

Yi Sun-shin, an Admiral Who Became a Myth

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Koreans' battle against Japanese imperialism and its blatant invasions, and their subsequent foundation of a modern nation, led them to rediscover several heroes within their own history. Admiral Yi Sun-shin, who fought the Japanese forces during the Imjin Waeran and saved the Korean people, was one of the historical figures praised most highly.

But his glorious victories and achievements had already been praised and honored since the mid-Joseon dynasty. When meritorious attainments were being appointed right after the Imjin Waeran, the victories that Yi Sun-shin had achieved in his sea battles were being cited as part of the major factors that contributed to the repelling of the Japanese troops. Quite oddly, though, Admiral Weon Gyun's victories were being highly spoken as well for political reasons.

After the Byeongja Horan, the level of praises and honoring of the achievements of Admiral Yi Sun-shin became more heightened, and countless occasions to honor him and his achievements were continuously arranged. After the defeat under the Chinese Qing dynasty troops at the time, Korean people's worshipping of a competent military leader who repelled enemy forces with superior power was higher and stronger than ever.

During the reign of King Sukjong, the honoring of Yi Sun-shin took on another level of interest, as Yi Sun-shin came to be praised as a loyal vassal of the King who served the Joseon king well and also saved the civilization of Ming China that was flourishing on the Korean peninsula. This was because the general sentiment of the time was that Joseon was the true successor of the cultural essence of Ming China in all possible ways.

During the modern times, Yi Sun-shin's status was once again elevated to that of a national hero, and the Turtle Ship (Geobukseon) developed by him is perceived and believed to be the world's first armored ship. But during the Japanese colonial period, some revised nationalists demoted him as an exemplary person and not a national hero.

Several evaluations of Yi Sun-shin with different nuances continued even after the liberation in 1945. Especially during the early days of the Park Chung Hee regime, Yi Sun-shin was praised as a savior of the nation, and he was praised as an honorary person who was truly loyal during the 1970s when the authoritative regime continued. Different evaluations on Yi Sun-shin remind us of the unfortunate days when presidents had the power to influence the objects of worship.

Keywords: Yi Sun-shin, national hero, Imjin Waeran, Joseon-Centrism.

Introduction

Memories of war last the longest among historic occasions because of the shocking experiences by various classes during its course. Moreover, those memories leave traces in various forms afterwards as they influence the next generation of people experiencing war. In particular, the experience of a total war with other nations generally appear during the nation building process of the modern age, giving almost all members of the nation nearly the same war experiences and memories. These collective experiences strengthen the homogeneity of the people who were divided by social status and class before modern times and are shared with the next generation through national education. It is natural to discover many national heroes who fought and won wars against other nations as well as for positive evaluation and advertisement to be at the national level. Interpretation of a national hero is closely related to the political and ideological situation of the times because collective memories about history are generally formed based on images of past great men rather than on a certain theoretical interpretation on history.¹

It was the same with Korea whose foundation of its modern nation-state is based on the invasion by Japanese imperialism and the confrontation with it. Even though Korea did not directly wage a large-scale war, Japan's colonial rule and the national resistance against it contain characteristics corresponding to war, and many national heroes began to be discovered in this course as is the same throughout history. Euljimundeok, Yeongaesomun, Choe Yeong, and Yi Sun-shin are typical examples. Yi Sun-shin is praised most highly among them as the national hero who protected the nation against Japan's invasion as he won battles with Japan during the Imjin Waeran (Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592) and was widely known through sources such as many literary works as well as history records. Even his being as historical substance was elevated to a status at the level of national ideology afterwards through this process, which brought about a historical understanding in setting up victory in the Imjin Waeran using naval forces and loyal troops under the direction of Yi Sun-shin and a relieving force from Ming China. Such an understanding is directly reflected on today's major introductory books on Korean history (Lee Ki-baik 1990: 251-253; Han

1. See "Yeongung mandeulgi" (Making a Hero) (<http://hero.snu.ac.kr/>) at the Institute of Humanities, Seoul National University, for the making of a hero in western modernity and the formation of national memories.

