

A Brief Study of Yi Sun-Shin

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Who is Yi Sun-Shin?

Yi Sun-Shin is the most revered general and admiral in Korean history. During his illustrious career in Korea's 16th century Chosun Dynasty, he saved Korea by successfully defending it against Japanese invasion during the 7-year long Imjin War. His heroic acts and sacrifices on behalf of his country earned him a posthumous title of nobility. Thus, he is also called Choongmu-gong Yi Sun-Shin.



Why is Yi Sun-Shin so respected and famous?

Yi Sun-Shin's dedication to his nation was unparalleled. He showed this dedication most obviously by committing his life to defend Korea against the Japanese. While he is best known for his amazing military victories, a study of his life and character as evidenced by his actions throughout his life, clearly shows many qualities about Yi Sun-Shin that are admirable and exemplary. His achievements and admirable qualities for which he is respected and famous are as follows:

1. Military Achievements:

As a Tongjesa, the Supreme Commander of the Navy for the 3 Provinces, Yi Sun-Shin saved the nation by successfully defending it in all of the 23 sea battles against Japanese invaders during the protracted Imjin War.

2. Strength of Character to Overcome Great Obstacles:

Yi Sun-Shin's amazing military victories against all odds are even more impressive because he achieved those feats without the support of his country. In other words, because his government would not provide such support, Yi Sun-Shin himself had to figure out how to meet all of his military needs, such as providing rations for his soldiers, obtaining sufficient weapons, building war ships,

outfitting his soldiers with uniforms and recruiting sailors and oarsmen. In human history, no other commander in battle has had to assume such extraordinary burdens in preparation for war. And, although he could very easily have given up and admitted defeat with the circumstances that he was dealt, Yi Sun-Shin's great drive and determination led him to persevere and overcome his obstacles to achieve his military objectives. Moreover, his great strength of character allowed Yi Sun-Shin to assume all of these burdens and fight the Japanese successfully throughout the entire length of the 7-year long Imjin War.

3. Ingenuity and Creativity:

As can be seen by his ability to overcome many difficulties on the battlefield, Yi Sun-Shin was an ingenious and creative thinker. How else could he have built and maintained a military force without the support of his own government? Further, his amazing military victories against all odds in every single one of the 23 encounters with the Japanese during the Imjin War also speak to the ingenuity and creativity of his solutions to military problems and his design of military campaigns. The greatest example of Yi Sun-Shin's brilliance is his creation of the world's first iron-clad Gobuksun, a turtle-shaped war boat. This war boat proved to be a formidable and invincible power over the enemy ships.

4. Exemplary Pursuit of Perfection of Character:

Not merely a great and ingenious military strategist, Yi Sun-Shin was also a deep, philosophic thinker. Throughout his life, he worked hard and strove to be a good person, acting and reacting appropriately in his interactions with others. And, as in all things that he sought to achieve, he succeeded splendidly! Through his life, Yi Sun-Shin demonstrates the creation and development of a flawless character unrivaled by any other person in human history.

So, now let's take a look at his life, from his birth to his death in battle, to see all of the wonderful examples of his brilliant achievements and characteristics that we have discussed above....

Yi Sun-Shin's Background

On March 8, 1545 (April 28 in the solar calendar), the 1st year of King Injong's reign, Yi Sun-Shin was born into the Duksu Yi clan, a fairly poor middle-class family. Yi Sun-Shin was born the third son. Despite their fairly poor and non-aristocratic status, Yi Sun-Shin was born into a well-educated family clan that emphasized and valued learning and philosophic thought processes.

Yi Sun-Shin's forefathers had enjoyed some favor from the government and had served in fairly high-ranking official positions, such as the Head of the National Scholastic Institute and a high-ranking Prosecutor position in the highest court of the land. Yi Sun-Shin's grandfather, however, became a member of the reformist faction headed by statesman Jo Kwang-Jo, which was heavily repressed by the ruler at that time, King Myungjong. Because of this connection, that grandfather's line of the Duksu Yi clan fell out of favor of the government and Yi Sun-Shin's father, Yi Jung, could not obtain any favorable official position within the government. Thus, his family suffered in poverty.

Yi Sun-Shin's Early Years



To ease the difficulties and expenses of living in the capital, Yi Sun-Shin and his family moved down to Ahsan, his mother's hometown. Yi Sun-Shin was only a teenager at the time.

