

Admiral Yi Soon-Sin

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Introduction

Choong-Moo was the name given to the great Admiral Yi Soon-Sin of the Lee Dynasty. He was reputed to have invented the first armoured battleship *Kobukson* in 1592, which is said to be the precursor of the present day submarine. The reason why this pattern ends with a left handed attack is to symbolise his regrettable death, having no chance to show his unrestrained potentiality checked by the forced reservation of his loyalty to the king.

For me, this has always been the most intriguing pattern meaning. It is the longest Kup pattern meaning and is full of questions.

Why was Admiral Yi Soon-Sin called Choong-Moo? What is a Kobukson? Why was his death regrettable? What lead up to his death?

Personally, I have always wondered about the last clause “having no chance to show his unrestrained potentiality checked by the forced reservation of his loyalty to the king”. What was so special about his loyalty to the king?

This essay shows the history behind the pattern meaning and hopes to further each Black stripe's understanding of it.

Early Military Career

Yi Soon-Sin was born on April 28th 1545 in Geoncheon-dong, Hanseong, which is in present day Seoul. As a boy he showed excellent leadership skills and he learnt to construct his own bows and arrows as a teenager.

At first he chose to study the liberal arts but later decided to study for the military. He passed the annual military examination in 1576 where he impressed the judges with his swordsmanship and archery. Yi was then posted to the northern border region of Korea as Commandant of the Tonggubi fortress, where he became battle hardened defending the border against the Jurchens¹.

After a series of promotions, Yi was appointed Naval Commander in Palp'o, Cholla province in 1580.

In 1583, Yi was appointed acting commandant of the Konwon fortress where he led his forces to victory over the Jurchen forces led by the Manchurian barbarian chief Mu Pai-Nai. Near the end of the year his father died and in accordance with the Confucian ideals² of the time, he resigned his post to fulfil his filial duties as a mourner.

At the end of the mourning period in 1586, Yi was appointed Garrison Captain of the Chosan fortress, where he had more successes against the Jurchen nomads. However, these victories soon made his superiors jealous and in a conspiracy led by General Yi II the Army Commander, Yi was falsely arrested for desertion during battle. Yi refused to

1 The Jurchens inhabited Manchuria until the 17th Century when they changed their name to the Manchu people, hence the name Manchuria.

2 Joseon Neo-Confucian ideals included: *chung* or loyalty; *hyo* or filial piety; *in* or benevolence; and *sin* or trust [4].

back down even under torture and imprisonment. After a pardon by King Seonjo, Yi was stripped of his rank and had to begin his military career again as a foot soldier. This is another example of Yi's refusal to compromise his ideals and morals despite the consequences.

Yi's hard work as a foot soldier was rewarded with further promotions, which culminated in 1591 with the appointment as Commander of the Cholla Left Naval Station in Yosu despite having no previous naval experience. There he began to build up the Korean Navy to fend off attacks by Japanese pirates, which were a frequent occurrence in the seas around southern Korea. This build up included the construction of the famous Kobukson or turtle ships in 1592³.

Japanese Invasions

It was during the Japanese invasions from 1592 to 1598 that Admiral Yi showed his unwavering loyalty to King Seonjo and his country. He is remembered for his famous battles with the Japanese where his brilliant use of innovative naval tactics ensured victory.

First Japanese Invasion

When the Japanese warlord, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, came to power in 1590, he wanted to stop the internal feuding within Japan. He thought the best way to do this would be to invade China and therefore drain the financial resources of his rival lords. He requested that Korea aid him in the conquest of China, and when Korea refused, he ordered two of his generals, Kato Kiyomasa and Konishi Yukinaga, to invade Korea in April 1592.

The Japanese invasion force consisted of around 250,000 troops and 700 ships with 9,000 sailors. The Japanese used many small ships as they expected the Korean Navy to use similar tactics to the Japanese Navy and fight in hand to hand combat. The Japanese army was very well armed by the standards of the time as they had perfected the ability to make European muskets themselves.

In contrast, the Korean army had few firearms and had no method of manufacturing them.

3 The Kobukson was a large warship used by the Joseon dynasty between the 15th and 18th centuries.

Contrary to popular belief, Yi Soon-Sin did not invent the turtle ship but improved upon an earlier design (early 15th Century [6]). His main improvements were to add iron-cladding to the hull, a dragon on the bow which emitted sulphur gas to scare the enemy and better still to mask the ship's movements, and a flame thrower cannon which was used to set enemy ships alight.

