* year, 96:15-16.
64 F22572.
65 For details on this fascinating episode, see the excellent articles by Ledyard, 1988; Li Guangqiao, 1902.
66 For information on siege tactics and techniques in Medieval Western Europe, see Richard L.C. Jones. In Kern, 1969:183-185.
67 Translated in Elson, 1988:35. For the original, see Keinen 2000:73-74.
Chronicles written by survivors on both sides of the siege attest to the terri-
ble hardships suffered by all the troops and offer glimpses into the harsh realities of
warfare in early modern East Asia. They are also reminiscent of accounts written by
participants in the Korean War of the 1590s who often dwell upon the frigid
cold of Korean winters. It was certainly no accident that many Japanese comman-
ders pulled out of Korea shortly after the siege of Ulsan, including Keinen’s own
lord. Indeed Hideyoshi’s generals were almost unanimous in advocating withdraw-
al. When he questioned them about the situation in Korea, they said, “Korea is a
big country. If we move east, then we have to defend the west; if we attack to our
left, then we are assailed on the right. Even if we had another ten years the matter
still might not be resolved.” Thereupon Hideyoshi complained of his advanced age
and the fact that there appeared to be no way out of the quagmire and asked them,
“If we were to stop the troops and sue for peace, what then?” At this the generals
all answered, “That would be best.”

Overall, things were relatively calm for most of 1598 as the Japanese slowly
returned home and Hideyoshi’s physical and mental condition steadily declined.
The allies bided their time and maintained defensive positions, the Koreans consist-
tently pressing for more aggressive action. There were occasional skirmishes as
Japanese troops emerged from their strongholds to loot and Korean irregulars
harassed the occupying troops. It was clear that the war was not going to be
pressed by the attackers any longer and both sides were eager for a final resolution.
By the time Hideyoshi died in the eighth month, only ten of the thirty leading
Japanese generals remained in Korea and the five elders who now governed Japan
for Hideyoshi’s young son ordered the final withdrawal of remaining forces in
Korea.8 The allies determined to make them pay and decided to launch a series of
final offensives on the treating Japanese. By the autumn of 1598 they had decided
to launch a four-pronged assault on the Japanese positions at Ulsan, Sachin, and
Suncheon, with another group patrolling the seas under the joint command of Yi
Sunsin and the Chinese commander Chen Lin.

The main allied force of over 30,000 was under the command of Ma Gui
and advanced towards Ulsan. Ma still believed defeating Katō Kiyomasa was criti-
cal to ousting the Japanese from Korea. The allied advance was effective, as Ma
made good use of his numerical superiority and learned from his experiences earli-
er in the year. His forces managed to kill more than 2,200 Japanese and torch their
provisions as they retreated and escaped to sea.9 A clean victory was denied Ma,
however, as his men were lured into a trap and were eventually forced to pull back,
giving the Japanese the opportunity they needed to escape. Katō’s men boarded
their ships in the dead of night on December 14, just as their allies were sailing to
their doom in the straits of Noryang.

The Siege of Sachin
This was another exciting and controversial battle, immortalized in Japanese art
and called a defeat snatched from the jaws of victory by the Chinese scholar Li
Guangtao.10 In it the allied Sino-Korean forces once again defeated the Japanese in
a series of smaller engagements and forced them to the brink of capitulation in
another siege, only to be undone by a bizarre episode that has still to be satisfacto-
riely explained. With respect to the documentary evidence, on the Chinese side, we
find paucity and fall guys and the usual charges of incompetence in battle, this time
the blame falling upon commanders who were presumably unversed in the use of
gunpowder, a surprising charge given that all Ming units were supposed to under-
go firearms training in Beijing on a regular basis. The Korean sources are once
more critical of their Ming allies, especially their disciplinary breakdown at the bat-
tle’s key moment. Japanese sources, most notably the Shimazu family chronicles,
emphasize the resolve of the doughty Japanese against seemingly overwhelming
odds. According to these obviously embellished accounts, the Shimazu cut their
way through the enemy with such acumen that more than 30,000 noses were
taken, a figure that exceeds allied projections for the total number of troops even
present at the battle. Additionally one might ask if the Shimazu were so completely
and utterly triumphant, why did they not continue their advance and take the fight
to their fleeing enemies as they promised after the battle?

