

# National Defense in Shambles: Wartime Military Buildup in Chosŏn Korea, 1592-98\*

Hur Nam-lin

Why was Chosŏn Korea's military so helpless before the Japanese intruders? As far as the Japanese were concerned, war on foreign soil was a daunting task that, among many difficulties, involved the transportation of troops and the shipping of provisions across the sea. In such case, defense would appear to be easier than offense. Nevertheless, despite the enormous effort it poured into strengthening its military, Chosŏn Korea was not able to fully utilize its geographical advantages. Indeed, very early in (and throughout) the Imjin War (1592-1598), the Chosŏn government adopted a range of urgent measures to build up its military, including special military examinations designed to recruit "elite" soldiers, nationwide compulsory conscription, the encouragement of "righteous armies," and the establishment of a special force for the defense of the capital. To what extent did these measures work for the national defense of Chosŏn Korea? This article identifies and examines a number of key structural problems lurking within the military system of Chosŏn Korea.

**Keywords:** Imjin War (1592-1598), military system, recruitment and training, politics, corruption

---

\*This work was supported by the Academy of Korean Studies of the Republic of Korea in the year 2009.

*Hur Nam-lin (namlin@interchange.ubc.ac.ca) is a Professor at the Department of Asian Studies, The University of British Columbia*

*Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 22, no. 2 (December 2009): 113-135.

© 2009 Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies

### Military Buildup: What was the Problem?

When the Japanese invaded in the fourth lunar month of 1592, Chosŏn Korea was utterly unprepared. Having landed in Pusan on the thirteenth day of the fourth month, the Japanese found little resistance, and they walked virtually unchallenged along the three routes (amounting to more than five hundred kilometers) leading to the capital, Hansŏng (current Seoul). Hansŏng fell within three weeks, and the Korean king, Sŏnjo (r. 1567-1608), fled north with the greatest possible speed. Within a period of two months and two days after the invasion, the Japanese advanced as far as P'yŏngyang and northern Hamgyŏng province.

Upon urgent requests from Korea, which came one after another, Ming China dispatched tens of thousands of relief troops. After some trial and error, the Chinese troops, led by Li Rusong, eventually recaptured P'yŏngyang early in the first month of 1593 and pushed the Japanese back to Hansŏng. They then initiated truce negotiations. A temporary truce was hammered out, and, in accordance with its terms, the Japanese troops retreated to the southern coastline of Korea in the spring of 1593 to wait for the outcome of ongoing negotiations between China and Japan. In the sixth month of 1593 there was a large battle when, in an attempt to create leverage for the negotiations, the Japanese launched a massive attack on the Chinju fort, which soon fell. King Sŏnjo returned to Hansŏng in the tenth month of 1593.

For more than four years, from the time of the fall of Chinju until the seventh month of 1597, during which time prolonged shows of Chinese-Japanese negotiations were staged without producing any significant agreements, there were no major military confrontations. With the exception of the narrow southern coastal strips of Kyŏngsang province, which were occupied by the much reduced Japanese troops, Korean society was left to itself. The Imjin War is known as a seven-year war; however, for more than four years (i.e., more than 60 percent of the entire period) there were no noteworthy battles.

Given this, one may say that Chosŏn Korea had considerable, if not abundant, time to rebuild its moribund military force, which had proved to be all but helpless in the first phase of the war, from the fourth month of 1592 to the sixth month of 1593. To be sure, Admiral Yi Sunsin exercised brilliant leadership and achieved unprecedented victories whenever he confronted the Japanese navy on the southern sea, but the overall progress of the war rested on land engagements rather than on sea engagements. Furthermore, from the

middle of the ninth month of 1592 until the seventh month of 1597, Yi Sunsin and other admirals had no opportunities to demonstrate their skills as the Japanese fleets had retreated to the safe havens of coastal bases, where they were protected by their ground forces. During this period of four-plus years, there was no serious Japanese aggression either on the land or on the sea.

The years 1592 and 1593 were miserable in almost every way; fortunately, however, the years from 1594 to 1596 were relatively better as those Koreans who had sought refuge elsewhere returned to their home villages, tilled their fields, and produced food sources. The respite that provided many Koreans with relief from hunger and starvation was a boon to the Chosŏn government, which had to make every effort to build up a military force in order to avoid a repeat disaster. Given the level of military technology and the way in which combat was conducted, what the Chosŏn government had to do was to recruit as many able-bodied men as possible, feed them, train them in basic combat skills, and equip them with conventional weapons.

How many soldiers were recruited and trained during this period? And were they trained well enough to repel the Japanese invaders? In trying to answer these questions, it should be noted that, in terms of population size, Chosŏn Korea was not that much smaller than Japan. Current scholarship estimates that the Japanese population at that time was in the range of 10 to 12 million, from which was drawn a military force consisting of about 300,000 troops, half of which were used as an invading force. On the other hand, conservative estimates put Chosŏn Korea's population at between 6 and 8 million – more than half that of Japan. Thus, one can say that Chosŏn Korea had the human resources to enable it to produce more than 150,000 troops. In fact, for more than four years, Chosŏn Korea tried desperately to build up a workable defense force.

How many soldiers were recruited and trained? Here are some telling figures. The Korean armies that had been rebuilt by the end of 1597 were fully mobilized for a major confrontation with the Japanese at Ulsan. The total number of Korean troops, which were attached to the more than 36,000 Ming troops, was 11,600.<sup>1</sup> In another, and final, showdown in the fall of 1598, the

---

1. In the first month of 1597, Chosŏn court officials discussed “how the total of about 10,000 troops should be deployed” amid rumors that Hideyoshi would once again mobilize a massive force. See *Sŏnjo sillok* 宣祖實錄 84:17b-19a, 150-151 [1597/1/23]. On the other hand, right after the battle of Ulsan some high officials expressed their concerns regarding the unstable structure of Korean military leadership that commanded “troops that numbered only about 12,000 in total.” See Sim Sŏnggu, “Imjin waeran ū palbal kwa tong'wŏn ch'eje ū chaep'yŏn: Chosŏn'gun chihwi ch'egye rŭl chungsim ūro,” in *Imjin waeran kwa Han-Il kwangye*, ed. Han-Il kwangyesa yŏn'gu

Ming command mobilized the full strength of the Ming-Chosŏn allied forces. The total number of Chosŏn troops, including those in the navy, that accompanied the close to 90,000 Ming troops was about 25,000.<sup>2</sup> This figure, though somewhat dubious, represents the highest number of Korean troops to be deployed in battle during the war.

