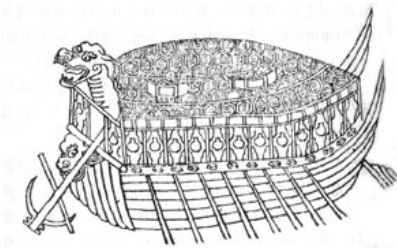


# Turtle Ship, Gobuksun

Lee Nae Won  
Seoul National University, College of Education

Lee Anna  
MIT, B.S.  
London School of Economics, M.Sc.  
MIT Admissions Interviewer  
Computer Systems Manager

Gobuksun is the world's first unconventional iron-clad wooden war ship invented by the military genius Admiral Yi Sun-Shin of the Chosun Dynasty in 16<sup>th</sup> century Korea. Yi Sun-Shin used these Gobuksun war ships in his naval battles against the Japanese invaders during the 7-year Imjin War and proved the ships' unrivaled destructive capabilities through decisive and undefeated victories over the enemy fleet.

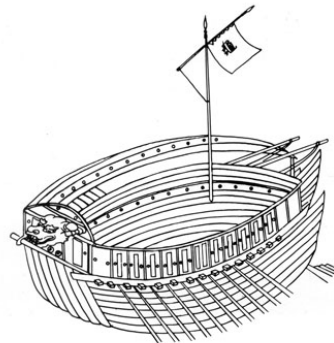


**Juasuyoung Gobuksun**

Gobuksun's outer shell structure is the same as a flat-bottom Panoksun war ship, but it is additionally covered with a turtle shell-shaped dome heavily studded with sharp spear tips facing outward. This design is intended to deter enemy landings and fire attacks, which was a common method of destroying ships at the time. Each Gobuksun is armed with approximately 15 cannons on wooden carts; there is an opening in the armor for each cannon to shoot from. There are six cannons each on the port and starboard

sides, two on the shoulder walls, and one on the stern.

The Gobuksun is propelled by oars; each ship has eight large oars on either side and each oar is pulled by a team of five sailors: four oarsmen and one leader. When the ship is not engaged in battle, only two oarsmen are needed to row each oar. However, when the ship is under battle maneuvers, the entire team of five oarsmen works together for maximum power and agility. The Gobuksun needed roughly 90 oarsmen in total for optimal operations. Additionally, the Gobuksun can have two masts on its back for sails. One sail is for the forward wind and the other sail is for the parallel, or adverse, wind.



**Tongjeyoung Gobuksun**



**Actual size reproduction  
By Korea Naval Academy**

The Gobeuksun has two decks, a bottom deck and an upper deck. The section under the upper deck houses the oarsmen safely from enemy fire and arrows. In the chamber on the upper deck, a crew of approximately 50 sailors works under the protection of the turtle shell-shaped dome, including the captain, his aides, cannon crews, and archers. The crew use openings in the armored dome for the cannons, and slats designed as lookouts; the sailors can look out the slats but outsiders cannot look in. Thus, the Japanese called this new, fearsome Gobeuksun as the “Blind Ship”. The Japanese were unable to devise a way to

successfully battle this innovative war ship; Japan’s main artillery – the Jochong – was useless against the Gobeuksun’s thick wooden walls or the iron-clad dome.

To enhance the fearsome impression of the Gobeuksun, Yi Sun-Shin mounted a large dragon head on the bow of the ship in lieu of a standard ship bow. The dragon head has a large open mouth, which billows a concealing smoke to impair the enemy’s visibility.

It is known that there are two prevailing variations of the Gobeuksun, as can be seen in *The Book of Choongmu-gong Collections*. The first, more popular model, called the “Juasuyoung” model, has the dragon head stretched up like a fearsome monster. The other model, the “Tongjeyoung” model, has a much smaller dragon head with an open mouth that can be used to fire cannons from, much like the openings on the side of the ship.



**Reduced size exhibition sample at  
Hyunchoongsa Shrine**

There are very few models of the Gobeuksun as most existing drawings, such as the ones from the above book, are awkward and unrealistic due to the lack of accurate drawing techniques at the time. The life-sized model built by the Korean Naval Academy is one of the most realistic modern models in existence today.

This revolutionary Gobeuksun ship was a brilliant military innovation which saved Korea from its enemies and helped earn Yi Sun-Shin his reputation for ingenuity and creativity.