The Chinese general Dong Yiyuan was charged with attacking Shimazu
Yoshihiro and his son, Tadatsune, at Sachin. The decision to engage the Shimazu
was part of the overall allied strategy to dislodge the invaders from their coastal
strongholds once and for all. The ouster of the Shimazu was deemed the most
important of any of the allied columns’ actions because the Shimazu and their
fortress were regarded as the linchpins in the Japanese foothold on the Korean
peninsula. According to the Chinese and Korean records, Dong Yiyuan led about
15,000 men against the Japanese. Some Japanese sources, on the other hand, con-
tend that Dong led as many as 200,000 men, reflecting the propensity for exaggera-
tion that is typical in Japanese chronicles of this war, especially the family
histories.11

Sachin was actually comprised of two major fortresses and a number of
outlying structures. The original structure was built by the Koreans and occupied
by the Shimazu after the sack of Namwon in 1597. The newer castle was built by
the Japanese between 1597 and 1598.12 This structure was built on a hill overlook-
ing the sea to the rear of the original fortress. The route leading to the castle was
again narrow and easily defended, as was the preference of the Japanese. Both
fortresses were defended by stone walls and wooden stockades. The perimeter
defenses extended some forty li around the main structures.

68 Cited in Li Guangtao, 1986:831.
70 See KBS:6201.
72 See CNE:1106. It is possible that the Japanese are including the Korean forces in their fig-
ures, which are estimated to have been perhaps as many as 200,000, albeit scattered over the entire
country. See FBZ:603.
73 See Shimazu kohshi 21:3b-6a.
In examining the Japanese defenses from afar, Mao Guoqi remarked that they looked like a snake stretching to the sea and all they had to do was cut off the snake’s head (Shimazu Yoshitoyo) and the whole snake would die.74 After breaking their camp at Chuja and crossing to the south bank of the Nam River, the allies advanced steadily under cover of night. Advance scouts took twelve Japanese heads in a skirmish at Kümung.75 Riding the tide of victory, they continued to seize outposts and burn wooden stockades, thereby greatly damaging Japanese morale. Dong Yiyuan, however, was cautious and decided to halt his army for seven days to await news of the army to his west. The Korean general Chöng Chaenyöng, on the other hand, wanted to take the fight to the enemy. Finally, on the twenty-seventh day of the ninth month, Dong acceded to Chöng’s requests and assembled 2000 infantry and 1000 cavalry to join Chöng, who had 4000 troops under his banner, and they advanced towards Sachön.76 Upon reaching the outermost defenses of Sachön, the allies were engaged in furious combat by the enemy. The fighting was especially thick in the middle ranks and the Sino-Korean forces managed to kill a Japanese officer in resplendent armor, allegedly with a single arrow from the bow of one Fang Shion, in addition to killing 130 regular soldiers.77

The allies estimated that the defenders had no more than 10,000 soldiers in provisions within the fortress and had inside information that there was only one well within the stronghold, meaning that the defenders certainly could not hold out for long.78 One of the Chinese commanders, Mao Guoqi, whom the reader will recall had survived the siege of Ulsan, was uncertain, however, suspecting some sort of ruse. Nevertheless, armed with this inside information and probably assistance, the allies managed to burn a great number of outer buildings and capture two more stockades, even as the defenders sent forth small units to disrupt these operations. As a result, the old fortress was also seized with relative ease, as the Japanese retreated to the fortress closer to the sea.

At this juncture the attackers pursued the Japanese back to the walls of the old fortress itself before pulling back a bit. Japanese records indicate that Shimazu Tadasuke was itching to fight, while his father counseled staying inside the stronghold to let the flankers do the work. Meanwhile, the allied commanders debated their course of action as well. Some wanted to wait for further reinforcements to arrive from Tolsan. Chöng Chaenyöng in particular argued that since there were no wells in the city, it would be best to simply station enough men around the city to prevent an escape and wait as morale declined. Eventually thirst would force the weakened garrison to come forth to do battle. Mao Guoqi concurred, reasoning that even though the allies had won several skirmishes, they had killed or captured relatively few and victory was by no means certain. However, Dong Yiyuan, perhaps over-confident on account of the relatively easy victories he had already gained and belittling the fighting skills of the Japanese according to some accounts, was in favor of pressing the attack immediately. Addressing the other commanders he supposedly said heroically as he stroked his beard, “When the thunder claps, who has time to cover his ears?”79