No doubt, compared to the previous level of troops, this was a much improved force.<sup>3</sup> However, compared to the Japanese troops deployed in 1597-98, which numbered about 150,000, and given that, for over four years, the Chosŏn government had poured all its energy into the urgent task of building up its military, one might wonder why the improvement was so minimal. It should be remembered that this was a time of national crisis and that, therefore, the government was fully entitled to take any available measure to promote national defense. At the same time, in theory, the government could have tapped a force of irregular fighting men, known as “righteous armies” (whose membership numbered more than 20,000 at one point in 1592), and convert them into regular troops. But, whatever happened, the number of regular troops employed at the various fronts in 1597-98 was between 11,600 and 25,000. What was the problem? What kept Chosŏn Korea from building up a sizable military force during wartime?

### Regular Troops and the Military System

In the late sixteenth century, the system of military corvée in Chosŏn Korea was based on two cardinal principles: (1) it applied to all non-slave adult males, which means that the slaves, or *nobi* (about thirty or more percent of the population), were exempt from military duty; and (2) soldiers on duty were required to bear all expenses pertaining to food, clothing, military equipment, transportation, and horses (in the case of cavalry) by themselves and/or with the help of assigned military support taxpayers. It was true that the royal

---

nonjip p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe (Seoul: Kyŏng'in munhwasa, 2005), 213.

2. See *Sŏnjo sillok* 105:15b, 520 [1598/10/12].

3. Back in 1592, the Korean army was in disarray. At the battle of P'yŏngyang in the first month of 1593, when the Ming-Korean forces applied their full strength against the Japanese troops of Konishi Yukinaga, Korean troops, including monk soldiers, numbered no more than 10,000. At the defensive battle at the Haengju fortress in the second month of 1593, Kwŏn Yul led a force of, at most, 2,300. These two battles entailed the highest levels of military engagement involving Korean troops, which were constantly in the process of gathering and scattering. By the time the Japanese retreated to the south in the spring of 1593, the full strength of the regular and operable troops of Chosŏn Korea probably did not exceed 10,000 men.

palace guards and the corps of police in the capital were supposed to be provided with food and military equipment, but this was possible only when their numbers were small and only if the tax revenues were still available after the expenses of the king, his royal family, and court officials were met.

When the Chosŏn dynasty was established, its leaders put one more principle into practice: those soldiers who had fulfilled their assigned military service were, according to their status, entitled to be rewarded with positions or titles (albeit often titular) in the government bureaucracy. This privilege, called *sahwankwŏn* 仕宦權, was an avenue through which one could improve one's lot in Chosŏn society, where government positions meant almost everything.<sup>4</sup> Early in the sixteenth century, however, the government abolished this privilege for the simple reason that very few positions and titles were available.

With this termination, military service became a corvée accompanied only by sacrifice. Those commoners, including the *sajok* 士族 (family members, relatives, and descendants of scholar-officials who formed the ruling class of Chosŏn society), who had lost the incentive provided by *sahwankwŏn*, tried to avoid conscription by whatever means possible. The *sajok* men, who had power, wealth, and political influence, successfully manipulated the process of military conscription and were gradually exempted from military service. Wealthy peasants who could bribe officials or hire substitute soldiers soon followed suit in a growing exodus from military obligation.<sup>5</sup> Those who had little to offer were forced to suffer. When they could no longer endure the burden, poor peasants turned to their last resort: they ran away from home, commending themselves to powerful landlords or giving up their commoner status and transforming themselves into slaves.

Worse yet, from the late 1530s, the government, which faced increasingly shrinking revenues and financial shortfalls, began to plunder the already dwindling stock of military corvée by allowing eligible recruits to buy out their military duty by paying a substitute cloth tax ("cloth" refers to rolls of cotton or hemp, which were used as a main currency for commercial exchange in Chosŏn society). Extra tax revenues so collected were supposed to improve the

---

4. For more details, see Kim Sŏng'u, *Chosŏn chunggi kukka wa sajak* (Seoul: Yŏksa pip'yŏngsa, 2001), 313.

5. For example, amid the ongoing effort of military buildup in 1595, Yi Hangbok, a ranking court official, told the king about what he had experienced as Minister of War: "Each day, the ministry issued about fifty certificates that would exempt [soldiers] from the duty of guarding the palace and other military obligations . . . . We will be in danger if regular troops are casually released from military duty and if public servants are all exempted from military service." *Sŏnjo sillok* 60:8b-9a, 432-33 [1595/2/6].

public treasury; however, not only did they fail to do this, they created a chain of corruption along the administrative ladder and further sapped the military strength of Chosŏn Korea.<sup>6</sup> The elite troops assigned to the defense of Hansŏng and royal palaces – troops that used to be comprised of young men from *sajok* families – were no exception. They, too, increasingly chose to avoid military duty (which brought them nothing in return) by paying the cloth tax or by hiring substitute soldiers.

The widespread practice of avoiding the military through tax payments and/or the hiring of substitute soldiers chipped away at the foundation of Chosŏn Korea's military system, and the government found itself struggling to maintain even a minimum number of regular troops for national defense. This was particularly the case with regard to the defense of the Hamgyŏng borders against the Jurchen and with regard to the defense of the southern coastlines against the Japanese pirates. When pressured from above to maintain troop levels at quota, local officials squeezed the eligible recruits and military taxpayers to the limit, and when those people ran away, the squeeze fell upon their relatives, neighbors, and so on. When they still could not come up with a satisfactory roster of draftees on paper, local officials filled it with forged names – “names of trees, stones, chickens, and dogs” – any names that caught their imagination.<sup>7</sup> And these fake rosters, which were riddled with the names of phantom soldiers, did not cause any trouble as long as they appeared to indicate a filled quota. Having strayed far from its original design, the national defense system gradually turned into an institution premised upon fakery and paperwork. The only reason this system continued to look sustainable had to do with the fact that threats by alien elements were not yet serious enough to alarm anyone. However, it was only a matter of time before the country's military ailments led to a full-blown disaster.

Towards the late sixteenth century, military service was seen as an exploitative tax that plundered powerless and impoverished peasants. The king and government leaders, who had settled into a period of prolonged peace, were by and large immune to the demoralized state of the military. The *sajok* and court officials tried to satisfy their greed for wealth and power not only by collecting bribes and military taxes but also by absorbing the poor peasants into their possessions in the form of slaves or indentured laborers. The pool of

---

6. With regard to the problems associated with how this policy involved converting duty soldiers into cloth taxpayers, see the comments made by Yi Yulgok, quoted in James Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyŏngwŏn and the Late Chosŏn Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 400-402.