Yi Sun-Shin was a very active child with outstanding intelligence. Early on in his life he developed an affinity for military maneuvering and he enjoyed playing war games. Even in play, he always took a commanding role.

At the age of 21, Yi Sun-Shin married Miss Bang, who was the only daughter of Bang Jin, a renowned master archer who used to be a local governor. The following year, Yi Sun-Shin began his own military training, learning such things as horseback riding and archery.

Yi Sun-Shin and the Kwago National Military Exam

At the age of 28, in order to become a military officer, Yi Sun-Shin applied to take the Kwago National Military Exam, the highest military exam in the country. He failed the exam when he fell off of his horse while being tested for his ability to shoot arrows while riding on horseback. Even though he broke his leg when he fell off of his horse, Yi Sun-Shin himself got up on one leg, gathered some willow tree branches from nearby and tied up his own broken leg.

Yi Sun-Shin took the exam once again at the age of 32. He passed.



Yi Sun-Shin's Public Service and Frustrations



Later that same year, after he passed the Kwago National Military Exam, Yi Sun-Shin began serving as a defense officer at Dongkubibo Fortress, along the northern border. At that time, the main threat and opposition was posed by the barbarian tribe of Yeojin to the north in Chinese Manchuria that would cross the river and attack Chosun towns nearby.

Yi Sun-Shin worked hard and defeated many barbarian attacks. But instead of being praised and rewarded for his dedication and success, Yi Sun-Shin, adversely, was demoted and punished to Baekuijongkun by his jealous commander, Yi Il. This demotion was quite a severe punishment as it meant that Yi Sun-Shin had to serve with no rank in plain white clothing alongside common soldiers.

The following year, finally, Yi Sun-Shin was released from this punishment in recognition for his dedicated contribution in crushing Yeojin's stronghold village of Shijon. But despite his military successes, Yi Sun-Shin repeatedly suffered many discharges and objections to his promotions. This was because of his uncompromising integrity and honesty that often put him in conflict with his direct supervising officers, who were corrupt and sought to benefit personally from their positions. For example, Yi Sun-Shin refused to show favoritism to his supervising officers' friends by promoting them ahead of those who deserved it or allow his supervising officers to make personal use of government property and assets. This type of steadfast integrity made Yi Sun-Shin very unpopular with his corrupt supervising officers.

Inauguration as Cholla Juasusa

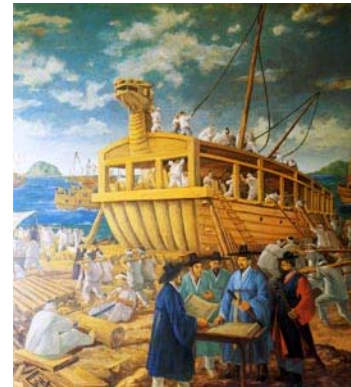


After many fluctuations and frustrations in his career, Yi Sun-Shin was promoted to the position of Cholla Juasusa, the Regional Commanding Admiral of Chosun's Southwestern Sea by the strong recommendation of Vice Premier Yoo Sung-Ryong, who was a childhood friend. Yi Sun-Shin was 45 years old.

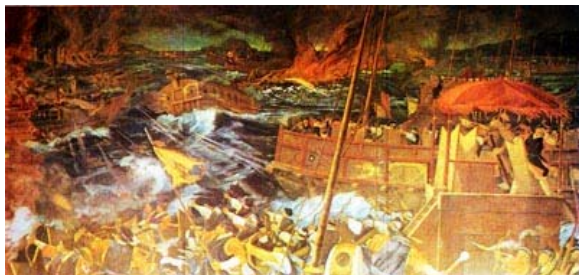
Immediately after this appointment, believing that war with Japan was imminent, Yi Sun-Shin rushed to prepare for battle. He checked

and repaired all existing defense facilities and weapons. He stocked rations and supplies. He had new ships built. And, he had his navy train extra hard. It was at this time, too, that he invented the world's first revolutionary iron-clad turtle ship called Gobuksun.

Yi Sun-Shin did all of this on his own initiative as everyone else refused to believe that war with Japan was imminent. Thus, while Yi Sun-Shin worked frantically to prepare for war, everyone else chose to indulge in the easy life and do nothing.