So, on the first day of the tenth month, the full-scale assault on Sachön began. The Chinese commanders Mao Guoqi, Peng Xingu and Ye Bangrong led three infantry divisions in the frontal assault. Cavalry units under Ma Chengwen and others were deployed to the left and right in supporting positions. The allied troops hit the walls again and again with cannon fire and battering rams from dawn until mid-afternoon. The Japanese responded in kind. Though one of the outerlying forts remained in Japanese hands, the allies decided to concentrate on the main prize. The Japanese knew they were in a tough spot and Shimazu Yoshitoyo even remarked to one of his subordinates that, “If reinforcements don’t come soon, this will be my grave.”80 The Korean general Chöng Chaenyöng was alongside Peng Xingu in the vanguard, smashing the gate with a great battering ram.

Finally, on the third day of the tenth month of 1598, the allies managed to breach the walls. Just as they were streaming in to finish off the enemy, however, a magazine of gunpowder exploded, though it is still unclear whether the explosion was touched off incidentally by the attackers or intentionally by the defenders. The allied forces panicked amidst the confusion, horses and men stampeding one another in their haste to retreat. Hao Sanpin, Mao Guoqi and Ye Bangrong tried to rally the allied forces for a counterattack while waiting for nearby reinforcements, but their efforts met with little success. Thus, with one unanticipated explosion were all their prior achievements undone. After a quick meeting the Ming generals decided to adopt a defensive stance, at least temporarily. And as word of the debacle spread through the countryside, refugees started streaming north towards Hapchön.81

It is still unclear whether the explosion was touched off accidentally by the attackers or intentionally by the defenders. Most Chinese accounts charge that Peng Xingu, who was said to be unfamiliar with gunpowder in spite of his previous service in the capital guards, ignited Japanese gunpowder stores as he forced the gates open with cannon and battering rams.82 This is born out by some of the Korean records as well.83 But other sources maintain that the Japanese actually set a trap for the attackers. Realizing he was being outnumbered, Shimazu Yoshitoyo dispatched some trusted retainers to steal outside the walls and plant gunpowder filled jars under the ground just outside the main gate. The defenders initially did

---

74 PRL 366.
75 FBZ 462.
76 FBZ 462-467.
77 FBZ 462-467; Yi Hyoungok, 1974:1360, which cites another Korean source.
78 See Yi Hyoungok, 1974:1361.
79 See Yi Hyoungok, 1974:1365-1366.
80 Cited in Li Guangtao, 1972:261.
82 For example, SOK 37; PRL 371. Dong Yiyuan’s string shi biography also states that the Japanese set off the explosion on purpose. See MS 6214. Also see the Korean account in CSSL 1375-1376/Sanjo yonshik 31st year, 1598-1599), which blames Mao Guoqi’s subordinates. A Japanese version of events can be found in s3 737-760. Also see Shimazu koiku 21, 8b-12a.
83 Yi Hyoungok, 1974:1360.
what they could to hold the gate, but when it became obvious it was going to fall, they raised a cry and the explosion was set off just as the attackers started breaching the defenses.

Still another version of the event suggests that the Chinese battering ram was equipped with explosives that discharged either by accident or were intentionally set afame by the Japanese at the key moment.

In any case, the explosion created chaos in the allied ranks as smoke and flames filled the breach they were trying to scramble through. Dong Yiyan himself barely escaped with his life. The defenders took advantage of the situation to sally forth and inflicted heavy losses on the allied troops, though allegations of taking over 30,000 heads are almost certainly greatly exaggerated. Nevertheless, it is said that only 50-60 of Peng’s contingent of 3000 men survived the attack and Mao Guoqi lost 600-700 more.

