

The Impact of the Hideyoshi Invasions on Ethnic Consciousness in Korea

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I Introduction

A central defining element of nationalism, according to modernist theorists such as Anderson, Gellner, and Hobsbawm, is the rise among non-elites of a sense of belonging to a larger social, cultural, and political collectivity. This broader sense of identity, which is seen as the product of a variety of forces working in tandem, including the organizational and educational efforts of the modern state, the spread of capitalist modes of production and consumption, and the propagandizing activities of nationalist intellectuals, is argued to be a novel form of consciousness that displaces older locally-specific identities. Indeed in the cases of the European and other countries that have been used to develop this model, the centralized bureaucratic state itself has been a modern novelty. On the other hand, however, in East Asian there are countries, including Korea, where ancient agrarian polities with long traditions of centralized bureaucratic rule have developed (albeit only after painful encounters with Western nationalism and imperialism) into modern nation-states. Furthermore, there is evidence to indicate that this sort of enduring centralized political rule engendered in the social and political elites of these countries a sense of belonging to distinct cultural and political collectivities that transcended individual dynasties. This raises the question of whether the long experience with centralized bureaucratic states also fostered among non-elites a broader sense of identity, a sense of collective belonging that could be mobilized to serve the purposes of modern nationalism.

The question of how to know the minds of non-elites is a difficult one, especially for the historian who relies primarily on written documents. The non-elites of the Chosôn period left virtually no writings, leaving us reliant on official records and elite commentaries. The dangers in using these types of sources to construct non-elite consciousness have been pointed out by Guha and Spivak,⁽¹⁾ among others. Thus I have turned to another type of source material: popular oral traditions. The popular oral traditions of the late Chosôn, while sometimes reflecting actual historical events, are fictional works that contain much fanciful, even magical, material and for that reason have been largely eschewed by historians. Folklorists, on the other hand, have pointed out that these oral traditions are verbal formulations that often reflect historical, social, and political realities.⁽²⁾ My own reading of such late Chosôn oral narratives as the *Ch'unhyang chôn* (Story of Ch'unhyang) and the *Hûngbu chôn* (Story of Hûngbu), which echo much of what we historians think we know about social and economic conditions, seems to bear out the folklorists' contentions.

Folklorists, in constructing their interpretations of reality in oral traditions, stress the importance of the informant or narrator's social status and occupation.⁽³⁾ This presents the scholar hoping to use late Chosôn oral narratives to construct some understanding of premodern peasant consciousness with two problems. One is that the overwhelming majority of the surviving versions of these narratives were first recorded after Korea was opened up to the outside world in 1876. Given the way in which narrators are sensitive to changing conditions—for example, a 1916 version of the *Hûngbu chôn* mentions the great war in Europe—it seems necessary to locate versions that predate the arrival of Western

imperialism. The other is that the recorders of the earlier versions have left us with no information about their informants. Inasmuch as the recorders were presumably literate elites, we have to assume that their versions may have reflected elite tastes. These narratives, however, survive in numerous versions. In the case of the *Imjin nok* (Record of 1592), over 40 different versions have been found. Not only does the existence of many versions testify to the widespread circulation of these narratives, but the versions themselves vary widely—some contain language and content that seem to mirror elite values, while others seem to represent commoner sensibilities. Thus I have attempted, wherever possible, to use versions that were recorded prior to the opening of Korea and versions that reflect non-elite language and attitudes.

II State and Commoner in the Chosôn

The inhabitants of the Korean Peninsula have had an extraordinarily long experience of unified political rule, beginning in 668 with Silla's unification of the southern two-thirds of the peninsula, and continuing through the Koryô (918-1392) and Chosôn (1392-1910) dynasties, with only one brief forty-year period of disunity during the Silla-Koryô transition at the beginning of the tenth century. Premodern Korean dynasties engaged in a number of organizational and cultural activities that directly affected the commoner populace, but perhaps none as much as the last dynasty, the Chosôn. Shortly after its founding the Chosôn took a number of measures to strengthen its administrative control over the countryside, including upgrading the status and authority of provincial governors, reorganizing local administrative units, and dispatching centrally appointed magistrates to all the prefectures and counties in the country. This standing presence in the countryside of officials of the central government seems almost certain to have engendered in the non-elite population an awareness that they belonged not only to local village society, but to a larger entity symbolized by the dynasty.

