

***Planting the Seeds of the Modern East Asian Dilemma:
Myths and New Interpretations of the Japanese Invasions of Korea (1592-
1598)***

The contemporary East Asian political stage is among the most complicated ones in the world. While many, in search for an explanation for such complication, tend to look to the entangled modern history between China, Japan, and Korea, probably few would go as far as tracing this tripartite antagonism back to a pre-modern era—the late sixteenth century—when a war affected the fate of all three countries. In 1592, Toyotomi Hideyoshi—the man who had just brought an end to the long Warring States Period and unified Japan—dreamed ambitiously of conquering Ming China and, eventually, the whole world. His first step was to send his samurais across the sea to conquer Joseon Korea, which started a prolonged war among the three countries that left a lasting impact on the region. As an indispensable part of my history honors thesis project, I spent the past summer researching this largely forgotten war.

I set two goals for my summer research in the funding proposal I submitted to Kellogg this February: “to excavate a persuasive account of the Japanese invasion and to understand how competing nationalistic narratives have shaped each other.” The former focuses on the historical account itself, while the latter explores the larger historiographical picture of the war with an attempt to trace “the history of how this history was written.” Looking back to my summer experience, I can confidently say that I have completely achieved the first goal and partially achieved the second, which I will explain further. Thanks to the generous funding of the Kellogg Institute, I was able to spend over a month in

Beijing working at the Peking University Library and both the main branch and the Reading Room for Ordinary Old Books of the National Library of China. During the time I searched for, read, and analyzed primary as well as secondary Chinese sources that either focus on or involve the war.

Starting with secondary sources and examining closely their bibliographies, I noticed a prevailing inclination among Chinese historians in later eras to rely on Chinese court records or annals to the exclusion of all other sources—despite the apparent availability of plenty (for example, the memoirs of the Joseon chancellor Ryu Song-Nyong and the Korean admiral Yi Sun-shin were readily accessible in Chinese archives for at least the past century). It is, of course, common for historians to ignore sources from other countries due to language abilities, yet as far as I know, most of the Korean and Japanese sources regarding this war had been written in classical Chinese in the first place. I plan to expand on this interesting observation in my senior thesis and aim to characterize it as an effect left on contemporary Chinese by the country's past glory—when it was literally the “Central Kingdom” of East Asia. Probably the result of a combination of such bias in source selection and the “great power” mentality, the Chinese scholars tend to portray the war as completely Chinese-dominated, with the Ming Dynasty defeating the Japanese invaders in the end. This, they believe, from both Ming China and Joseon Korea's perspectives, seems a course of action appropriate for a benevolent suzerain on Ming's part.

When I checked in with Kellogg in June, I expressed worries about conflicting dynastic historiographical perspectives, especially the immediate gap between Ming and Qing Dynasties of China, with the latter succeeding the former less than half a century after the Japanese invasions of Korea in the 1590s. I was firm that the irreconcilable discrepancies would complicate the research process, but having taken some time to reflect and then a second look at the *Mingshi* (*A History of Ming, compiled in Qing Dynasty*) and the *Ming*

Shilu (*The Veritable Records of Ming, the court annals of Ming Dynasty*), I realized that the differences affect not so much the actual historical account as the portrayal of monarchs or military leadership. In fact, in many regards, the Qing officials wrote a more comprehensive history than the Ming ones did, for the former were writing right at a time when the Ming memory had not yet faded and when Ming memoirs and personal biographies had become accessible—while the Ming historians compiled court annals from a politically limited up to date perspective, the Qing officials were able to draw from a much wider variety of sources and write in a much less restrained manner. For example, in the entry 62 of Volume 342 of the *Veritable Records of Wanli Emperor* in *The Veritable Records of Ming*, the Ming court historians remark that after the war, “the emperor ordered the King of Joseon to deploy heavy defense around Busan” in order to prevent the Japanese from “sabotaging the hard-won feat of rehabilitation by the heavenly kingdom.” In *A History of Ming*, the Qing historians simply portrayed the same matter as “the emperor alerted Joseon against Japan,” which conveyed the same meaning in a less interested manner. Therefore, I believe that as far as the war is concerned, the Qing version of *Mingshi* is at least as accurate as the Ming *Shilu*, if not more impartial and straightforward in its portrayal.

Although I have acquired a rather clear picture of the Chinese sources, I still feel a little blind about testing the hypothesis that the Chinese-sided story of the war pervades into later Chinese modern and contemporary Chinese nationalism, and the same blindness applies to the Japanese and Korean accounts as well. Despite the apparent (though still obscure to some extent) knowledge of the war itself, I will not be able to establish an argument that is continuous through the past centuries about the later and especially contemporary impact of the war on the East Asian societies and politics at the current stage. Thinking about how I might tackle this historiographical problem, I boarded the plane to Fukuoka, Japan and began the second phase of my summer research, which was funded by CUSE and Liu Institute for

Asia and Asian Studies. It was during my trip in Japan that I came to realize that I needed not limit myself to the constraints of historical scholarly works. My project, aiming to examine contemporary East Asian societies, is by its nature an interdisciplinary one, and I will not be able to achieve all my goals without looking beyond just what the historians have done. Therefore, I will focus the next phase of my archival research on searching for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean documents in the later era that mention, make reference to, or honor the war fought from 1592 to 1598. Some of the targeted documents will include but are not limited to late Qing court documents that mention Japan, Qing-Joseon Korea correspondences, late Bakufu Japan political documents, and twentieth century nationalistic propagandas of all three countries.

At the end of this report I would like to thank the Kellogg Institute again for its generous funding of my summer research in China. I would not have been able to carry out this project without the Institute's help and support. I will work hard in the coming school year to ensure the production of a good senior thesis in return of the research grant I have had the honor to receive.