Two Korean sources tend to agree with these figures. Even worse from a military standpoint, the Japanese recovered valuable supplies and provisions. Dong Yiyan then called for a general retreat to Sunchu to await reinforcements. The Japanese did not pursue them because they lacked both the necessary numbers and provisions. Subsequent censoiral investigations called for the execution of the soldiers deemed responsible for the blunder, and Hao Sanpin and Ma Chengwen were beheaded in front of the troop because the cavalry units had been the first to bolt and were therefore deemed the most responsible for causing the panic. Peng Xingyu, who according to most of the accounts was inexperienced in the use of gunpowder, actually blamed his Korean allies.

Dong Yiyan was given the chance to redeem himself by meritorious service, although he was demoted three grades in rank.

Ironically enough, Peng Xingyu was also given the chance to restore his rank and position through service.

In order to buy some time, Dong sent Mao Guoqi to negotiate with Shimazu Yoshitane. Upon seeing his Chinese counterpart, Shimazu gloated, boasting “Today was a great victory for me. First I’ll seize Seoul, then I’ll head west and soon you’ll see me in Liaodong!” Dong was concerned when he heard this, and he dispatched a messenger west to warn Yang Hao’s replacement, Xing Jie. Xing, on the other hand, was livid, saying, “Don’t resume peace talks. I’ll kill you before I authorize doing that!”

Xing also said he was raising more troops to send against Shimazu, who reportedly lost color when he heard Xing’s angry response to his threats. According to Chinese and Korean accounts, these warnings convinced the Japanese commander to withdraw and his men were forced to fight as they embarked on their ships and set sail for Suncheon, losing fifty men to Chōng Chaeryong. Japanese chronicles unsurprisingly paint a different picture, maintaining that after this victory the allies lifted all their sieges and afforded the invaders the opportunity to effect an orderly retreat, noses in tow, so to speak.

When Dong Yiyan entered the abandoned fortress on the seventeenth day of the eleventh month, there were only a few old and sick Japanese left, along with three female Korean prisoners. He also found a great deal of treasure, including gold, silks, decorative fans, and fancy carriages, all stolen from the Koreans.

The next day they burned the remaining Japanese built structures to the ground.

Within days the last battle of the war would end in a bittersweet victory for the allies in Noryang Stratas where Yi Sunsin was slain in battle even as thousands of Japanese met their doom at the bottom of the sea.

As for the battle of Sachin, it was indeed a military disaster for the allies. After all they were on the brink of cutting all the Japanese commanders off from one another and therefore poised to strike a blow that might have greatly changed the memory of the war in Korea, China, and Japan. But with their improbable victory, the battle of Sachin became symbolic of the indomitable samurai spirit and willingness to fight on against seemingly unsurmountable odds. It also proved to be very lucrative for the Shimazu clan. Their fief was greatly increased upon their return to Japan and Shimazu Tadasuke was awarded a ceremonial ancestral blade.

Their alleged taking of 38,700 noses became an established part of Japanese folklore. Throughout the ensuing Tokugawa era in Japan, Korean envoy were reminded of the atrocities committed by the Japanese whenever they visited Kyoto.

But as devastating as the defeat may have been initially, in the broader strategic sense it meant very little. In this sense, the Battle of Sachin was similar to the debacle at Ulsan earlier in the year. It had clearly been a tactical defeat for the allies, but the Japanese were not in a position to take advantage of their success. Despite his boastful words to the contrary, Shimazu Yoshitane was well aware that he had no real chance of advancing towards Seoul. He had managed to buy himself some breathing space, but the odds were clearly stacked against him. The best the Japanese could do was make an orderly retreat, their version of “peace with honor” if you will. And given what happened in the subsequent Battle of Noryang Stratas, they proved unable to do even that. Had the situation truly been as favorable as suggested by Japanese records, they surely would not have lost thousands of men in these final engagements. By the fall of 1598, the war in Korea was lost and all...
The Siege of Sunchon