The Imjin War and Yi Sun-Shin's Sweeping Victories



On April 13, 1592, in the Imjin Year, approximately one year after Yi Sun-Sin's inauguration as the Cholla Juasusa, the Japanese invaded the Chosun port of Pusan with an army of 160,000 men, by order of their ruler, Toyotomi Hideyoshi. The Japanese were well-equipped with the new and fearsome Western firearm called 'Jochong,' which was an older version of the modern-day rifle.

Finding the enemy power overwhelming, two commanding admirals of the Kyungsang Province, one of them a man named Won Kyun who would later become one of Yi Sun-Shin's most jealous rivals, gave up the fight and fled from battle. This left the enormous burden of defending the country's southern sea to Yi Sun-Shin.

On May 4, 1592, Yi Sun-Shin and his fleet sailed out eastward to meet the Japanese ships in battle for the first time. Three days later, using 24 cannon-laden flat bottom warships called Panoksun, Yi Sun-Shin accomplished his first unilateral victory over the Japanese navy.

In June of that same year, Yi Sun-Shin had his second confrontation with the Japanese navy. This confrontation took place at Dangpo and Sachon. It was at this time that Yi Sun-Shin used his newly-developed Gobuksun turtle ship for the first time. The Gobuksun proved to be a destructive power against the enemy ships. And, the Japanese, taken aback by the use of this new, unexpected and seemingly invincible

ship, did not know how to react and fight against the Gobuksun. Thus, the new Gobuksun helped annihilate the enemy while sustaining barely any damage to itself.

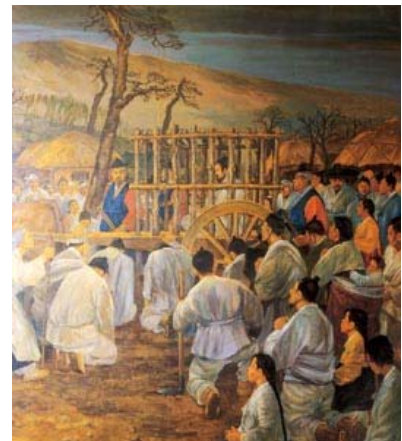
In July of that year, Yi Sun-Shin and the Japanese clashed for a third time at Hansan Sea. Here, Yi Sun-Shin accomplished a grand victory over the Japanese by using the Hakikjin maneuver, or crane wing-shaped encircling attacks. Although Yi Sun-Shin and his forces lost no ships and only 19 lives, they thoroughly vanquished the Japanese by destroying 59 of their ships and killing almost 9000!

With this absolute victory at Hansan Sea, Yi Sun-Shin secured complete control of the southern sea, thus frustrating Japan's intent to open a sea route to the western sea near Hansung, which today is the city of Seoul. Further, after this battle at Hansan Sea, even though Yi Sun-Shin was eager to meet the enemy to finalize the victory, he would have to wait more than 3 years for their next confrontation as the Japanese ruler, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, ordered his navy not to fight Yi Sun-Shin anymore.

Not surprisingly, on August 15, 1592, shortly after the Battle at Hansan Sea, Yi Sun-Shin was promoted to the rank of Tongjesa, the Supreme Commander of the Navy for the 3 Provinces.

Yi Sun-Shin's Arrest and Baekuijongkun

Fooled by Japanese spies who falsely informed him that the brutal Japanese general, Kato Kiyomasa, would be traveling from the Japanese island of Tsushima to the port of Pusan, which was an enemy stronghold in Chosun, King Sunjo ordered Yi Sun-Shin to proceed to the open sea just outside of Pusan port to try to capture the famous enemy general. Yi Sun-Shin refused to do this as he knew that the king's order was based on false information and lies. King Sunjo became angry with Yi Sun-Shin and had him arrested and brought to Hansung, modern-day Seoul. There, Yi Sun-Shin was tortured and would have been sentenced to death for his insubordination.



Many people, however, made appeals to the king on Yi Sun-Shin's behalf, insisting on his innocence and emphasizing his prominent role in the battles with the Japanese. Due to these appeals, King Sunjo pardoned Yi Sun-Shin from the death sentence and in its stead punished him with Baekuijongkun, which Yi Sun-Shin suffered for the second time in his life.

Now as a lowly common soldier with no rank, Yi Sun-Shin traveled to the southern sea to join Kwon Yul, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief. On his way there, sadly Yi Sun-Shin learned that his mother had died on a sailboat headed for Ahsan. Such was the

nature of their loving relationship that, overjoyed at the news of his release from prison, his 83-year old mother had braved the toils of travel by sea to meet her beloved son at their hometown of Ahsan; but, unfortunately, she was unable to withstand the rigors of the travel and died en route. Upon learning of her death, Yi Sun-Shin collapsed into extreme sorrow and despair.