Yeong-woo 1997: 313-315).

However, unlike other heroes who were reevaluated in modern times, Yi Sun-shin's achievements have continuously been reevaluated since the late Joseon period and recognized at the national level. Therefore, various posthumous evaluations and recognitions of him and the process of his appearing as a national hero in modern times are very important. In a sense, they imply many characteristic aspects of Korean history from the late Joseon period to modern times, and remain not at the simple level of changing interpretations about an individual.

Bearing this in mind, this treatise will firstly examine under what political and ideological background praising and recognition of Yi Sun-shin are made in the late Joseon period, and then show the process of his appearing as a national hero in the period of forming a modern nation-state through active projects that acknowledged him as a national hero during the Park Chung Hee (Bak Jeong-hee) regime as well as its meaning that has today. Through this, this treatise would assist in producing a more objective understanding of Yi Sun-shin as a historical figure rather than a great hero.

Praising of Yi Sun-shin in Late Joseon

1. Selection of Seonmu Gongsin and Yi Sun-shin in early seventeenth century

The Imjin Waeran was a very shocking war and acknowledged at the time as the "greatest disturbance since the beginning of Korea" by Koreans. The phenomenon of public resentment against the ruling class who failed in coping with the war in its early stage reached a climax, which came as a great shock to King Seonjo after witnessing this with his own eyes while taking refuge in Uiju. When the burden of the commons aggravated in the form of military service, famine, and disease accompanied by seven years of war, their discontent was revealed in the form of an uprising. Subsequently, efforts were made to reform the unstable Joseon society in the face of various social deviations after the war. It was important to determine the meritorious subjects in the war and record their achievements for posterity in the sense that this meant the completion of war as well as a part of postwar restoration.

The work of selecting meritorious subjects and recording their achievements took around three years; it began around three years after the war in March of

1601 (the 34th year of the reign of Seonjo) and was completed in October of 1604 (the 37th year of the reign of Seonjo). The subjects whose achievements were being recorded were those who served Seonjo in Uiju and asked Ming dynasty China for aid (Hoseon Gongsin), those who distinguished themselves in war (Seonmu Gongsin), and those who performed a meritorious deed in suppressing Yi Mong-hak's disturbance (Cheongnan Gongsin).² The point at issue was who would be selected as meritorious subjects among military commanders. Firstly, the most problematic matter in this selection was difficulties in confirming their military merits because most of them died in battle.

Another sensitive matter was the viewpoint of Seonjo and some vassals who thought actual military merit was not achieved by Joseon commanders other than by Yi Sun-shin and Weon Gyun in naval battles; they further thought that the main reason for winning the war was the military aid provided by Ming China. The political intention behind Seonjo taking up the position of showing preference for Hoseon Gongsin and emphasizing Ming's entry into the war was the retrieval of territories almost devastated by the Japanese army during the early stages of the war and the court's lost authority due to its lack of preparation for the war (Han Myeong-gi 1999: 80-81). In other words, Seonjo could not help restricting the recording of the achievements given to Seonmu Gongsin even under the necessity of attributing responsibility for the early defeat in the war to some local military commanders.

In the case of Yi Sun-shin, even though he was chosen as a meritorious subject because his victories in naval engagements were appreciated, there were many complications in the selection process. This was the result of Seonjo's unreasonableness in not wanting to acknowledge Yi Sun-shin's merits. In the early stage of the Jeongyu Jaenan, Seonjo was tricked by Japan into dismissing Yi Sun-shin from his duties as Samdosuguntongjesa, the commander of the naval forces of three provinces, and appointed Weon Gyun to the post. In addition, Seonjo was responsible for the annihilation of Joseon's main naval forces in Chilcheonyang and the loss of the Jeolla Province to the hands of Japanese

2. The full account of recording the achievements of meritorious subjects in the late Seonjo period in connection with the Imjin Waeran is recorded in *Hoseongseonmucheongrangongsindogamuigwe* (扈聖宣武靖難功臣都監儀軌) (Gyujanggak Book No. 14924) and Seonjo sillok. As the contents of this paragraph were written based on these two books, additional citations will not be mentioned. The achievements of meritorious subjects are recorded in books such as the one written by Yi Jeon-gil in 1990.

forces by giving the unreasonable order to intercept a sea route around Busanpo, ignoring the reality of Joseon naval power. This dealt him a considerable blow politically. Therefore, his mistake stood out in comparison to Yi Sun-shin's merits (Jang Hak-geun 1992).