7. Quoted from Kim, *Chosŏn chunggi kukka wa sajak*, 121.

military human resources was rapidly depleted, so much so that in the intercalary eleventh month of 1593, after a series of vain efforts at military recruitment, King Sŏnjo concluded: “There are no real troops except the 200 or 300 elite palace guards.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1592, as, one after the other, the regular troops collapsed along the advance routes of Japanese invaders, the Chosŏn government became desperate. The task of assembling defensive forces, in whatever form, was a matter of life and death. But the problem was how to recruit and train soldiers within a short period of time and how to find enough of them in the ever-shrinking areas that escaped Japanese incursion. It must be remembered that, by the seventh month of 1592, when P’yŏngyang was occupied, the areas that, to one degree or another, were affected by Japanese intrusion exceeded sixty percent of the country.

### Military Recruitment and the Special Military Examination

Fighting for his own life in a remote village in Northern P’yŏng’an province, King Sŏnjo decided to use the magic of kingly politics – a magic that would touch the nerve of the Korean people’s obsession with government positions and official titles. As early as the fifth month of 1592, the Chosŏn court in exile announced a series of specially scheduled military examinations (*mukwa* 武科) or “augmented examinations” (*chŏnggwangsi* 增廣試). These were to be subject to “wide mobilization” (*kwangch’wi* 廣取) and were to be open to anyone, even slaves. Not only that, but anyone who, upon shooting ten arrows, scored two or more hits would be considered successful and, accordingly, would be decorated for having passed the exam.<sup>9</sup>

In normal times, regular military competitions, like civil service examinations (which were usually offered every three years), involved three stages: (1) the local preliminary examination, which was held throughout the country; (2) the intermediary examination, which was held in the capital; and (3) the palace examination, which was held in the king’s presence. It was at the latter that all the candidates who had passed the intermediary stage were ranked. At the first and second stages of examination, candidates were given two sets of tasks: one involved martial skills (which were grouped into six), the other involved knowledge of the classics as well as of the *Great Code of State*

8. *Sŏnjo sillok* 45:9a, 138 [1593/intercalary-11/2].

9. Kim, *Chosŏn chunggi kukka wa sajak*, 354.

*Administration (Kyöngguk taejön)*. At the palace examination, the unranked exam passers displayed their polo (*kyökku* 擊球, *kigyök* 騎擊) and field hockey (*pogyök* 步擊) skills.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, when the court announced the procedures for the special examination in the fifth month of 1592, nobody questioned the significantly truncated requirements.

Having quickly succeeded in recruiting supposedly elite troops thanks to the special military examination in P'yöng'an province, King Sönjo tried to extend it to other provinces as well. In fact, the government, which had no better options and no administrative apparatus for enforcing general conscription, found itself increasingly resorting to special military examinations. Did this strategy work in terms of building up an adequate national defense?

Four years after the first special military examination, the Chosön court expected its military force to be much strengthened. But that was not what King Sönjo found. In the seventh month of 1596, Yu Söngnyong, Senior State Councilor, reported that those who passed the exam in P'yöng'an province were directing their anger towards the government. They said that they were forced to serve, without a break, at defense positions far from their villages and that they were being dragged into all kinds of labor-intensive work (including road construction). They also said that they were not being provided with food, weapons, support taxpayers, or clothing. Given these dire circumstances, Yu reported, some of those who passed the exams were committing suicide (usually by hanging) or were leaving their degree certificates (*hongp'ae* 紅牌) at the main gate of local administration buildings and then running away.<sup>11</sup> The problem was that this situation was not limited to those who passed the exam in P'yöng'an province: it was a nationwide problem.<sup>12</sup> No wonder government officials encountered enormous difficulties whenever they tried to marshal those who had passed the exam to the task of national defense: they did not respond to the call, went into hiding, or just fled. A large number of people passed the exam, but they were very difficult to find when the government really needed them.<sup>13</sup>

---

10. For details, see Eugene Y. Park, *Between Dreams and Reality: The Military Examination in Late Chosön Korea, 1600-1894* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 26-27.

11. *Sönjo sillok* 77:19b, 34 [1596/7/22].

12. Even among those who passed the exam and who were brought to defend Hansöng were many old or sick men. Some of those who passed were, due to military pressure, brought to Hansöng before they could complete a minimum period of mourning for their deceased parents. See *Sönjo sillok* 83:12b, 129 [1596/12/12].

13. For details, see *Sönjo sillok* 86:19b-20a, 181 [1597/3/19].

If those who passed the exam had been fully mobilized, would they have made a big difference with regard to fending off the Japanese intruders? In theory, they were members of the military elite who had successfully passed the state's esteemed public service examination. But the reality was almost the opposite: they were no more than a bunch of bogus "officers" who had been minted by the quick-fix efforts of a ramped up recruitment strategy:

Those who hit one arrow out of five shots from a distance of 100 steps were considered to have passed the exam and, in the case of cavalry, those who hit one arrow out of five shots on slow-moving horseback were also considered to have passed the exam. This kind of recruitment was casually conducted every year. This is the reason that so many men, including even slaves and outcasts, passed the exam and came to possess degree certificates. It was not rare that, when exam passers died, the degree certificates they used to possess would be sold to other people and the latter would then replace the names on the certificates with their own.<sup>14</sup>

The manner in which the military examination was conducted was so detrimental to the status system of society that people ridiculed the situation with the saying: "If you want to find a slave in flight, check the roster of exam passers!"<sup>15</sup>

As a matter of fact, from the spring of 1593, the government grew cautious lest it should stretch itself too far. Some court officials began to argue that the standards of "military examination for wide mobilization" should be upgraded – say, by gradually closing the door to slaves, by differentiating applicants' eligibility according to their social status, and/or by raising the bar for passing the exam. In the seventh month of 1593, the government announced that the nothoi (sons of *yangban* by their secondary wives and concubines) would be allowed to apply to take the examination only when they had submitted two Japanese heads; in the case of slaves, the number of Japanese heads to be submitted was three. Not only that, the minimum qualification for passing the first phase of the examination was elevated to three hits out of five shots in the steel arrow-shooting test, and those who passed the first phase of the examination were eligible for the second phase only once they had brought in at least one Japanese head.<sup>16</sup>

The debate over the eligibility of slaves for the examination intensified over

---

14. *Sŏnjo sillok* 87:30b, 202 [1597/4/19].

15. *Sŏnjo sillok* 87:31a, 202 [1597/4/19].