With the final siege under consideration here, the siege of Sunchon, we find many of the same historiographic tropes we have already discussed in evidence. Again when reading Korean sources, the Chinese come off as being rather half-hearted in their efforts against the Japanese, not to mention downright avaricious and duplicitous. Both Liu Ting, the Chinese commander on land, and Chen Lin, the Ming commander of naval operations, are accused of accepting or soliciting bribes from the Japanese commander, Konishi Yukinaga. Both are also portrayed as arrogant bullies who constantly needed to be browbeaten or shamed into proper behavior by their Korean counterparts. As might be expected, the Chinese sources paint a much different picture. While the Ming commanders are understandably cautious, they are not unwilling to engage the enemy. And meetings with envoys of Konishi Yukinaga were arranged to facilitate his capture, not come to some sort of arrangement assuring his survival. It is interesting to note, however, that both of these portrayals of Chen and Liu are in keeping with their overall representations in the Ming literature. Both Chen and Liu were accused of accepting bribes or attempting to bribe other officials at various times during their careers. Yet nothing was ever substantiated. Indeed, it is difficult to find any high Ming official who was not accused of such actions. Moreover, both Chen and Liu had generally exemplary service records and both were amongst the most decorated military commanders of their day.

The Japanese accounts of this siege stress the fortitude and savagery of Konishi Yukinaga in both fighting and negotiating with foes at land and sea while he bought time as he awaited rescue by his allies. They also tend to bear out the fact that heavy fighting did take place, particularly on the landward side of the action. While Konishi certainly attempted to buy his freedom, it is not clear whether or not he really trusted his Chinese counterparts to live up to their end of any potential bargains, especially since Liu Ting had attempted to use false pretenses once to capture Konishi. Japanese versions of the siege also give a fair amount of credit to Yi Sunsin for his role in keeping the pressure on the invaders from the sea.

Getting to the siege itself, Liu Ting, who controlled about 24,000 allied troops, was ordered to attack Konishi Yukinaga at Sunchon as the other commanders were advancing on their targets.99 His land troops were supported by a naval force of over 20,000 led by Chen Lin and Yi Sunsin. The full-scale allied offensive was launched late in the ninth month. Because Konishi’s fortress of Yego at