The Total Destruction of the Chosun Navy

After Yi Sun-Shin's arrest and demotion, Won Kyun, still a high-ranking commanding military officer despite his cowardly flight from battle at the start of the Imjin War, replaced Yi Sun-Shin as the commanding admiral of the navy. Perhaps because Yi Sun-Shin's courage and victory in defending Chosun against the Japanese at the start of the Imjin War seemed to highlight Won Kyun's own shameful cowardice in fleeing from battle, Won Kyun forever after had set himself up as Yi Sun-Shin's rival and had jealously slandered Yi Sun-Shin's reputation far and wide. And, it was this person whom King Sunjo chose to replace Yi Sun-Shin.

On July 15, 1597, following King Sunjo's original orders which Yi Sun-Shin had refused to follow, Won Kyun took the entire Chosun navy fleet and sailed out to the sea just off of the port of Pusan. As Yi Sun-Shin had suspected, however, the Japanese had prepared a well organized attack and were lying in wait for the Chosun navy. The result was total devastation for the Chosun navy—the entire navy fleet was wiped out and Won Kyun himself was killed in battle. In this way, the Chosun navy, which Yi Sun-Shin had built and for five years had personally fostered with undying devotion, vanished.

Yi Sun-Shin's Victory at Myungryang Strait



After this devastating loss to the Japanese, King Sunjo hastily appointed Yi Sun-Shin back to his position as Tongjesa, Supreme Commander of the Navy for the 3 Provinces, and ordered him to rebuild the Chosun navy. There was no time to waste as the Japanese had already started moving west to sail up to the capital city of Hansung.

Yi Sun-Shin quickly rounded up 13 Panoksun flat-bottom warships and recruited sailors and fighters. After the annihilation of the Chosun Navy at Pusan, he had to forge a new navy capable of fighting off the impending Japanese attack.

On September 16, with his meager fleet of 13 Panoksun warships, Yi Sun-Shin blocked the Myungryang Strait and sought to fend off the Japanese advancement toward

Hansung. It was his 13 warships against the enemy's 133 ships and the fighting was fierce. In the end, the death toll for Yi Sun-Shin and his forces stood only at 2, with no ships lost. The death toll for the enemy stood at approximately 4000, with 31 of their ships destroyed. And with this miraculous victory, Yi Sun-Shin again frustrated Japan's efforts to open a route to Hansung and regained control of the southern sea for his country.

The Final Battle of the Imjin War at Noryang Strait

In the cold dead of night on November 19, 1598, Yi Sun-Shin joined forces with Admiral Jin Ihn of Ming China to attack the Japanese fleet of 500 ships that was en route to the Chosun town of Soonchon. The Japanese fleet planned to unite with their Japanese comrade, Konishi Yukinaga, who had established a Japanese stronghold at Soonchon. Separated and isolated from the main Japanese fleet, Konishi Yukinaga's forces sought to meet up with the main Japanese fleet to return together to Japan as their ruler, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, had died suddenly.



On that night, Yi Sun-Shin and Ming China's combined forces of about 145 warships executed a surprise attack against Japan's fleet of 500 ships. The fighting was fierce. Towards the end, after destroying about 200 enemy ships, Yi Sun-Shin was shot in the chest under his left arm. Concerned about his soldiers' morale, Yi Sun-Shin told his son and his nephew, "Cover my body with shields. The battle is in full swing. Do not reveal my death." Soon after uttering those words, Yi Sun-Shin died.

The Battle at Noryang Strait, like many of Yi Sun-Shin's victories, was a spectacular, against-the-odds routing of the enemy. Of the 500 enemy ships, only 50 managed to escape destruction and survive the battle. This decisive victory ended the 7-year long Imjin War.

Despite this resounding victory, with Yi Sun-Shin's death, there was much cause for sorrow. The sea cried. The sky cried. And, all of the people of Chosun cried upon learning of the death of this great man and invincible hero. But greatness like Yi Sun-Shin's does not perish even as the body and breath of life may expire; and, he leaves his enduring mark upon history and our lives as a perfect example of what a man should be to his family, his community and his country.