*Haengju Mountain Fortress*

*on the “River of Hell”*

Samuel Hawley

As you approach Seoul by bus from Incheon International Airport, you pass a bluff overlooking the Han River, where the orange-painted Banghwa Bridge gracefully curves to meet the north bank. If you look up to your right you can just catch a glimpse of a gray stone cenotaph rising through the vegetation at the top of the hill. It is a monument to a battle that was fought here four centuries ago, in the second year of the Imjin War, Japanese dictator Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s invasion of Korea, 1592-98. It was an epic struggle for survival that is remembered by every Korean today: The Battle for *Haengjusansong,* Haengju Mountain Fortress. To understand what took place on this spot is to better understand how Koreans think, and what motivates “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il and his maddeningly recalcitrant compatriots to the North.

It was a Sunday afternoon the last time I visited the place on the local bus, Number 921. I was the only passenger to step down into the dust along the side of the highway, the only one to trudge past the colorful restaurant signs advertising stewed dog and up the twisting road to the top of the hill. Was I, a foreigner, more interested in this place than the Koreans? No, the crowds were there. They just don’t arrive by public bus any more. In these days of affluence they come in luxury tour coaches and shiny new cars.

Inside the front entrance the children was already cutting up badly, racing about and shrieking and rolling on the grass. “Little Emperors,” they’d be called in China. After four years writing a history of the Imjin War, battle sites such like this fill me with reverence and emotion. Can’t those parents keep their kids in check? Can’t they teach them to show a little respect? But then I come upon a granite marker bearing an account of the battle, and a father guiding his daughter through a reading of it, running a stick like a pointer down the vertical lines. The text is dense. The girl solemnly drones for four minutes. She reads the whole thing.

It began in the year known in Korea as *Imjin*, “water-dragon,” 1592 in the West. On the twenty-third of May a 158,800-man invasion army departed from the Japanese island of Tsushima to land at Pusan Hideyoshi’s objective: to conquer Korea, then China, and then the whole of Asia. During the first few months of the invasion the Japanese moved up the peninsula with such ferocity and speed that it seemed increasingly likely that they would soon arrive at Beijing. Then, after taking Pyongyang, their advance ground to a halt. It was stopped in part thanks to the Korean navy under Yi Sun-sin, which was preventing Japanese ships from ferrying supplies north to the front via the Yellow Sea. Local resistance was building up inland as well, from bands of civilian volunteers known as *uibyong*, “Righteous Armies,” and from units of monk-soldiers responding to a call to arms from the venerated Buddhist master Hyujong. These irregular Korean forces would combine with government troops and a 35,000-man army from China to drive the Japanese out of Pyongyang in February, 1593.

March. The Japanese were resting comfortably for the moment in Seoul. They had halted the advancing Chinese on February 27 in the Battle of Pyokje just north of the city, inflicting such heavy casualties that Chinese supreme commander Li Rusong lost all desire to fight. There still remained a knot of resistance near the capital, however, that they wished to erase: 2,300 Korean troops under Cholla Province army commander Kwon Yul, holed up at Haengju a few hours’ march to the west, in a earth and wood fortress on a bluff overlooking the Han River.

Kwon Yul was a fifty-five-year-old civil servant from a family of note in Andong in the southeastern province of Kyongsang. Upon the outbreak of Imjin War in May of 1592, Kwon, then magistrate of Kwangju in the south of Cholla-do, led a body of troops north in a failed attempt to halt the Japanese advance before it reached Seoul. He then returned south and participated in the defense of Cholla Province, which the sixth contingent of the Japanese army under Kobayakawa Takakage was threatening to overrun. Kwon distinguished himself by defeating Japanese units in two engagements, the Battles of Ungchi and Ichi, in the second week of August. Recognizing his ability, the government appointed him Army Commander of Cholla Province in the following month.

By this time Kwon had come to the conclusion that the Japanese were too skilled in warfare to be defeated on open ground, and that the Koreans should therefore fall back on their traditional strength of fighting from behind walls.[[1]](#footnote-1) He would make his first attempt at this in October of 1592 from a base at Tok-san, a mountain redoubt two day’s march south of the capital, overlooking the main road between Pusan and Seoul. From an ancient Paekche dynasty fortress that they strengthened and enlarged, Kwon and his men attacked enemy foraging parties and small units passing along the road, and generally proved troublesome enough that the Japanese high command in Seoul sent a company south to besiege the fortress. The effort, we are told, was soon abandoned. According to one report, Kwon fooled the Japanese into giving up and returning to Seoul by having a horse rubbed down with rice grains until its coat sparkled in the sun. To the Japanese watching from the distance it appeared that the animal had just been washed, a sign that the Koreans had ample stores of water to withstand a lengthy siege.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Early in 1593 Kwon Yul led his men further north in preparation for the anticipated attack on Seoul by allied Chinese and Korean forces. Proceeding by a back route to the north bank of the Han River, he had a rough stockade constructed from earth and logs on the site of an ancient fortress on a hill outside the village of Haengju, some ten kilometers to the west of the capital. It was a highly defensible position, protected at its rear by a steep drop-off down to the Han. If an attack came, it would have to be made uphill and from the north, straight into the Koreans’ concentrated fire.