The turtle ships were around 30 metres long and had eleven cannons and 10 oars on each side, two cannons in the stern, two canons in the bow, and one cannon in the bow dragon. The turtle ships had three decks: a lower deck for cabins and supplies, a middle deck for the oarsmen, and an upper deck for the marines and cannons. Its crew consisted of 50 or more marines and up to 70 oarsmen.

The Korean navy was unusual at the time in that it relied heavily on the use of cannons to fire on the enemy at a distance instead of ramming and boarding ships for hand to hand combat, which was a major tactical difference from the Japanese Navy. The turtle ships were mostly used to spearhead attacks and were used to devastating effect upon the Japanese Navy.

The Korean Navy mostly consisted of another smaller type of ship *Panokseon*, which of a similar size to the turtle ship but had no armour or other improvements. No more than five turtle ships were ever used in a single battle and it is believed that no more than twelve were ever made.

As the Korean army was outnumbered and armed with only swords, bows and arrows, and spears, the Japanese army reached Seoul in 15 days, and occupied most of the country by May 1592. King Seonjo was forced to flee to Uiju in the Northern provinces of China with the permission of the Chinese Emperor.

In 1592, Admiral Yi was commanding the Right Division of Cholla province. When the Japanese invaded, Yi tried to rally the Southern naval commanders where he found nearly all of the fleet commanded by Won Gyun, the commander of the Left Right Division of Cholla province, destroyed. Despite this, Yi brought Won Gyun with him when in May 1592 he engaged the Japanese Navy at Okpa with 80 ships against the Japanese force of 800 ships. By the end of the battle, Yi had set 26 Japanese ships aflame and had forced the rest to flee. Giving chase, he sank many more.

In the following months, Admiral Yi had several further victories over the Japanese Navy where he seemed to be able to outguess the enemy. In one incident, Yi dreamed that a man called out to him, "The Japanese are coming". Seeing this as an omen, he immediately set out and surprised a large Japanese fleet. He set twelve ships alight and scattered the rest. During this battle, Yi showed extraordinary courage by not showing pain when he was shot in the shoulder. He only revealed his injury after the battle when he ordered the bullet to be cut out.

In August 1592, 100,000 Japanese reinforcements headed up the west coast where Admiral Yi confronted them at Kyon-Na-Rang. Yi pretended to flee at first but then he turned and began to ram the Japanese ships resulting in 71 Japanese ships being sunk. When another Japanese reinforcement fleet arrived, 48 of these were sunk too. This battle is considered one of the greatest naval battles in history, alongside the Spanish Armada and the Battle of Trafalgar, and it destroyed Japan's plans to invade China.

Later Admiral Yi took the entire Korean Navy of around 180 small and large ships into the Japanese naval base at Pusan, at which more than 500 ships were anchored. Yi managed to sink over half the Japanese fleet but was forced to withdraw, having received no land support. With this battle, Admiral Yi concluded what some naval historians have called the most important series of naval battles in history.

With the Korean Navy in complete control of the seas, the Japanese invasion was at a standstill as no supplies could get through. For his military feats and contribution to the Navy, King Seonjo promoted Yi to the Admiralty of the three surrounding provinces.

Meanwhile, the Chinese armies joined the Koreans to fight the Japanese, who were cut off from their supplies by the successes of Admiral Yi. The fight against the Chinese and Korean guerilla groups sapped the Japanese morale and they were forced into peace negotiations, which dragged on for five years and reached no conclusion.

Betrayal

As the Japanese became increasingly frustrated with Yi's successes, they devised a plan to get rid off him. A Japanese double agent named Yoshira was sent to the Korean general Kim Eung-Su, where he convinced the general that he would spy on the Japanese for him. Yoshira acted as a double agent for some time and gave the Koreans what appeared to be valuable information.

Yoshira told General Kim that the Japanese General Kato Kiyomasa would be coming to Korea to invade and said that Admiral Yi should be sent to lay an ambush. General Kim asked King Seonjo for permission to send Admiral Yi and when Yi received these orders he refused as the location given by Yoshira was treacherous and studded with hidden rocks. Also, Admiral Yi was not prepared to accept and trust battle plans that he himself had not devised and practised.

When the King was told of Admiral Yi's refusal to obey orders, Yi's enemies at court insisted that Yi be arrested and Won Gyun take over Yi's command.