Some of the most important duties of the magistrates included registering the local populace and exacting from it various taxes, corvée labor, and, at times, military service. This was in all likelihood often an unwelcome intrusion, as evidenced by the frequency of popular uprisings against excessive taxation and corruption. Throughout much of the dynasty, the magistrates relied heavily on local elites (organized in the local gentry bureau, *hyangch'ông*) and hereditary clerks (*hyangni*) for the actual collection of taxes in the prefectures and counties under their charge. This can perhaps be taken to mean that villagers were not in regular contact with magistrates and were largely unaware of the magistrates' role as representatives of the state. On the other hand, however, the bulk of popular uprisings—or at least those mentioned in official sources—were targeted against corrupt magistrates. In fact, it was not unusual for leaders of such protests to appeal to the court for redress. It seems safe to say that the presence of the magistrates served as a more-or-less constant reminder to villagers that they were part of a larger collectivity represented by the dynasty.

The Chosôn magistrates were also charged with carrying out various ritual and educational activities intended to, among other things, inculcate a sense of loyalty to the dynasty and foster the spread of Confucian social values. These included regular conduct of Confucian rituals at county schools (*hyanggyo*) and periodic dissemination of vernacular translations of such Confucian morals handbooks as the *Samgang haengsilto* (Illustrated Exemplars of the Three Bonds). The dynasty's cultural activities were supplemented by local elites through such vehicles as the village school (*sôdang*), where children (including in some cases commoner children) studied basic Confucian primers, and the village compact (*hyangyak*), many of which included commoners in their ritual and educational activities.⁽⁴⁾ While Confucian values

were often used by elites to rationalize their privileged position, it is important to note that those values were also deployed by non-elites in resistance to the rigid social and gender hierarchy of the late Chosôn.⁽⁵⁾ Furthermore, one recent study indicates that an increasingly large proportion of recipients of state awards for exemplars of cardinal Confucian social values came from non-elite social strata in the second half of the dynasty.⁽⁶⁾ It is also important to note that the leaders of popular protests against corrupt magistrates routinely avowed the protesters' loyalty to the king. These leaders were almost always déclassé local yangban and thus their protestations of loyalty may have reflected elite values. To be sure, they could hardly hope to appeal to the court for redress without proclaiming their loyalty. Whether the commoners who participated in the protests felt genuine loyalty to the king is uncertain, but their leaders' protestations must have reinforced their awareness of the centrality of Confucian values in the polity to which they were subject.

While it is difficult to gauge the extent to which the state's organizational and educational activities resulted in a common political and cultural identity among non-elites, it does seem likely that peasants and other commoners knew that they were subjects of the Chosôn dynasty and that they were well aware of the key Confucian values that constituted that dynasty's ideology. This in itself, while apparently different from the premodern European case, seems hardly enough to argue for some sort of premodern popular foundation for modern nationalism, since peasants could have been equally aware of, and equally accepting of/resistant to, a conquest dynasty and its ideological props, assuming that the new rulers' policies did not have an overly negative effect on their livelihoods.

III The Effect of Foreign Invasions

Eric Hobsbawm, in his overall pessimistic assessment of premodern senses of popular identity as bases for modern nationalism, notes the possibility that painful experiences at the hands of foreign invaders could produce a kind of "negative ethnicity"—a sense among commoners that they belong to a distinct social and cultural collectivity different from others—which, when fused with a long state tradition, could perhaps develop into modern nationalism. Hobsbawm cites Korea as one possible case in point, but unfortunately does not pursue the issue.