16. *Sŏnjo sillok* 40:36b-38a, 42-43 [1593/7/16].

time. In the middle of the seventh month of 1595, King Sŏnjo sought opinions: “Is it really necessary to allow private slaves [to apply for the exam]?”<sup>17</sup> The Ministry of War insisted that it was. However, the students of Sŏnggyungwan pressured the king, arguing that slaves, whether privately owned or publicly owned, should not be allowed to take the examination: “If they are allowed, the status order will collapse tomorrow, and once the status order is destroyed, dissenters and traitors will surely spring up everywhere.”<sup>18</sup> Under mounting opposition, both King Sŏnjo and the Ministry of War gave in to the Sŏnggyungwan students and limited eligibility to *sajok* men with experience in fighting.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, as the imminent threat of Japanese aggression dissipated, more and more *sajok* men emerged from hiding and showed a keen interest in the special military examination. Obviously, these *sajok* men were concerned not so much with offering their military service for the defense of the country as they were with seeking opportunities (opportunities that were now less risky) for improving their lot in a status-riddled society. In ordinary times, it was very hard to pass either the civil exam or the military exam, but those who were successful enjoyed all the privileges and benefits Chosŏn society could offer. The wartime examinations, which were porous, wide open, and easy to pass, presented a rare opportunity for *sajok* men to exploit the system. All this happened while the remaining Japanese troops hunkered down at fortresses in the remote corners of southern Kyŏngsang’s coastlines. As far as *sajok* men were concerned, the possibility of being sent to the front was at its lowest, and almost none of the exam passers envisioned themselves being thrown into battle anytime soon. Instead, they were looking forward to the prospect of being appointed to local positions, which were not easy to get in normal times.

The number of “military elites” raised through a total of thirty-one special military examinations during the Imjin War amounted to 8,832. Their provincial distributions were as follows:<sup>20</sup>

P’yŏng’an	2,749
Hamgyŏng	256
Hwanghae	1,269

17. *Sŏnjo sillok* 65:28a, 534 [1595/7/15].

18. *Sŏnjo sillok* 66:7a, 545 [1595/8/10].

19. For a case study that shows the dominance of *sajok* men in the examination, see Sim Sŭnggu, “Imjin waeran chung mukwa kŭpcheja ū sinbun kwa t’ŭksŏng: 1594-nyŏn (Sŏnjo 27) ū pyŏlsi mukwa pangmok ūl chungsim ūro,” *Han’guksa yŏn’gu* 92 (1996).

20. *Sŏnjo sillok* 99:31a, 424 [1598/4/27].

Kangwŏn	134
Kyŏnggi	699
Ch'ungch'ŏng	986
Kyŏngsang	665
Ch'ŏlla	1,894
Unknown	180
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,832</b>

Understandably, those provinces that were relatively unscathed by the Japanese, located close to the capital, or endowed with a large population produced more exam passers than did others.

When the Chosŏn government adopted the strategy of “military examination for wide mobilization,” it was in a desperate effort to raise troops – any troops. Given the texture of Chosŏn society, this strategy was considered the most effective way to attract the attention of able-bodied men for military service. And, indeed, it seemed to work well – at least on paper. Statistically speaking, a corps of close to nine thousand elite soldiers was raised without much difficulty. But this was an empty shell that contributed almost nothing to national defense, and the farce was exposed long before the Japanese resumed their aggression. Near the end of 1595, the Ministry of War reported that, according to the rosters of exam passers, those who had been granted degree certificates numbered more than 8,600 in total. However, because the government could exercise no control over them, most of them had disappeared or returned home. It was almost impossible to locate them.<sup>21</sup>

When it heard of Japan's decision to resume massive aggression, the Chosŏn court panicked. One of its obvious options was to call on those who had passed the exam, but no one seemed to respond. When no one could be found, another examination was held. In the third month of 1597, the government announced that 1,070 men had just passed the exam it had speedily arranged.<sup>22</sup> This, however, did not make any difference to the country's defense. In the fourth month of 1598, the Border Defense Council sighed: “The exam passers who had recently been gained have scattered in all directions and disappeared into the deep recesses of the countryside, all in order to avoid military service. They cannot be found, so generals and local officials are mustering peasants who do not even know how to carry a bow. The officials simply try to fill the quota imposed. These peasants so mustered do nothing but cause disturbances. They are of absolutely no use.”<sup>23</sup>

21. *Sŏnjo sillok* 70:23a, 617 [1595/12/26].

22. *Sŏnjo sujŏng sillok* 宣祖修正實錄 31:3a, 661 [1597/4/1].

In retrospect, the editors of the “veritable records” (referring to the Chronicle of the Chosŏn dynasty) commented:

It became very easy to pass the examination, and the road to public service was so widened that those lowly people who passed it tried to advance themselves along government positions by whatever means they had. All of them were, through bribery, appointed as local magistrates or local military officers. The price [of a position] was determined according to its location. On the date they were promised [it], they were busy making the rounds and presenting bribes to their patrons.<sup>24</sup>

Government positions and titles generated through the system of military examination were a commercial commodity, a source of corruption, rather than a catalyst for strengthening national defense.

### The Creation of Special Defense Forces

Another approach to building up a defense force involved creating a new style of military organization. Two military organizations were created – one in Hansŏng, the other in local provinces. The former, which was assigned to defend the capital and was directed by high-ranking court officials, was called the Military Training Agency (Hullyŏn togam 訓練都監); and the latter, which was assigned to local defense and was commanded by local officials, was called Sog’ogun 東伍軍, or the military units of Sog’o. Sog’o, which literally means “to bind military ranks,” refers to local military units organized into a hierarchical chain of command in order of *o* 伍 (= 5 men), *tae* 隊 (= 2 *o* units), *ki* 旗 (= 3 *tae* units), *ch’o* 哨 (= 3 *ki* units), and *sa* 司 (= 3 *ch’o* units, which contain 450 men in total). King Sŏnjo strongly endorsed the idea of creating these new military organizations.

First of all, the Military Training Agency, which was created in the second month of 1594 to replace the decimated force that had been defending the capital, followed the model suggested in the *Jixiao xinshu* 紀效新書 – a manual of military strategy authored by Qi Jiguang 戚繼光 (1528-1588), who had been instrumental in suppressing the “Japanese pirates” in southern Ming China in the late 1550s and early 1560s. King Sŏnjo charged Yu Sŏngnyong to administer this newly established elite corps. The Military Training Agency was composed

23. *Sŏnjo sillok* 99:31a, 423 [1598/4/27].

24. *Sŏnjo sillok* 86:8b, 175 [1597/3/9].

of units known as “three skills army” (*samsubyöng* 三手兵) – musketeers (*p’osu* 砲手), bowmen (*sasu* 射手), and close-combat killers (*salsu* 殺手) – which would be freshly recruited and trained.