---

99 Liu Ting (1532-1619), better known in his contemporaries as Big Sword Liu (Liu Da Dao), was one of the most renowned and colorful of all the Ming generals. He earned considerable distinction fighting aboriginal rebels in southwest China prior to his service in Korea. He eventually died battling the Latter Jin forces in 1619 in Liaodong.
route of approach for the Japanese navy coming from Pusan. The defenders of
Sunch’on managed to hold the Chinese and Koreans off long enough to start
embarking troops on boats still moored there. This set the stage for the most
famous naval engagement in Korean history, the Battle of Noryang Straits.
In this climactic battle the allied navy decimated the Japanese, sinking hun-
dreds of ships and killing or capturing hundreds of Japanese soldiers. Some of
these captives were later executed while others were actually enrolled into Chinese
military units. The battle was bittersweet however, as the major Japanese comman-
ders, including Kônshi Yûkinaga, were able to escape in the confusion and Korea’s
Admiral Yi Sunsin was struck by a musket ball and died in battle, after telling his
trusted subordinates to conceal his death from the rest of the army. Nevertheless
this battle served as a fitting exclamation point to the war and afforded the Koreans
the opportunity to exact at least some small measure of revenge for the depreda-
tions they had suffered at the hands of the Japanese over the previous seven years.
In both the sieges of Sachóhn and Sunch’ón, we see the importance of
firearms and topography as well as other elements of early modern siegecraft such
as using negotiations and bribes to avoid casualties. We also see how a limited or
imperfect understanding of firearms or gunpowder could create catastrophe within
the ranks. Such incidents also demonstrate the inherent unreliability of early mod-
ern firearms in general, an issue discussed at length in Kenneth Chase’s recent book
on the subject.166
In the larger context one gets a better sense of what Western historians such
as John Keegan refer to as “the fog of battle” where decisions often had to be made
in a split second and where accounts of what supposedly happened can often vary
radically according to the teller. Scholars of Hideyoshi’s Korean campaigns are
extremely fortunate in that they have a seemingly limitless amount of source mate-
rial to consult, but, as should be clear from the brief accounts given here, these
sources are often confusing and contradictory and it is very difficult to determine
precisely what happened in any given place or time. Still, such accounts yield great
information about battle conditions and tactics and should be of great interest to
military historians of other parts of the world.
Comparative Dimensions and Suggestions for Further Research
Historians of early modern Europe should find much of interest in these accounts
as developments in Asia paralleled those in Europe to some extent with respect to
siege warfare. For example, even though it was accepted that the allies, most par-
cularly the Ming armies, enjoyed a decided advantage in sheer firepower, they
were often unable to bring their big guns to bear in battle due to terrain considera-
tions and effective Japanese countermeasures. For, as historians of siege and gun-
powder warfare in Europe have demonstrated large guns typically had a much
slower rate of fire than smaller weapons and had to be brought uncomfortably
close to the walls of a town or castle to be effective.167 Commanders were often
understandably reluctant to sustain the kinds of casualties necessary to achieve
results with their larger guns, even though the Ming armies (at least) often prac-
ticed what were essentially human wave attacks. At the same time there was a defi-
nite preference for incendiary attacks on the part of the allies, perhaps because fire
arrows were cheaper and more portable than larger siege weapons and cannon.
The accounts of sieges described here well illustrate this.
In addition to simply making more comparisons between Eastern and
Western siege tactics and strategies, more comparative work needs to be done on
actual fortifications and the importance of structures in determining the shape of
combat. Geoffrey Parker has done a bit of work along these lines, especially with
respect to how Japanese castles incorporated European and indigenous sensibilities
to adapt to local realities of warfare, but much more work remains to be done.168 As
Parker himself notes, Chinese realities were different and their cities were capable
of withstanding massive artillery barrages by European arms even in the nine-
teenth century. As a result their tactics differed somewhat when approaching a
siege. Additionally, they were unfamiliar with Japanese fortress design, which was
replicated in Korea as much as possible. This undoubtedly worked to the advan-
tage of the Japanese, who had been perfecting siege tactics over more than a centu-
ry of civil war prior to the invasion of Korea.
Likewise, the relationship between technology and tactics certainly deserves
further study, though as European historians have found, it is often surprising how
little relationship there was between the simultaneous development of firearms tac-
tsics and technology.169 Throughout the war the combatants experimented with dif-
ferent weapons and tactics, including using different types of rockets, primitive
time bombs, and grenades. Yet there seems to have been little systematic imple-
mentation of particular tactics, although there were repeated attempts to standard-
ize Korean training utilizing the southern Chinese style drills and formations pion-
neered by Qî Jîguang, as mentioned above. The Japanese were more consistent, but
again actual battlefield actions appear to have been largely dictated by commander
and circumstance. A comparative look at the evolution of standardized training in
Asia and Europe would be instructive. On paper at least the Chinese had standard-
ized training methods throughout the Ming period but again following the regula-
tions seemed to be up to the whims of individual commanders.
In conclusion I would suggest that as perhaps the most richly documented
conflict in early modern East Asia paralleled those in Europe in the sense of exten-
sive material produced by all three sides (in marked contrast to say accounts of domes-
tic war in China for which generally only Chinese records survive), this war
demands further study from both historians of Asia and comparative military his-

167 For example, see Kern, 1990:277.

Kenneth M. Swope

Beyond Turtleboats

168 Parker, 1996:142-143. Japanese castles were typically built on hills overlooking plains and incorporated a series of walls and smaller towers in winding circles around the castle, not entirely unlike the trace italienne design used in Europe. See Parker, 1996:12-14.
169 Hall, 1997:130. Hall argues that firearms tactics and technologies followed their own respective courses, dependent more upon independent local conditions and personal preferences rather than mutually reinforcing factors. For example, methods of corning gunpowder that were more effective for small arms were still used for heavy ordnance because the tactical doctrine of the time in Europe emphasized the use of guns in sieges over mobile field operations.
Beyond Turtleboats

A growing body of literature is emerging in Western languages that should allow historians not trained in Asian languages to at least begin to scratch the surface of the conflict and offer their insights based on our much better understanding of siege warfare and tactics in Europe and the Middle East.

Moreover, the study of wars and sieges should not be perceived as solely the province of the military historian. As should be clear from the accounts given here-in, surviving documents provide lots of information about the societies that produced them, especially with respect to the social and military values of the participants. For example, siege accounts produced by Chinese and Korean chroniclers often relate tales of Confucian loyalty, filial piety, or widow chastity. A prime example of this would be the various legends associated with the Korean kisaeng martyr Nongae’s heroic sacrifice following the Chinju massacre of 1393. Japanese accounts, on the other hand, are more likely to extol the virtues of samurai bravery and battle prowess.