The Koryô dynasty experienced major foreign invasions by the Khitan Liao in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries and again by the Mongols in the mid-thirteenth century. Whether these unhappy experiences at the hands of peoples whose language and customs were different from their own produced feelings of ethnic identity among the commoners at that time is unknowable, since we have no sources that could give us any sense of what they might have felt. On the other hand, the Chosôn did suffer two major invasions midway through the dynasty. The first was the six-year campaign of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, whose Japanese forces swept throughout almost the entire peninsula after landing on the southern coast in 1592. The other was the Manchu invasion of 1636-37, which devastated most of the northern half of the country. There are popular works of narrative fiction dealing with both of these events, including the *Imjin nok* for Hideyoshi's invasion, and *Pak-ssi chôn* (Story of Madame Pak) and *Im Changgun chôn* (Story of General Im) for the Manchu incursion. Here, because of the strictures of time, I will focus on the Hideyoshi invasions and the popular memories of that invasion represented in (or perhaps constructed by) the *Imjin nok*.

There are, as mentioned above, over 40 surviving versions of the *Imjin nok*. Some of these versions are written in literary Chinese, others in vernacular Korean. Some versions are comparatively true to historical events, others are highly fanciful. The particular version on which I will rely primarily is known by the title *Hûngnyong nok* whose

language (vernacular Korean) and content (many fanciful events) seem to reflect non-elite sensibilities⁽⁷⁾ and which is believed to date back to sometime before 1849.⁽⁸⁾

There have been a number of studies by literary scholars on the *Imjin nok* in recent years that strive to identify major motifs and to classify various versions according to motif and language.⁽⁹⁾ These studies also tend to stress what they see as the nationalistic nature of the *Imjin nok*. In developing their arguments for nationalism, they focus on three major issues: one, the lionization of Korean heroes; two, anti-Japanese sentiments; and three, anti-Chinese feelings. Various versions of the story describe such heroes as Kim Tông-nyông and Yi Sun-sin as impossibly huge (Kim Tông-nyông was nine feet tall) and strong (Yi Sun-sin could lift three thousand pounds)⁽¹⁰⁾ and attribute to them magical powers, such as Kim Tông-nyông's ability to enter and leave a Japanese encampment without a trace, a feat that intimidated the Japanese commander.⁽¹¹⁾ Another important hero was the Buddhist monk Samyôngdang, who traveled to Japan after the war and, after enduring numerous trials and tortures, humiliated the Japanese king and exacted from him tribute and a promise never to invade Chosôn again.⁽¹²⁾ All this is seen as reflecting Korean nationalist sentiment after the Hideyoshi invasions. In particular, the appearance of such non-yangban heroes as the commoner Kim Tông-nyông and the Buddhist monk Samyôngdang are interpreted as expressions of the non-elite's consciousness of themselves as the subjects (*chuch'e*) of the nation and its history.⁽¹³⁾

Anti-Japanese sentiments are implicit in the descriptions of Korean heroes and especially in Samyôngdang's humiliation of the Japanese king. Such feelings are also revealed in the mention of Japanese atrocities, such as the mutilation of corpses, the cutting off of Koreans' noses and ears, and the slaughter of women and children, events that are also recorded in the diary of the Japanese monk Keinen's *Chosen nichinichiki* (*Chosen hinikki*). This comes as no surprise, since it was the Japanese who invaded Chosôn.

What is more interesting in this regard is the expression of strong anti-Chinese sentiment. Court and yangban-centered histories depict Chosôn as a country with an enduring sense of gratitude and loyalty to Ming China for its help in repelling Hideyoshi's forces. By contrast, most versions of the *Imjin nok* display very different feelings towards the Chinese. Several versions decry the way in which the Ming forces mistreated Chosôn generals and soldiers and terrorized the Chosôn populace, looting villages and raping women.⁽¹⁴⁾ Another common feature in many versions is the depiction of how the Ming general Li Ju-sung, concerned that Chosôn had too many heroes and might pose a future threat to the Ming, traveled throughout Chosôn severing the vital energy (*ki/ch'i*) of the country's mountains and rivers. Li is stymied in different ways in different versions. In the *Hûngnyong nok* he is killed for his crimes by a mountain god;⁽¹⁵⁾ in other versions he is dissuaded by the mountain god appearing in the guise of an old man or a young boy, rues his behavior, saying that he could not harm Chosôn because it was his ancestral home, and returns to the Ming.⁽¹⁶⁾ These latter versions seem to reflect a sense of blood and territory as a component of popular Chosôn identity. If so, then popular memories of the Hideyoshi invasions not only featured a sense of antagonism to Japanese and Chinese, but also some sense of what Hobsbawm implies by negative ethnicity—that the people of Chosôn constituted a distinct social and political collectivity.