Not long afterwards, Yu Söngnyong reported to King Sönjo:

When court officials discussed the idea of setting up this training agency, most of them said that it would not work because it was unconventional. But now we begin to see a lot of effect, although it has been only three or four months. The agency soldiers who have acquired military skills are no different from the skilled soldiers of Zhejiang, who are good at cannon shooting. I strongly feel that we must continue to train [these soldiers]. If we prepare enough grain, recruit soldiers as widely as possible, and train them day and night without disbanding [the agency], we will surely see a rewarding result month after month and year after year. And a few years later, the agency will become a force of firm discipline if we provide it with enough provisions and weapons. And then we will be able to wipe away the shame of our country.<sup>25</sup>

King Sönjo had high hopes for the agency, offering it his full support and frequently inspecting its one thousand-strong troops during training sessions.

However, a few months later, the agency, which was supposed to be a military division comprised of intensively trained professional soldiers, seemed to face some difficulties. In the middle of the second month of 1595, agency officials explained why it was so difficult and took so long to fill vacancies: “Recruitment is conducted only when there are enough military provisions . . . . No matter how hard we try, currently, soldiers are treated poorly and they suffer from hunger.”<sup>26</sup> The agency was still able to train some musketeers because fresh soldiers recruited from local areas would “bring foodstuff with them and come to the training camp and practice musket shooting for five or ten days.”<sup>27</sup> Obviously, the Chosön court was struggling to feed the soldiers of the agency. As Second State Councillor Kim Ŭngnam correctly pointed out late in the ninth month of 1595, for many soldiers who joined the agency, military service was something they could turn to when the government could afford to provide food while they had nothing to eat.<sup>28</sup> The government failed to feed the thousand or so agency soldiers, and many of them began to desert the training camp.

25. See Yu Söngnyong 柳成龍, *Kŭnp’okchip* 芹曝集 (“Ch’öng hullyöŋ kunsu kye 請訓練軍士啓,” spring 1594).

26. For details, see *Sönjo sillok* 60:33b-34a, 445 [1595/2/19].

27. *Sönjo sillok* 62:31b, 486 [1595/4/24].

28. *Sönjo sillok* 67:26b, 562 [1595/9/24].

One might wonder how many sacks of grains were needed to keep the agency soldiers in their barracks. The Ministry of Finance offered the following figures regarding what was needed to support the agency each month:<sup>29</sup>

Category of expenditures	Amount of grain
Agency soldiers	575 <i>sŏm</i> of rice
Wives of agency soldiers dispatched to the south	32 <i>sŏm</i> of rice
Weapon makers of the agency	6 <i>sŏm</i> of rice
Agency horses and oxen	32 <i>sŏm</i> of beans

\* 1 *sŏm* = 15 *mal* or *tu* = about 82.5 liters

Each month, the agency needed about 645 *sŏm* of grain to keep itself functional, but the government seemed to struggle to secure this from its regular budget.

Given the Military Training Agency's long period of inaction against the Japanese intruders, some court officials began to attack it from a different angle. For example, some said that, given that Korean soldiers had traditionally excelled at archery, the agency's employment of musketeers and close-combat killers would only dissipate the strength of the Korean military.<sup>30</sup> Other officials complained that the agency soldiers, who wasted valuable provisions, began to desert whenever food became available thanks to good harvests: "So far, deserters number about 1,200 . . . . Those who have been newly recruited amount to about 200. The agency now contains 1,100 soldiers in total."<sup>31</sup> As time went on, the agency continued to lose its soldiers; however, the Chosŏn court, which did not have any alternative, had to continue to depend upon them to defend the capital.

In the ninth month of 1597, after the disaster of the battle of Namwŏn, King Sŏnjo dispatched about eight hundred agency soldiers to the south in order to prevent tens of thousands of Japanese troops from advancing further north. The capital went into a panic when it lost its major defense force.<sup>32</sup> Were the agency soldiers able to block the Japanese and keep them in the south? About three weeks later, royal censors (Saganwŏn officials) suggested to the king that Cho Kyŏng, who had led the agency soldiers on this mission, be punished: "Cho Kyŏng, the commander of the Military Training Agency, had

29. *Sŏnjo sillok* 61:8b-9a, 461 [1595/3/10].

30. For details, see *Sŏnjo sillok* 87:14b, 194 [1597/4/13].

31. *Sŏnjo sillok* 88:39a, 232 [1597/5/27].

32. For details, see *Sŏnjo sillok* 92:13b, 292 [1597/9/11].

been ordered to put down the Japanese enemy; but, lamentably, he just dawdled, failed to confront any Japanese, and came back empty-handed.”<sup>33</sup> This happened in the tenth month of 1597. After that, no records allude to the agency until late in the seventh month of 1598, when the inspector-general demanded that the king dismiss Cho Kyōng from his position because, as commander of the agency, he had achieved nothing.<sup>34</sup>

The story of the Sog’o army was not much different from that of the Military Training Agency. The Sog’o units were designed for provincial defense and were created by mobilizing all available men, regardless of their social status or privileges of military exemption. Yu Sōngnyong, who led this initiative, sent an order to all provincial magistrates in early 1594: “Along with government exam passers, *yangban*, nothoi, local clerks and public/private slaves, conscript all able-bodied men who are able to serve as soldiers and, according to a set of rules, organize them into units [of Sog’o] and assign them to their, or nearby, villages.”<sup>35</sup> This was a revolutionary effort given that, previously, close to half of the male population had been exempted from military service. The Chosŏn government hoped that the new organizational concept of Sog’o units would result in the strengthening of local defense.<sup>36</sup>

The idea of comprehensive conscription sounded too good to be true, and it could hardly function as a practical policy in Chosŏn society. Above all, in a situation in which agricultural and military endeavors were not separated, the biggest challenge was how to organize recruits so that they could cultivate their land while fulfilling their military service. Without their labor, agriculture could not be sustained, and, given that the government did not provision them, the recruits could not sustain themselves while on duty. To deal with this quandary, the government adopted a conventional scheme according to which all recruits were allowed to stay home to till the soil once they paid a military tax (i.e., a cloth tax); however, during training sessions and times of military necessity, they were obliged to return to military duty. The heads of units higher than *tae* were ordered to stay at their military positions throughout the year. In other words, out of the 450 Sog’o soldiers who composed one unit of *sa*, only ten

33. *Sŏnjo sillok* 93:12b, 308 [1597/10/5].