With the retreat of the Ming army, Kwon Yul’s fortress at Haengju emerged as the greatest immediate threat to the Japanese in Seoul. On March 14 they decided to do something about it. Some hours before dawn, the west gate of the city was opened and a long line of troops filed out and turned towards Haengju, marching along the north bank of the Han to the accompaniment of drums and horns and gongs. The daimyo on horseback in the lead constituted an all-star cast from the Korean campaign. There was Konishi Yukinaga, leader of the first contingent that had spearheaded the Japanese invasion in May of the previous year, recently back in Seoul after the retreat from Pyongyang. There was third contingent leader Kuroda Nagamasa, and Kobayakawa Takakage, hero of the Battle of Pyokje. There was Hideyoshi’s adopted son Ukita Hideie, the 20-year-old supreme commander of all Japanese forces in Korea, and the veteran Ishida Mitsunari, one of the overseers sent from Japan to help him out. Accompanying them were more than half the troops garrisoning Seoul, a total of 30,000 men.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Inside Haengju fortress, Kwon Yul’s 2,300 government troops had been joined by contingents of monk-soldiers, civilian volunteers, and women from the surrounding countryside, bringing the number of defenders to something approaching 10,000. They watched the noisy approach of the enemy multitude with growing trepidation. When the Japanese arrived at the base of their hill in the soft light of dawn, the Koreans observed that each soldier had a red-and-white banner affixed to his back, and that many wore masks carved with fierce depictions of animals and monsters and ghosts. Panic was now hovering just beneath the surface, held in check by the calm authority of commander Kwon Yul. As the Japanese busied themselves below with their pre-battle preparations, he ordered his men to have a meal. There would be no telling when they would have a chance to eat again.

The battle commenced soon after the sun came up. The Japanese, so numerous that they could not all rush at the ramparts at once, divided into groups and prepared to take turns in the assault. Their strength must have seemed overwhelming to the Koreans. For once, however, the muskets of the Japanese were of only limited use, for in having to fire uphill they were unable to effectively target the defenders holed up within. Their lead balls simply flew in an arc over the fort and into the Han River beyond. The advantage was with the Koreans, firing down upon the attacking Japanese with arrows and stones and anything else that came to hand. They had a number of gunpowder weapons as well, including several large *chongtong* (“generalissimo”) cannons and a rank of *hwacha* (“fire carts”), box-shaped devices built onto wagons that fired up to one hundred gunpowder-propelled arrows in a single devastating barrage. Alongside these more traditional weapons was an oddity that employed a spinning wheel mechanism to hurl a fusillade of stones. It was called the *sucha sokpo*, the “water-wheel rock cannon.”

Konishi Yukinaga’s group led off the Japanese attack. Kwon Yul waited until they were within range, then beat his commander’s drum three times to signal the attack. Every Korean weapon was fired at once, bows, *chongtong*, *hwacha*, and rock cannons, raking Konishi’s ranks and driving his men back. Ishida Mitsunari was the next to the attack. His force too was driven back, and Ishida himself was injured. Next up was Kuroda Nagamasa, the Christian commander of the third contingent, otherwise known by his baptismal name Damien. He had been burned once before by Koreans fighting behind walls, at the Battle of Yonan the previous year. This time he took a more cautious approach, positioning musketeers atop makeshift towers so that they could fire into the fortress while the rest of his force held back. A fierce exchange of fire ensued, then Kuroda’s men too were forced to retreat.

The Japanese had now attacked Haengju three times, and had failed even to penetrate the fortress’s outer palisade of stakes. Young Ukita Hideie, determined to make a breakthrough in his, the fourth charge, managed to smash a hole in the obstacle and got near the inner wall. Then he was wounded and had to fall back, leaving a trail of casualties behind. The next unit to attack, Kikkawa Hiroie’s, poured through the gap Ukita’s forces had opened, and was soon attacking Haengju’s inner wall, the last line of defense between the Japanese and Kwon Yul’s troops. The fighting now went hand-to-hand, with masked warriors attempting to slash their way past the defenders lining the barricades, while the Koreans fought back with everything they had – swords, spears, arrows, stones, boiling water; even handfuls of ashes thrown into the attackers’ eyes. As the fighting reached its peak no sound came from Kwon Yul’s battle drum. The Korean commander had abandoned drumstick and tradition in favor of his sword, and was now fighting alongside his men. At one point the Japanese heaped dried grass along the base of Haengju’s log walls and tried to set the place ablaze. The Koreans doused the flames with water before they could take hold. In the seventh attack led by Kobayakawa Takakage, the Japanese knocked down some of the log pilings and opened a hole in the fortress’s inner wall. The Koreans managed to hold them back long enough for the logs to be repositioned.

