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

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

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

Introduction
The fact that the countries of the Korean peninsula have been at the forefront of the international news scene for the past few years should not surprise any student of Korea’s past. Intermittently throughout its long recorded history Korea, or, more properly, various polities located in what is now the Korean peninsula, have been caught up in power struggles involving militarily more powerful neighbors. As early as the fourth century BCE, the ancient state of Old Chosön was invaded by the Chinese kingdom of Yan, which sparked the formation of a successor kingdom, Wiman Chosön, which bore many of the hallmarks of more advanced Chinese civilization to the west. This state in turn was invaded and crushed by Han(202 BCE-220 CE) China in 109 BCE. The Chinese then established a number of commanderies that functioned as proto-colonies in the Korean peninsula. States in the Korean peninsula would be attacked again by China under the Sui(589-618) and Tang(618-907) dynasties, though it should be noted that the latter was in fact allied with the Korean kingdom of Silla. These later actions also involved Japanese interests on the peninsula, although neither the exact nature of the Japanese presence nor the precise interests of the Japanese Yamato state on the peninsula have
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Thus far been accorded to other dimensions of the conflict, most notably the sieges that characterized most of the fighting during Hideyoshi's truncated second invasion. For while they easily overran Korea's defenses in the spring and summer of 1592, the Japanese invaders were much less successful in their second attempt to conquer Korea due to vigorous allied resistance by the Chinese and Koreans that managed to check the Japanese advance and force them to retreat to an extended defense line that stretched from the vicinity of Ulsan on the east coast down to Sunchon on the south coast. Even though the allies were seldom able to dislodge or completely defeat the Japanese defenders, they managed to effect a military victory by virtue of preventing the Japanese from launching any significant offensives and wearing them down through process of attrition. In the end, upon the advice of his top generals in Korea, Hideyoshi ordered a withdrawal of Japanese forces, which was already well underway by the time of the taeho's death in September of 1598. This article shall examine various accounts of some of the sieges of the second Japanese invasion of Korea and discuss their tactical and strategic significance. It will also suggest bases for comparison between these sieges and their early modern European counterparts.

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

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

1 This survey of early Korean history is based on the account given in Lee Kee-ik, 1994:16-21.

2 For a recent examination of the war between the Sui and Tang Chinese, see the Yamato Japanese, and the Three Kingdoms of Korea, see Batten, 2006:18-31.


4 Two works have recently appeared, but neither is really an academic study based on primary source materials. See Hawley, 2003; Turnbull, 2002.