34. For details, see *Sŏnjo sillok* 102:34b-35a, 474-75 [1598/7/27].

35. Yu Sōngnyong 柳成龍, *Kummun tǎngnok* 軍門騰錄 (“I Hamgyōng kambyōngsa mun 移咸鏡監兵使文,” 1595).

36. The Sog’o army was also based on Qi Jiguang’s military system, which featured a hierarchical organization of small units trained in firearms. For more on Qi Jiguang (Ch’i Chi-kuang), see L. Carrington Goodrich, ed., *Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368-1644* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 220-23.

men served as a standing army. All others were subject to military training in arrow shooting and spear handling once every fifteen days, except during the busiest time of the agricultural season (which occurred in the fifth and sixth months).<sup>37</sup>

Did the system of Sog'ŏ units work with regard to building up an adequate national defense? A few months before Japan's resumption of aggression, King Sŏnjo received a report that there were about five hundred Sog'ŏ soldiers in Ch'ungch'ŏng province.<sup>38</sup> The situation did not seem to be any better in other provinces. Many of the Sog'ŏ soldiers, who had been conscripted through a great deal of effort, were, under the pretext of all kinds of excuses, "returning to their home villages or taking flight in order to shun military duty . . . . Once [the Japanese] started to wreak havoc, they [Sog'ŏ soldiers] quickly disappeared one after another, and the military roster is almost emptied out. How can we tackle the imminent crisis?"<sup>39</sup>

The Border Defense Council, which was responsible for leading the wartime government, also questioned the manner in which the Sog'ŏ army was operated: "The Sog'ŏ army was originally designed to deal with the crisis situation brought about by the war, [it was not designed] so that the Ministry of War could use its soldiers as a labor force. The social outcasts would be alright, but *yangban* men, Confucian students, and local clerks who can hardly endure the hardship of construction work are included in the Sog'ŏ units."<sup>40</sup> The Border Defense Council implied that men who were Confucians and of the ruling class should not be forced to mingle with commoners and social outcasts and to serve as laborers.

Those who could exercise power exempted themselves from, or bought their way out of, Sog'ŏ recruitment. Slave owners who were poised to lose their "properties" put up strong resistance to it. Local government offices, which were poised to lose their slaves, also did not cooperate as public slaves were supposed to be manumitted once they joined the Sog'ŏ army and fulfilled their service. Worse yet, in many cases, a man would simultaneously be enlisted on the roster of the Sog'ŏ army as well as on that of the regular army. Royal censors reported to King Sŏnjo: "The government imposes all kinds of duties upon Sog'ŏ soldiers that lack any substance. Those who have to fight against the enemy are picked from among the Sog'ŏ soldiers; those who have to do the

---

37. Song Pok, *Widae han mannam: Sŏae Yu Sŏngnyong* (Seoul: Chisik madang, 2007), 230-31.

38. *Sŏnjo sillok* 84:29b, 156 [1597/1/27].

39. *Sŏnjo sillok* 91:25b, 283 [1597/8/21].

40. For details, see *Sŏnjo sillok* 94:20b, 340 [1597/11/16].

work of labor are also picked from among the Sog'o soldiers. Even the job of serving Chinese soldiers is assigned to the Sog'o soldiers . . . . It is no wonder that the Sog'o soldiers have reached the point of total collapse."<sup>41</sup> This was the position of the Sog'o army in 1598.

It was not even clear how many soldiers were organized into Sog'o units and how many were deployed at battlegrounds in 1597-98. Such reports and statistics as were available were unreliable, porous, and sporadic. Above all, no matter what was reported, nothing added up. In the seventh month of 1598, the Border Defense Council reported to King Sōnjo that it was able to mobilize 10,000 Sog'o soldiers from Hwanghae, P'yōng'an, and Hamgyōng provinces to Hansōng. Yet, it failed to meet the demand of Liu Ting, a Chinese commander who asked it to dispatch three hundred soldiers.<sup>42</sup> This is the last time the Sog'o soldiers are mentioned in a report. Where were all those presumably abundant Sog'o soldiers when they were most urgently needed? Nobody seemed to know for sure.

### Converting “Righteous Armies” into Regular Troops

In order to understand why the process of converting righteous armies into regular troops did not go smoothly, we must look at the power equation between these armies and the state. Facing the devastation of the Japanese invasion, the *sajok* found that the commoners – who quickly vented their anger at government officials, plundered public granaries, and even welcomed the invaders – were not on their side. When the Japanese neared their village, the *sajok* families fled. When they could not flee quickly enough, they were attacked by the common villagers or sometimes even killed by their own slaves.<sup>43</sup> No matter how desperate the situation, the government, which was on the run to the north, did not come to the rescue of the *sajok*. Public safety and protection was a private matter.

However, flight could not be a long-term solution. The *sajok* began to take up arms and to organize themselves and their loyal slaves and sympathetic commoners into fighting units. These so-called righteous armies were most numerous and active in areas in which their local autonomy – through the

---

41. *Sōnjo sillok* 96:31a, 373 [1598/1/26].

42. For details, see *Sōnjo sillok* 102:19b-20a, 467 [1598/7/11].

43. For more details, see Nukii Masayuki, *Toyotomi seiken no kaigai shinryaku to Chōsen gihei kenkyū* (Tokyo: Aoki shoten, 1996), 38-39, 70-77.

community compact association (*hyangyak*), private academies (*sŏwŏn*), and social networking – was strongest.

Initially, the government was frightened of these irregular “private” fighters. As far as it was concerned, the matter of organizing fighters and arming them was a domain that was exclusive to the state. The monopoly on military matters was not something that could be shared with, compromised by, or delegated to any private agent. When Kwak Chaeu organized a guerilla force in Ŭiryŏng on the twenty-second day of the fourth month of 1592, the county magistrate immediately reported it to the governor of Kyŏngsang province, referring to it as a clique of rebels, whereupon Governor Kim Su moved to chastise it (albeit to no avail as Kwak Chaeu quickly dismantled it).<sup>44</sup> Chŏng Inhong in Kyŏngsang province, Ko Kyŏngmyŏng in Chŏlla province, Cho Hŏn in Ch’ungch’ŏng province, Yi Chŏng’am in Hwanghae province, and many others could not but dismantle their hastily organized irregular fighters as the government suspected them of being insurgents – a label that, in Chosŏn society, could be lethal.<sup>45</sup>

In places where the power of the state could never possibly reach, some guerilla fighters, who reassembled for self-defense, began to confront the Japanese invaders and, with hit-and-run tactics at various locations in the country, succeeded in delivering some damaging blows.<sup>46</sup> In the middle of the eighth month of 1592, Kim Sŏng’il, then Governor and Mobile Border Commander of Eastern Kyŏngsang, was able to secure the king’s authorization to incorporate regular soldiers who were in a state of disarray into the camps of righteous armies. It was a desperate effort to keep the crumbling regular armies from dispersing completely. Unlike the regular troops, the guerilla troops showed some signs of being able to effectively fight the intruders. With this dramatic measure, the irregular fighters, now referred to as “righteous armies” (*ŭbyŏng*), were free from the suspicion of treason.

