

*Japan's Foreign Wars: Legitimization of War in 16th – 19th Century Japanese Literature**

by KIM Si-deok

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This book is a Korean translation of a Japanese publication,¹ itself a version of the author's original doctoral dissertation (also written in Japanese). It is also the fruit of the author's extensive analyses of classical Japanese literature, building on prior studies of literature and historical documents related to the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592 (hereafter Imjin War).² In these works, the author has produced important

* *Ilbonui daeoe jeonjaeng: 16~19 segi ilbon munheone natanan jeonjaeng jeongdanghwa noll.*

¹ Kim Si-deok, *Ikoku seibatsu senki no sekai: kanhanto-ryukyu retto-ezochi* [Annals of Foreign Conquest: The Korean Peninsula, Ryukyu Islands, and Ezo] (Kasama shoin, 2010).

² These include Choe Gwan and Kim Si-deok, *Imjinwaeran gwallyeon ilbon munheon haeje: geunsepyeon* [Explication of Japanese Literature Pertaining to the Imjin War: Pre-modern Period] (Mun, 2010); Yasushi and Kim Si-deok, *Hideyoshi no taigai senso: henyō suru katari to ime-ji* [Hideyoshi's Foreign Conquests: Changing Narratives and Imagery] (Kasama shoin, 2011); Kim Si-deok, Geudeuri bon imjinwaeran: geunse ilbonui beseuteuselleowa jeonjaengui gieok [The Japanese Perspective of the Imjin War: Bestsellers and Memories of War in Early Modern Japan] (Hakgoje, 2012); Ryu Seong-ryong, *Gyogam-haeseol jingbirok: hangugui gojeoneseo dongasiaui gojeoneuro* [Translation and Commentary, Book of Corrections: From a Korean Classic to an East Asian Classic], translated and annotated by Kim Si-deok (Akanet, 2013); and Kim Si-deok, *Geurimi doen imjinwaeran: geunse ilbon gomunheonui saphwaro boneun 7 nyeon jeonjaeng* [Imagery of the Imjin War: Looking at the Seven-years War through Illustrations in Early Modern Japanese Literature] (Hakgoje, 2014).

research pertaining to Japanese pre-modern literature concerned with Japan's foreign wars. Altogether, the book provides a comprehensive overview of the author's own particular critical approach as well as a starting point for further research in this regard.

There are two major themes in the book. First, it offers an overview of literature produced in early modern (sixteenth-to-nineteenth century) Japan related to the Imjin War and its influence on other Japanese literature pertaining to Japan's foreign conquests. Second, the author analyzes the concept of the "just war (*seibatsu, bellum iustum*)" manifest in war annals pertaining to Japanese foreign wars in the pre-modern period. This analysis is extrapolated from Imjin War literature. A concept widely used within the East Asian Confucian cultural sphere, the "just war" was originally a "putative measure" adopted by the Chinese emperor to deal with "outsiders," "barbarians," and "others" disturbing the social order. Thus, a "just war" consists of two clearly opposing sides, one virtuous and superior and the other deserving of punishment.

In the first chapter, the author divides the development of Japanese Imjin War literature into five stages, with each having particular characteristics. The second through fourth chapters deal with literature pertaining to the Ryukyu and Ezo wars and the Conquest of the Three Koreas, elucidating the influence of Imjin War literature as well as the concept of the "just war" manifest therein. Following its initial stages of development, Japanese Imjin War literature was influenced by the introduction of Chinese literature in the first half of the seventeenth century (the first shock) and later by the introduction of Korean literature, including such works as the *Book of Corrections (Jingbirok)*, in the latter half of the seventeenth century (the second shock). Thus, Imjin War literature came to embrace information regarding all three states in East Asia. By the nineteenth century, it was widely disseminated in the form of *Yomihon* literature, which took the common people as its subject. Meanwhile, it has been confirmed that Imjin War literature had a direct influence on the development and composition of eighteenth-

century literature concerning the Ryukyu War and the Conquest of the Three Koreas.

According to the author, the concept of the “just war” is composed of two logics, namely, that of the attacker, which claims some sort of justifiable grounds for such action, and that of the defender, which emphasizes the need to protect against invasion. Thus, there is the “logic of attack” and the “logic of defense.” The author shows how these logics shift and strengthen over time in Imjin War literature. In particular, he describes how this literature became imbued with nationalistic characteristics in response to the incursion of Russia and other Western powers beginning in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The author thus presents concrete cases demonstrating how this particular flow also emerged in literature pertaining to the Ryukyu and Ezo wars and the Conquest of the Three Koreas.