As the afternoon wore on the Korean defenders grew exhausted, and their supply of arrows dwindled dangerously low. The women within the fort are said to have gathered stones in their wide skirts to hurl at the attacking Japanese. This traditional type of skirt is still known as a *Haengju chima*, “Haengju skirt,” in remembrance of this day. But stones alone were not enough to repel the enemy for long. Then, when all seemed lost, Korean naval commander Yi Bun arrived on the Han River at the rear of the fortress with two ships laden with ten thousand arrows. With these the defenders of Haengju were able to continue the fight until sundown, successfully repelling an eighth attack, then a ninth.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Finally, as the sun dipped below the horizon out beyond the Yellow Sea, the fighting petered out and did not begin again. The Japanese had suffered too many casualties to continue. Their dead numbered into the many hundreds, and their wounded – including three important commanders, Ukita Hideie, Ishida Mitsunari, and Kikkawa Hiroie – were many times more. They had in fact been dealt a terrible defeat, the most serious loss on land so far in the war at the hands of the Koreans. Throughout the evening the survivors gathered up what bodies they could, heaped them into piles, and set them alight. Then they turned around and walked slowly back to Seoul. One Japanese officer in the disheartened assembly would later liken the scene beside the Han River that day to the *sanzu no kawa*, the “River of Hell.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

When they were gone, Kwon Yul and his men came out and recovered those bodies that the Japanese had been unable to retrieve. They cut them into pieces and hung them from the log palings of their fort. These grisly trophies were an indication of how much had changed for the Koreans since the beginning of the war; of how ten months *in extremis* had transformed them from indecisive scholars Toyotomi Hideyoshi had derided as “long sleeves,” into bloodthirsty warriors, bent on revenge.

With a large Chinese army encamped thirty kilometers to the north, and with the Koreans displaying an increasingly grim determination to fight back, the Japanese knew their only reasonable option was to abandon Seoul and fall back to the south. After a series of negotiations with Chinese supreme commander Li Rusong, they evacuated the capital on May 19, 1593.

The Battle of Haengju is remembered today as one of the three “great victories” (*daechop*), won by Koreans in the Imjin War. (The other two are the Battle of Hansan-do of July 1592, in which Yi Sun-sin and his navy destroyed more than 70 Japanese ships, and the First Battle of Chinju later that year in November, in which the Koreans under Kim si-min repelled an attack by a vastly larger Japanese force.) The site of the battle, once a blasted knoll, has been reclaimed by nature over the years, and is now a peaceful, forested national shrine. The remains of the earth wall still can be easily discerned. The wooden palings that stood on top of it, of course, are long gone. Gazing west towards the center of Seoul from the top of the hill, one can imagine what it might have been like to have stood here four centuries ago, watching 30,000 Japanese warriors march out from the city and prepare to do battle. One can imagine the fear that the Korean soldiers, the civilian volunteers, the monk-soldiers and women all must have felt. And in imagining that fear one may get a glimpse - just a glimpse - of the determination that kept them standing firm at the walls, resisting the repeated attacks of a much larger and stronger and better-armed force, beating it back until it eventually gave up.

Back at the entrance families are having their pictures taken in front of the statue of Kwon Yul, many clutching baskets for a lunch under the trees. More kids have arrived in cars and buses and are racing wildly about. I’m feeling annoyed now that I felt annoyed. Everyone seems to be smiling and happy. The meaning to the battle does not seem to weigh heavily upon them. But it is there, somewhere deep inside. The seven-year-long Imjin War, in which the Battle of *Haengjusansong* was just one of many do-or-die struggles, resulted in an estimated two million Korean deaths and a twenty percent decline in the nation’s population.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is in part what makes the Koreans the people they are today: fiercely proud, polite and friendly, but tough and aggressive when confronted with a threat.

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1. Yu Song-nyong, *Chingbirok* (Seoul: Myongmundang, 1987) p. 170. (Yu was Prime Minister of Korea during the Imjin War. He wrote *Chingbirok* c. 1604-07.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hanguk chongsin munhwa yonguwon, *Hanguk-in muldae sajon* (Seoul: Chungang ilbo, 1999), vol. 1, p. 160; Wilbur D. Bacon, “Fortresses of Kyonggi-do,” *Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 37 (April 1961), p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Yi Hyong-sok, *Imjin chollan-sa* (Seoul: Imjin chollan-sa kanhaeng hoe, 1967), vol. 1, p. 697. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Sonjo sujong sillok* (Annals of King Sonjo, Revised), 2nd month/Sonjo 26 (March 1593); Sin Kyong, “Chaejo bonbangji,” in Yi Nae-ok et. al., eds., *Saryoro bonun imjin waeran* (Seoul: Hyean, 1999), pp. 170-171; Kang Song-mun, “Haengju daechop-eso-ui Kwon Yul chonnyak-gwa chonsul,” in Chang Chong-dok and Pak Jae-gwang, eds., *Imjin waeran-gwa Kwon Yul changgun* (Seoul: Chonjaeng kinyomgwan, 1999), pp. 110-113. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. George Sansom, *A History of Japan, 1334-1615* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1961), p. 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tony Michell, “Fact and Hypothesis in Yi Dynasty Economic History: The Demographic Dimension,” *Korean Studies Forum*, no. 6 (Winter-Spring 1979/1980), pp. 77-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)