In addition to offering the righteous armies official recognition, the government proceeded to empower them with official titles and ranks. Leaders of righteous armies were hastily appointed as local magistrates, field commanders, and even as provincial commanders. Furthermore, the government exempted those ordinary men who joined the righteous armies from public tax

---

44. For more details, see *Sŏnjo sillok* 27:19a-b, 505 [1592/6/28].

45. For details, see *Sŏnjo sujŏng sillok* 26:19a, 620 [1592/6/1] and 26:43a-b, 632 [1592/11/1].

46. Later, the Chosŏn court praised their anti-Japanese resistance, saying: “Even though their achievements were not big, they won people’s minds and, thanks to their effort, the thread of life of the state was preserved.” *Sŏnjo sujŏng sillok* 26:19a-b, 620 [1592/6/1].

obligations and military service – a move that would elevate these armies to the status of regular forces. In its attempt to muster volunteer fighters, the government even went so far as to promise the privilege of grain rations from the public granary. As the righteous armies continued to be sanctioned, some regular soldiers and their commanders, who had gone into hiding, began to emerge and to refashion themselves as members of these armies.<sup>47</sup>

However, the glorification of righteous armies did not last long. This was partly their own fault: far too often they abused their sanctioned power to promote their own non-military self-interests. In the name of loyalty to the king, some leaders of righteous armies forcibly drafted local villagers into their fighting units, commandeered bags of grains from public granaries whenever they happened to be hungry, and extended their authority to administrative matters for personal gains. They even ganged up and directed their venal energies towards local residents in order to confiscate their goods.

Realizing that the righteous armies could compromise his sovereign power from within, King Sōnjo, from the middle of the ninth month of 1592, began to take measures against their unbridled behavior. This tendency only increased when, with the arrival of the Ming forces, the Japanese slowed their aggression. When the Ming forces retook P’yōngyang in the first month of 1593, the government decided to assign the righteous armies the task of transporting grain and fodder for the Ming troops. Some leaders of these armies who failed to fulfill their transport quota were even brought to military court for punishment.<sup>48</sup>

Concurrently, the government rescinded its policy of allocating grain rations to the righteous armies and stopped rewarding them with government positions and titles. In particular, the termination of grain rations dealt a staggering blow to the already sagging spirits of these armies: some of their members joined the regular troops in order to survive, while others, who could not withstand their hunger, went so far as to plunder local grain storehouses. In the second month of 1593, the government ordered the righteous armies to refrain from fighting the Japanese as the latter’s aggression had dissipated into a stalemate. From this time on, the righteous armies either rapidly dispersed or caused additional pain to Chosōn Korea’s wartime society. In the early first month of 1595, Minister of Personnel Yi Tōkhyōng reported: “Bandits in the

---

47. For example, see *Sōnjo sillok* 31:11a-b, 554 [1592/10/16]. For a detailed discussion of the relations between regular troops and righteous armies, see Ch’oe Yōnghŭi, *Imjin Waeran chung ū sahoe tongt’ae: ūbyōng ūl chungsim ūro* (Seoul: Han’guk yōn’guwōn, 1975), 49–65.

48. For examples, see *Sōnjo sillok* 34:18a-b, 603 [1593/1/12] and 35:10a, 626 [1593/2/8].

Yöngp'yöng area [in Kyönggi province] surrendered to the magistrate office but the magistrate did not properly take care of them. Upset, they again formed a group of bandits and robbed residents in the area of their possessions and grain under the guise of trade .... Many of those bandits used to be agile and strong righteous soldiers who killed Japanese enemies."<sup>49</sup> As may be seen, in some pockets of the country, former guerrilla fighters transformed themselves into bandits and plundered local villages and government offices.

Interestingly, however, when Ming China completed the withdrawal of its major forces from Chosön Korea in the fall of 1593, the Chosön government, which could not find soldiers to fill the defense vacuum created by the Chinese retreat, began to court potential righteous armies again. Unfortunately, despite the rosy promises, it could not find many *sajok* men who would risk being deceived a second time. For those who were willing to respond to the call for loyalty, the government once again played the offices-and-titles card. Kim Töngnyöng in Chölla province, who was appointed as the commander of the righteous armies of the three southern provinces in the tenth month of 1593, serves to illustrate how the politics of righteous armies unfolded during the Imjin War.

The government praised Kim Töngnyöng highly, even assigning him an elite corps of 1,782 men who had passed military examinations conducted in Chölla province.<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, however, Kim Töngnyöng was not blessed with opportunities to demonstrate his loyalty as the Japanese had retreated into mountain fortresses. What most troubled the government at this time was not Japanese aggression but, rather, domestic rebellions that had broken out in local areas. As was seen in Song Yujin's attempt at rebellion in Ch'ungch'öng province in the first month of 1593, some of these rebellions were triggered by former righteous armies.<sup>51</sup> Out of fear and jealousy, some court officials began to cast a suspicious eye on Kim Töngnyöng, who commanded a sizable army. In the seventh month of 1596, when Yi Monghak staged a large-scale rebellion in Hongsöng of Ch'ungch'öng province, King Sönjo decided to deal with the potential danger of righteous armies.

To quell Yu Monghak's rebellion, the government ordered Kim Töngnyöng to bring his soldiers and join the regular troops who were rushing to seal the

49. *Sönjo sillok* 59:1a-b, 415 [1595/1/3]. For more, see Ch'oe, *Imjin Waeran chung ü sahoe tongt'ae*, 147-56.

50. O Hümun 吳希文, *Swaemirok* 瓊尾錄 3 [1594/2/2], in *Imjin waeran saryo ch'ongsö 5, yöksa* (Chinju: Kungnip Chinju pangmulgwan, 2002), 282.

51. For more details on Song Yujin's rebellion, see Yi Changhü, *Imjin waeransa yön'gu* (Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1999), 332-342.