The book’s significance stems from its capacity to convey to Koreans what the Imjin War, with which they are already familiar, meant in pre-modern Japan and how these perceptions have carried over into modernity. The Korean audience will also likely experience its first encounter with the development of literature concerning Japan’s foreign wars, such as that pertaining to the Ryukyu and Ezo wars and the Conquest of the Three Koreas. Meanwhile, they will come to better understand the concept of the “just war” and how it was used by the Japanese in the early modern period.

The Japanese invasions of the 1590s are commonly referred to in Korea with the terms “*Imjin waeran* (literally Imjin ‘chaos’)” and “*Jeongyu jaeran* (literally *Jeongyu* ‘re-chaos’).” “*Imjin*” and “*jeongyu*” refer to the years within the sexagenarian calendar when each of the invasions occurred (1592 and 1597, respectively). “*Ran*” refers to the “chaos” incited by the “*wae*,” the term then used by Koreans to refer to the Japanese. In Japan, the invasions are now respectively referred to as *Bunroku no eki* and *Keichō no eki*. Here, *Bunroku* and *Keichō* each refer to years and *eki* to “campaign.” Thus, Japan has also come to the wars

with respect to the years in which they occurred. It was common up until 1945, however, to use the term, “Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s Conquest of Joseon (*Hō taikō no chōsenseibatsu*).” This rather had the effect of portraying Joseon as the object of a “just war.” In China, the war was once variously referred to as the “*Wanli dongzheng*” or the “*Wanli chaoxian zhi yi*.” Currently, it is also referred to as “*Kang wo yuan chao*.” Thus, China refers to the war as the “the just war in the East during the reign of Emperor Wanli,” “the war in Joseon during the reign of Emperor Wanli,” or “the matter of resisting Japan and aiding Joseon.” Lately, to avoid the subjective perceptions signified by such terminology, some have argued for the more neutral term of “Imjin War.” More important than the issue of nomenclature itself, however, is the task to stipulate exactly how such differing terminologies have developed and precisely what is signified by the differing perceptions therein.

Reflecting this critical awareness, Korean scholarship in the fields of history and literature has recently begun to illuminate problems of memory pertaining to the Imjin War. In the Korean public consciousness, however, perceptions of the Imjin War have diverged little from the narrative structure presented in the *Book of Corrections*. Consequently, there is inadequate understanding of the Chinese and Japanese sides of the story. Just as the author delineates in the book, pre-modern Japanese perceptions of the Imjin War were never all that straightforward owing to the powerful influence of diverse factors such as the reception of Chinese and Korean literature, differences between intellectuals and the common people, disparities over time, and the advent of mass publishing. Furthermore, with the onset of modernity, an intimate relationship was forged between the development of pre-modern Japanese Imjin War literature and Japanese “perceptions of the other.” Accordingly, there is a need for Koreans to transcend unmitigated criticism of Japanese perceptions, to endeavor to objectively observe the point of contact between the pre-modern process of development and the modern era, and to compare this process with the development their own perceptions of

the Imjin War. It is precisely in this respect that the publication of the book in Korean is so significant. One may hope it will have a substantial influence on future relevant research.

The analysis of the legitimization of war, or the concept of “just war,” within sixteenth-to-nineteenth-century Japanese literature in the book also has important implications for Korean historical and literary research. The concept of a “just war” allowed Japan to legitimize its invasion of Joseon on the basis of the arrogance, tyranny, and “obliviousness to war” of its ruling class. Coming to empathize with the Korean point of view, however, contemporary Japanese researchers now naturally consider the term “Just War in Joseon” to be an objectionable one. Nevertheless, the tendency for a nation to believe itself on the side of righteousness and its war on the side of justice is a universal one, wherein Korea is no exception. Korea has also used the term “just war” to refer to its military encounters with surrounding peoples, such as those on Tsushima Island (Daemado) and in Jurchen in the fifteenth century.³ In terms of the legitimization of armed conflict or deference to a “great power” according to the “logic of defense” described in the book, the actions of Korea share common ground with the reasoning manifest in pre-modern Japanese literature pertaining to wars with foreign powers. Meanwhile, the “Russian Conquest (*Naseon jeongbeol*)” of the seventeenth century was a coercive military action by the Qing, but it has been reappraised as a proud historical event in relation to King Hyojong’s (r. 1649-1659) “Northern Conquest” in the eighteenth

³ Jeong Da-ham, “Joseon chogui “jeongbeol”: cheonmyeong, sigye, dallyeok, geurigo hwayangmugi [The “Just War” in the Early Joseon Dynasty Era: The Will of Heaven, the Clock, the Calendar, and the Gun],” *Yeoksawa munhwa* 21 (2011): 45-80; Jeong Da-ham, “Jeongbeoliraneun jeonjaeng/jeongbeoliraneun jesa: sejongdae gihanyeon “dongjeong”gwa pajeogang “yainjeongbeor”eul jungsimeuro [War as “Just War” / War as Ancestral Rite: The Gihae “Conquest of the East” during the Reign of King Sejong and the Pajeo River “Barbarian Conquest”],” *Hanguksa hakbo* 52 (2013): 271-306.