Another feature of the *Imjin nok* that suggests a sense of identity transcending the local level is the various locales in which battles and other events take place. Although events and their locales vary from version to version, nearly all the versions depict events unfolding on a country-wide stage, from Tongnae in the southeast, to Ch'ungju and Wonju in the center, and P'yôngyang and Ŭiju in the northeast. The *Hûngnyong nok* version, for example, depicts a Japanese

general commanding the forces that landed at Tongnae as giving his subordinates responsibility for attacking different regions of Chosôn. One was charged with attacking Wônju in Kangwôn Province before proceeding on the P'yôngan Province. Another was ordered to attack Chôlla Province and to transport provisions from Kimhae. Others were sent to attack Kyôngsang Province, Kyônggi Province, and Hwanghae Province.⁽¹⁷⁾ Numerous additional place names throughout the peninsula appear in the *Hûngnyong nok*, including such towns as Chinju, Ch'ungju, Chônju, Sakchu, and Ch'ôrôn, as well as mountains and rivers such as Mount Songni and the Yalu River. While this is hardly the same as sitting in one's home in Cherbourg and reading about events in Marseilles in the morning newspaper, nonetheless it indicates a certain popular awareness of other parts of Chosôn and how they were affected by the war. Whether this kind of awareness existed before, or even during the war is uncertain, but it seems probable that the popular memories reflected in, or perhaps constructed by, the *Imjin nok* suggest a sense of identity larger than village or even provincial locales.

On the other hand, however, we should note that many versions of the *Imjin nok* emphasize the heroic role of Kuan Yü (Kuan Yun-ch'ang), a general of the Three Kingdoms era who became canonized as the god of war in Chinese folk traditions. In these versions, Kuan Yü appears in a dream to warn the Chosôn king of the coming invasion, persuades the Ming emperor to send troops to Chosôn, and intervenes on several occasions to protect the Chosôn king and Chosôn generals.⁽¹⁸⁾ Although one contemporary scholar asserts that the appearance of Kuan Yü as protector of Chosôn indicates that the common people of late Chosôn had a nationalistic sense of themselves as a "chosen people,"⁽¹⁹⁾ it seems to me that the prominent role ascribed to Kuan Yü by the *Imjin nok* can also be seen as indicating that at some level popular Chinese traditions represented a kind of universal cultural order, that there are limits to the extent to which we can read notions of modern nationalistic popular consciousness back into the late Chosôn. Nonetheless, on the whole it seems that the various versions of the *Imjin nok* suggest that popular memories of the Hideyoshi invasions do reflect a sense among non-elites of a larger Chosôn identity imagined, at least in part, in contradistinction with Japan and China.

How, then, did this sense of negative ethnicity play out in relation to the state tradition represented by the Chosôn dynasty? On the one hand, we find the king, Sônjo, and his officials, such men as Yi Sun-sin, Yu Sông-nyong, or Kang Hong-nip, playing central roles in the story, suggesting a clear sense of the importance of the state in Chosôn society. Also, we find several instances where people stepped forth to offer their services, as in the case of Kim To-gyông (or Kim Ko-wôn in the *Hûngnyong nok* version) who, in the *Hûngnyong ilgi* version translated by Peter Lee, prostates himself before the king, who was in flight from the invaders, and says, "Your humble subject is Kim Togyông from P'yôngan Province. The Japanese bandits are powerful in the eight provinces, and I tried to rally a defense but had no soldiers or standards, nor any summons from your Majesty. I was on my way to the capital and I am lucky indeed to encounter your majesty on the road. How can I not be deeply grateful? It is owing to your vast virtue that I am here."⁽²⁰⁾ Such passages suggest not only loyalty to the king but perhaps also something not unlike modern patriotism.