In 1597, Admiral Yi was relieved of command and placed under arrest. He was taken to Seoul and brutally tortured. The King wanted to have Yi executed but his supporters in court managed to convince the King to spare his life due to his past service record.

Admiral Yi was once again demoted to a common foot soldier. Yi responded to this humiliation by being the most loyal and obedient soldier possible.

Final Japanese Invasion

Now Admiral Yi was out of the way, the Japanese could invade once more in the first month of 1597 with 140,000 troops, which landed safely at Sosang harbour. It is likely that if Admiral Yi had still been in command, these troops would never have landed.

Admiral Won Gyun, at the urging of the spy Yoshira, intercepted the Japanese fleet with the entire Korean Navy of 180 ships and 30,000 men. At the Chilchon straits on August 28th 1597, the Korean Navy was destroyed except for 12 ships. Won Gyun's poor tactics and leadership allowed the Japanese to board his ships and kill the crews in hand to hand combat. Won Gyun was later caught ashore by Japanese troops and beheaded. This was the only naval battle the Japanese won.

When the King heard the news he immediately reinstated Admiral Yi. Despite his previous treatment Yi went to his former naval base and found the 12 remaining ships which made up the last of the Korean Navy. Yi set sail and met the Japanese fleet of 133 ships in the Myongyang straits. There using continuous barrage fire, he caused the Japanese to think they had met vastly superior force and they scattered. The next day a larger fleet was encountered and Admiral Yi decimated them and killed the Japanese commander.

In 1598, the Chinese Emperor sent Admiral Chil Lin to command Korea's western coast. Chil Lin was a vain and difficult man and Admiral Yi had to work hard to gain his trust. He allowed Chil Lin to take credit for many of his own victories while Yi was in charge of the actual strategy. As this made the Chinese seem successful, they were more prepared to aid Korea in the war effort.

Due to the lack of progress after the 1597 invasion and the death of the warlord Hideyoshi in 1598, the Japanese began withdrawing from Korea.

Unfortunately, Yi never saw the results of his heroic efforts as he was killed in battle in November 1598 while attacking the withdrawing fleet. Yi was hit by a stray bullet while standing on the bow of his flagship leading the battle. Before he died, he is credited with saying, “Do not let the rest know I am dead, for it will spoil the fight”.

Legacy

Today, Koreans look upon Yi Soon-Sin as a man of courage, perseverance, strength, self-sacrifice, and loyalty.

Perhaps one of Admiral Yi's greatest qualities was his drive to serve his King and Korea in any way he could. In his time, almost everyone in the Korean military and government was forced to side with one of the two powerful political factions in the court⁴, in order to survive. Yi chose neither side and was only loyal to the King and his country. What is more, at a time when rank and position meant everything, Yi was able to maintain his pride and dignity even when demoted to the lowest rank. Most other officers would have been driven to suicide or revenge if subjected to such disgrace.

In 1643, Admiral Yi was posthumously awarded the honorary title of *Chungmu-gong* which means Lord of Loyalty and Chivalry. He was also posthumously granted the titles of *Deokpung Buwongun* (Prince of the Court of Deokpung) and *Yumyeong Sugun Dodok* (Admiral of the Fleet of Ming China). South Korea's third highest military honour is called the “the Cordon of Chungmu of the Order of Military Merit and Valour”.

A street in Seoul, Chungmuro, is named after him as is the small city of Chungmu on the southern coast of Korea. There is a 55 foot tall statue of him in Sejong Avenue in Seoul and a life-size one on the peak of Mt Nam-mang.

The shrine of Chungnyol-Sa (“faithful to King and Country”) was established in 1606 and is now a museum dedicated to the Admiral.

Yi's name is held in such high regard that several naval historians and fellow Admirals have compared him to Lord Nelson. One such example is the Japanese Admiral, Togo Heihachiro, who defeated the Russian Navy in 1905.

When someone remarked of him about his victory over the Russian Navy, “Your great victory is so remarkable that it deserves an everlasting place in history. You can be regarded the equal of Admiral Nelson, who defeated Napoleon in the Battle of Trafalgar; you are indeed a god of war.” Admiral Togo is said to have replied, “If there ever were an Admiral worthy of the name of ‘god of war’, that one is Yi Soon-Sin. Next to him, I am little more than a petty officer.”

⁴ There were two main factions in the Joseon dynasty court: the conservative “Westerners”, and the liberal “Easterners” [5].

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