century.⁴ In contemporary Korea, these wars are referred to the same as they always have been, as the “Daemado Conquest,” “Jurchen Conquest,” and the “Russian Conquest.” Thus, the rationalization of military conquests according to the logic of the “just war” has not been absent from Korean history either. In this manner, the author’s emphasis on the concept of the “just war” may act as a mirror reflecting the “victimhood nationalism” inherent in Korean perceptions of their nation.⁵

The book is thus a useful work inducing contemplation in the Korean studies scholar and general Korean reader alike. There are, nonetheless, some issues with the book as well. First, because it is a compilation of studies pertaining to separate literary works, there are places within the text where the overall critical perspective of the book is not readily apparent. In the second section of chapter two, for example, the analysis of *Crescent Moon: The Adventures of Tametomo (Chinsetsu Yumiharizuki)*, related to the Ryukyu Conquest, is necessary to discuss the development of Ryukyu Conquest literature, but any consideration of the relationship between this work and other Imjin War literature or the concept of the “just war” manifest therein does not emerge until very much later. While it is true that this problem is inevitable, due to the fact that the book surveys each piece of literature separately, it can be somewhat exasperating for the reader. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the book’s critical approach consists in philologically arranging the developmental process of Imjin War literature and its influence on Japanese literature pertaining to wars with foreign powers, analyzing the logic of the “just war” manifest therein. But it is difficult to claim that each of these objectives receive balanced treatment. Despite being well

⁴ Kye Seung-beom, *Joseonsidae haeoepabyeonggwa hanjunggwangye: joseon jibaegyechungui jungguk insik* [Foreign Dispatches and Korea-China Relations during the Joseon Dynasty Era: Perceptions of China Among the Joseon Ruling Class] (Pureun yeoksa, 2009), 259-275.

⁵ Jie-hyun Lim, “Victimhood Nationalism and History Reconciliation in East Asia,” *History Compass* 8, no. 1 (2010): 1.

presented in the conclusion, the author's critical framework is perhaps not so well formulated within the main body of the text.

The book also demonstrates the inevitable limitations associated with any specialized scholarly work. It is primarily a work directed at scholars of Japanese literature, composed of highly technical and empirical content. The average reader, and especially the average Korean reader—despite the fact that this edition is published in Korean—will thus likely encounter great difficulty in grasping the content of the book. This is simply due to the fact that, in order to do so, one should have prior knowledge of such difficult subjects as pre-modern Japanese literature, political and social development in Edo period Japan, or historical change in the realm of publishing. The author has surely endeavored to address this issue by making some simplifications in the translated version; he has removed esoteric content from the main text and footnotes, shifted some footnote content into the main text, added footnotes explaining unfamiliar content, and even incorporated illustrations. Unfortunately, it remains clear the book is not one “friendly” to the average reader.

Furthermore, while the author minutely traces the manner in which the logic of the “just war” manifests in Japanese literature pertaining to wars with foreign powers, a precise theoretical analysis is lacking. There are brief and intermittent discussions in the body and conclusion regarding which rationales for “just war” manifest in early modern Japanese literature pertaining to war with foreign powers originate in the ancient and medieval eras, which are the result of Confucian influence, and which are the product of popular culture in pre-modern Japan. Nevertheless, the book would have benefitted from a discussion of how Japan's concept of the “just war” is similar to or different from that in China and Korea by comparing these rationales with the concept of the “just war” prevalent in pre-modern Japanese literature related to wars *within* Japan.

One might anticipate that such issues will be resolved in the

author's upcoming work, *The Philology of War* (*Jeonjaengui munhak*). Readers wishing to better understand the author's critical approach and the development of Imjin War literature, moreover, may refer to *The Japanese Perspective of the Japanese Invasion of 1592: Bestsellers and Memories of War in Pre-modern Japan*, targeted at the general reader.⁶

To conclude, it is perhaps worth mentioning a few points of personal interest to the reviewer in the book. First, despite the fact that pre-modern Japanese Imjin War literature intricately encapsulated literature from all three nations in East Asia, rather than submitting any critical perspective regarding Japan's wars, it merely supplemented and strengthened the already existing perceptions therein. Second, under the influence of unabashed nineteenth-century nationalism, the Japanese logic of the foreign "just war" developed into a sense of superiority and imperial expansionism, completely bereft of the capacity to present the slightest justification for war (*casus belli*). While it is unfortunate that the scope of this review does not allow for a description of the various other aspects of the book, suffice it to say that it is worth a read not only for readers interested in the Imjin War but also the literature, ideas, and society of early modern Japan.

⁶ See note 3.