On the other hand, many scholars have noted the negative ways in which the king and his officials are depicted in the *Imjin nok*. A case in point is the Kim To-gyông story, where the king and his officials are at a loss for what to do and turn to the seventeen year old commoner, who advises them to flee to Ŭiju in order to avoid the invaders.⁽²¹⁾ Many versions depict the king as weak and indecisive, as in his tearful dealings with the Ming general Li Ju-sung,⁽²²⁾ or short-sighted and foolish, as in his failure to heed Yi Yulgok's warnings about a coming Japanese invasion.⁽²³⁾ As for the officials, a well-known instance is the way in which jealous officials conspired against the hero Yi Sun-sin, putting their

own interests ahead of that of the country. The hero Kim Tông-nyông suffers the same fate, falling victim to the machinations of treacherous officials and executed by the king.⁽²⁴⁾ More direct hostility to the king and his officials are shown in other versions, where the fleeing king and his party are stoned by commoners and angry mobs loot and burn government offices and kill officials. These versions seem to have been based on actual events, as testified to by Yu Sông-nyong in his literary collection *Chingbirok*, where he describes rioting by clerks and commoners in P'yôngyang after the royal party, which had promised to defend the city to the death, decamps for Ŭiju.⁽²⁵⁾

These versions seem to reflect expectations that the king and his officials should provide the country protection against the invaders and animosity toward them when they fail to do so. This, in conjunction with the way in which commoner heroes arise in defense of the country and important roles played in rescuing Chosôn by the Kuan Yü and to some extent by Li Ju-sung, seems to indicate that many non-elites held a largely negative view of the state, which in turn suggests some limitations to the fusion of negative ethnicity and state tradition suggested by Hobsbawm.

IV Final Remarks

The popular memories of the Hideyoshi invasion presented in the *Imjin nok* undoubtedly date back, in their earliest moments, to the time of the invasion itself. Nonetheless, these stories also undoubtedly took different shape over the passage of time during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Given the sensitivity of narrators to changing historical circumstances, therefore, it is incumbent on us to consider when the surviving versions were produced. For that reason, I have avoided using late nineteenth and twentieth century versions and have relied instead on the earliest known versions which appear to date back to the mid-19th century.

The 19th century in Korea was a time of great popular unrest, beginning with the Hong Kyông-nae rebellion in P'yôngan Province of 1811-12. Hong's rebellion, in which large numbers of non-elites participated, was a localized affair with strong overtones of regional resentment against the state. The next round of major uprisings came in 1862, when peasants in over 70 counties in southern and central Korea arose in a kind of chain reaction protest against heavy taxation and official corruption. As I mentioned earlier, the leaders of the protests invariably proclaimed the rebels' loyalty to the king and looked to the court for redress. But at the same time it is important to note that the rebels attacked government offices, burned the granaries of the grain loan (*hwan'gok*) system that was a major source of their misery, and humiliated and expelled the magistrates. It was in this context of widespread peasant unhappiness that the oldest surviving versions of the *Imjin nok* were written down. Thus it seems possible, if not likely, that the expressions versions of contempt for the king's ability and for the corrupt and self-serving behavior of officials found in various versions of the *Imjin nok* may have been as reflective of mid-19th century attitudes as they were of the late 16th century.