Lastly, siege accounts often provide glimpses into the lives of ordinary people and how war affected their lives such as in Kemen’s account of those enslaved by the Japanese. Such a topic certainly has contemporary significance, bombarded as we are every day by images of global conflict and the potential of said conflict spreading into new areas. In traditional times soldiers conscripted or volunteering to serve in armies generally came from less affluent segments of society, at least in China and Korea, and military accounts are one of the few places in which we can recover their voices. While the study of samurai history has long enjoyed pride of place in Japan, it is only recently that historians of China have turned their attention to China’s long and storied military past, and to my knowledge Korea still lags behind China in this regard. Still it seems as if the recent trend towards the study of Chinese military history promises to open up vast new vistas of China’s past for the benefit of both Asianists and comparative military historians. One would hope that the same will prove to be true for Korea since given the current tensions on the Korean peninsula, a more sophisticated understanding of Korea’s military past and its martial traditions may be more relevant than ever.

ABBREVIATIONS

CBR  Chinghisor
CNE  Chosen no chi
CXSL  Renshen Wuhan Chuxian Shiliao
FBZ  Zaizao fan bang chi (Chaojo pongbang chi)
MS  Mingshi
MSJBM  Mingshi jishi bimo
NC  Nanjung chammok
PRL  Liang chao pingyang lu
SDZK  Wanli san da zheng kao
SI  Seikan iryaku

GLOSSARY

Chen Lin  柴琳  Pusan  釜山
Chen Yin  陈寅  Pusan  釜山
Chilsan  車山  Pyokechegewan  楚錦館
Cho Kyōngnam  祁慶男  Qi Jiguang  戚繼光
Cholla  全羅  Sachōn  潑川
Chōng Chae nyōng  鄭起龍  Sansōng  山城
Chōtō  九州  Seoul  濟城
Chōsen nichinichūki  朝鮮日記  Shi 石
Choson  朝鮮  Shimazu Tadatsune  島津忠常
Ding Yingtai  丁應泰  Shimazu Yoshihiro  島津義弘
Dong Yiyuan  東一元  Ōno  宜野
Fang Shixin  方時新  Ōsaengpo  西生浦
Han  漢  Sui  隋
Hao Sanpin  郝三賓  Sunchōn  順川
Imjin waeran  倭戰記  Taikō  太閤
Kasii Kiyomasa  加賀清正  Tang  唐
Kaesōng  開城  Tōdō Takatora  藤堂高虎
Keinen  慶念  Tokugawa Ieyasu  德川家康
Khubilai Khan  耶律八八  Tolui  突山
Konishi Yukinaga  小西行長  Toyotama Hideyoshi  豊臣秀吉
Koryo  高麗  Uiju  畿州
Kumyang  金陽  Ukita Hidetake  宇喜多秀家
Kwōn Yul  黃岳  Ulsan  岩山
Kyōngsang  廥州  Wajō  順域
Li Rumei  李如梅  Wanli  福建
Lin Ting  林廷  Wŏn Kyun  元均
Ma Chengwen  馬呈文  Xing Jie  鄂介
Ma Gui  麥貴  Yalu  鴨綠
Mao Guoqi  費國器  Yamato  大和
mimizuka  耳榮  Yan  義州
Ming  明  Yang Hao  楊濠
Morii Hidemoto  毛利秀輝元  Yangsan  梁山
Namwŏn  南原  Ye Bangsong  李邦榮
Nanjung Chammok  南荊ram  Ye gyro  頭裡
Niu Boying  牛伯英  Yi Hanghong  李恒協
Noryang  露梁  Yi Pongnam  李福男
Ōka Kazuyoshi  大垣一吉  Yi Sunsin  李舜臣
Peng Ning  彭能  Yi Tōkhyöng  李德馨
REFERENCES

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Li, Guangtang 李光庭. 1969: “Ming ren yu Han yu Yang Hao” Weihuan zhi yi 明人韓與楊浩記. Lishi yuyan jishou ji 41. 4 pp. 543-566.


Li, Guangtong 李光東. 1986. Ming-Qing Dang’an luwenji 明清档案文献集. Taibei: Lianjia chuabanshe hangong.


Sun, Laichen. 2004. “Ming China and Korea, c. 1368-1600: With Special