Hongsŏng area. Kim Tŏngnyŏng and his troops were on their way north when, all of a sudden, they were stopped by a group of law enforcement officials. Without knowing what was going on, Kim Tŏngnyŏng was arrested on the strength of obscure accusations that connected him to Yu Monghak's rebellion. Brought to the court prison of Hansŏng, Kim Tŏngnyŏng was subjected to incessant brutal tortures in the presence of King Sŏnjo and was coerced into confessing the crime of treason. Before succumbing to death in excruciating pain, Kim Tŏngnyŏng spoke these words: "When my mother died in 1593, I neglected the three-year mourning period, cut the bonds between mother and son, arose out of uncontrollable indignation [towards the Japanese enemy], cast off my mourning dress, picked up a sword, and joined the army for several years. So far I have not achieved a modicum of loyalty but have only displayed a lack of filial piety. Given the gravity of my sin, I cannot avoid it even if I die ten thousand times."<sup>52</sup> It soon turned out that Kim Tŏngnyŏng had had nothing to do with the rebellion, but the government, which had already removed him, proceeded to turn its watchful eye on other leaders of other righteous armies, including Kwak Chaeu.

The state's killing of Kim Tŏngnyŏng sent a chill through the remaining righteous armies. Ch'oe Tamnyŏng, a close associate of Kim Tŏngnyŏng, who barely survived the anti-treason terror of the government, immediately transformed himself into a beggar in order to avoid the same fate as his dead friend.<sup>53</sup> Amid anger and frustration directed at the capricious tyranny of the Chosŏn court, the remaining righteous armies abandoned their camps and dispersed. However, not long after this, the government faced a quandary: with the failure of the Chinese-Japanese truce negotiations, the possibility of renewed Japanese aggression suddenly loomed large, and the government found that its regular troops were still not adequately prepared to defend the country. Out of desperation, the government again put out a call for loyal righteous armies. Not surprisingly, people turned a deaf ear to it.

A month after the disaster of the battle of Namwŏn in the fall of 1597, King Sŏnjo asked Commander Kwŏn Yul if there were any men who were trying to raise righteous armies. The latter answered: "When I was in Yŏngnam, I asked Chŏng Inhong to muster [righteous] soldiers. Even though he was old and sick, his reputation as a Confucian scholar was so high that [I thought] he would be able to raise righteous soldiers and exercise his loyalty to the king. Similarly, Yi Wŏnik also asked Chŏng [to raise soldiers]."<sup>54</sup> That was

---

52. *Sŏnjo sujŏng sillok* 30:6b, 659 [1596/8/1].

53. For details, see *Sŏnjo sujŏng sillok* 30:6b-7a, 659 [1596/8/1].

it. King Sŏnjo received some reports that had been submitted by certain obscure groups of self-proclaimed righteous armies regarding some minor achievements, but nobody at the court seemed to pay any attention to them.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

To what extent was Chosŏn Korea's military capacity improved through its strenuous efforts to build up the military? Did its naval forces, which had dealt a deadly blow to the Japanese navy, remain intact? In the second month of 1595, Kwŏn Yul reported that "military vessels, both big and small, altogether number 84, and the [naval] combat troops and rowing crew number 4,109 in total, but more than half of them are sick." And then, regarding one particular place, he noted: "I looked around the Ŭiryŏng county and found that many soldiers were released due to a lack of provisions. Soldiers stationed in the camp were fewer than 500." Kwŏn Yul concluded that the military camps in other places would be no different, saying: "I do not know what to do about this situation no matter how hard I think."<sup>56</sup> Kwŏn Yul was the supreme commander of Chosŏn Korea's military.

On the other hand, an official named Cho Hyŏngdo, who served at the Border Defense Council, submitted a detailed report on the naval troops stationed on Hansan Island: "Each of the soldiers is provided with five *hop* (1 *hop* = about 0.055 liters) of rice and 7 *hop* of water per day. Once they board a ship, there is no way for them to get off. When they are sick, they are thrown into the water, and when they are starving, they are left on the mountain slope. The whole area of Hansan Island is like a village of ghosts."<sup>57</sup> Where did Kwŏn Yul get the number "4,109"? While somewhat enigmatic, all other reports indicated that, under the command of Admiral Yi Sunsin, the navy, which had been the pride of Chosŏn Korea's military in 1592, was in rather bleak shape.

In the fourth month of 1596, Yu Sŏngnyong reported, after having inspected the two Kyŏngsang provinces (the most important battle fronts in the country): "The combined troops of the two Kyŏngsang provinces number

54. *Sŏnjo sillok* 92:17b, 294 [1597/9/13].

55. For example, according to Chŏlla governor Hwang Sin, So Hoeik, the head of a righteous army, and his soldiers were able to lure 286 Koreans from the Japanese fortress in Sunch'ŏn and another 127 Koreans from Nag'an, which was under Japanese control. See *Sŏnjo sillok* 95:17a, 351 [1597/12/17].

56. *Sŏnjo sillok* 60:27b, 442 [1595/2/12].

57. *Sŏnjo sillok* 63:15a, 499 [1595/5/19].

around 2,000 at maximum.”<sup>58</sup> This was where Chosŏn Korea stood after the presumably vigorous national efforts, lasting more than three years, devoted to military buildup. In the tenth month of 1596, upon hearing that Japan’s resumption of massive aggression was imminent, King Sŏnjo convened an emergency court meeting. Yu Sŏngnyong suggested: “What we can do is do our best to prepare ourselves [for the upcoming battles] and to ask, in an urgent manner, the Chinese court to send a large number of troops to P’yŏngyang.”<sup>59</sup> Obviously, the first part of his statement is mere rhetoric while the second part shows an awareness of the reality of the situation. Yi Sanhae, another high-ranking court official, jumped in: “Over the past five years we have never had good policies but only relied on negotiated settlement . . . . The best thing that we can now do is to plant troops in ambush between Kyŏngsang and Chŏlla provinces and to defeat the enemy at strategic points.”<sup>60</sup> He said nothing about where those wondrous troops could be found.

No matter what government officials said, the cold truth is that Chosŏn Korea could not expect to repel the Japanese on its own. If Koreans hoped to save their country from ruin, Chinese military aid was not merely an option, it was a must. There was a chance to build up the military, but it was lost. In particular, during the years between 1594 and 1596, Chosŏn Korea was poised to benefit from the interlude in war actions, but it did not do so. The bottom line is that the problem was not an operational one but a structural one: it was built into Chosŏn Korea’s military system itself.

Indeed, Chosŏn Korea had the “perfect storm” with regard to the inevitability of military collapse: military exemption for, and avoidance by, the wealthy and powerful; military desertion by those with no power; and the loophole afforded by the cloth tax and substitute soldiers. All of these ingredients worked together to derail the military defense system of Chosŏn Korea, even during the years of the Imjin War. These structural problems in the country’s military went far beyond what any makeshift measures, no matter how splendid they might sound, could possibly cure.

---

58. *Sŏnjo sillok* 74:2a, 669 [1596/4/2].

59. *Sŏnjo sillok* 82:13b, 95 [1596/11/7].

60. *Sŏnjo sillok* 82:17b, 97 [1596/11/7].