Although I have reservations about the degree to which we can rely on the written versions of these oral narrative traditions, not to mention reservations about the extent to which we can ever really reconstruct peasant consciousness, it seems at least somewhat plausible that the memories transmitted by, and at the same time constructed by, the *Imjin nok* in the years prior to the opening of Korea in 1876 reflect some degree of awareness among the non-elites of Chosôn that they constituted a social and political collectivity distinct from those of their neighbors and some degree of awareness, albeit strongly negative, of the role the state played in their lives. The biggest problem for the modernizers and nationalist propagandists of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Korea may have been less one of creating a sense of shared identity among the inhabitants of the Korean Peninsula than one of convincing them that a modernized,

more intensive and powerful Korean state could be a good thing for them. I have not read widely in the writings of late nineteenth and early twentieth century nationalizing propagandists, but what I have read leaves me with the distinct impression that they were primarily concerned with convincing other yangban elites of the need for Westernizing reforms rather than with trying to win non-elites over to their cause.

Notes:

- (1) Guha, Ranajit, "The Prose of Counter-insurgency," and Spivak, Gayatri, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- (2) Rohrich, Lutz, *Folktales and Reality*. Peter Tokofsky, trans. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 178-183.
- (3) Rohrich, 186. See also Degh, Linda, *Folktales and Society*. Emily M. Schossberger, trans. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969).
- (4) Deuchler, Martina, "The Practice of Confucianism: Ritual and Order in Chosôn-dynasty Korea," paper presented at the conference on "Rethinking Confucianism in Asia at the End of the Twentieth Century," held at UCLA, May 27-June 1, 1999.
- (5) Haboush, JaHyun Kim, "Filial Emotions and Filial Piety: Changing Patterns in the Discourse of Filiality in Late Chosôn Korea," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 55 (1995).
- (6) Pak Chu, *Chosôn sidae úi chôngh'yo chôngch'aek* (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1990).
- (7) So Chae-yông, *Imbyông yangnan kwa munhak úisik* (Seoul: Han'guk yôn'guwôn, 1980) 63-64.
- (8) Kim Ki-hyôn, ed., *Imjin nok* (Seoul: Yegûrin ch'ulp'ansa, 1975) 173-77.
- (9) See, for example, Im Ch'or-ho, *Imjin nok yôn'gu* (Seoul: Chôngûmsa, 1986); So Chae-yông, *Imjin nok* (Seoul: Yôngsôlsa, 1977); Lee, Peter H., "The *Imjin nok*, or the *Record of the Black Dragon Year*: An Introduction, *Korean Studies* 14 (1990); and Lee, Peter H., trans., *The Record of the Black Dragon Year* (Seoul: Institute of Korean Culture, Korea University and Honolulu: Center for Korean Studies, University of Hawaii, 2000).
- (10) Lee, Peter H., *The Record of the Black Dragon Year*, 17.
- (11) *Hûngnyong nok* in Kim Ki-hyôn, ed., *Imjin nok*, 99-101.
- (12) *ibid*, 150-163.
- (13) Im Ch'or-ho, *Sôrhwa and minjung úi yôksa úisik* (Seoul: Chimmundang, 1989) 297-99.
- (14) Lee, Peter H., *The Record of the Black Dragon Year*, 204.
- (15) One version which depicts Li as being killed by a mountain god for his crimes can be found in Kim Ki-hyôn, ed., *Imjin nok*, 71-73.
- (16) *Ibid*, 27-28.
- (17) *Hûngnyong nok* 87-88.
- (18) See Lee, Peter H., *The Record of the Black Dragon Year*, 202-03 for a brief summary of motifs relating to Kuan Yü.
- (19) Im Ch'or-ho, *Imjin nok yôn'gu*, 392.
- (20) Lee Peter H., *The Record of the Black Dragon Year*, 67. Also *Hûngnyong nok*, 102-03.
- (21) *ibid.*, p68.
- (22) Im Ch'or-ho, *Imjin nok yôn'gu*, 144-46, 230-31.
- (23) Im Ch'or-ho, *Sôrhwa wa minjung úi yôksa úisik*, 49.
- (24) *Hûngnyong nok*, 132-35. See also Lee, Peter H., *The Record of the Black Dragon Year*, 23-24, 92-93.
- (25) Im Ch'or-ho, *Imjin nok yôn'gu*, 108-109.