At first, Yi Sun-shin ranked first while Weon Gyun ranked next because he was held accountable for defeats as well as victories during the process of selecting Seonmu Gongsin. However, they were ranked side by side in the end as first, because Seonjo unreasonably claimed that the greatest figures of all times should not be evaluated simply by the number of successes and defeats and that Weon Gyun was a general with wisdom and courage. Moreover, in the case of admirals under the commands of Yi Sun-shin and Weon Gyun, two from both banners were selected as Seonmu Gongsin so that the merits of Yi Sun-shin and Weon Gyun could be valued on the same level. In the process of selecting Seonmu Gongsin, the official position was to rate the achievements of Yi Sun-shin and Weon Gyun on par with each other and to award a stipend to both as the first Seonmu Gongsin, regardless of actual historical facts.

This is reflected well in *Imjinnok* (Record of the Imjin Waeran), a literary work thought to be written in the early seventeenth century. In *Imjinnok*, written in Chinese characters and owned by the National Library of Korea and regarded the oldest woodblock-printed book among existing kinds of *Imjinnok*, although a description of Yi Sun-shin was emphasized in the part on the achievements of the Joseon naval forces, there are abundant descriptions about joint operations with Weon Gyun. In particular, it is noteworthy that it describes Weon Gyun's role positively in various naval battles. It describes Yi Sun-shin and Weon Gyun flanking, attacking, and defeating a Japanese fleet led by Matashi as well as gaining victory at Angolpo. This is influenced by the fact that Weon Gyun's achievements were recorded as the first Seonmu Gongsin along with Yi Sun-shin and Gwon Yul due to the strong support of Seonjo as discussed above, which is quite different from later memories about the Imjin Waeran and Weon Gyun's limited role (Roh Yeong-gu 2004: 21-22).

As examined above, even though Yi Sun-shin was acknowledged as an admiral who distinguished himself in war in the early seventeenth century, he was not acknowledged fully as the greatest war hero of the Imjin Waeran as was the case in later years due to various political agendas.

2. Recognition of Yi Sun-shin since the middle of the seventeenth century and Joseon as the center of culture (Joseon-centrism)

Many changes began to appear in evaluating Yi Sun-shin from the middle of King Injo's reign. This was influenced by Injo Banjeong (King Gwanghaegun was deposed from the throne by the Westerners Faction and King Injo succeeded the throne in 1632) and Byeongja Horan (Manchu invasion of Korea) in 1634. The Seoin ("the Westerners") faction, one of the four political factions in late Joseon, came into power with the support of the Namin ("the Southerners") faction through Injo Banjeong and set about a fundamental reappraisal of the vassals by the Bugin ("The Northerners") faction who held power from the late Seonjo to Gwanghaegun period. In other words, there began to appear a tendency in making integrity and loyalty instead of military merit the standard for evaluating loyal subjects. In the early period of the reign of King Injo, this aroused public opinion to revise the *Seonjo sillok* (Chronicle of the Reign of Seonjo), which was compiled during Gwanghaegun's reign, but the revision was not started immediately for many reasons.

King Injo personally surrendered to the Emperor of Qing China due to the overwhelming defeat during the Byeongja Horan, resulting in the formation of a sovereign-subject relationship. This strengthened the tendency to evaluate vassals based on integrity and loyalty. After its humiliating surrender to Qing China, Joseon became aware of the limitations in its power that was lower than that of Qing China, which had previously been considered a lesser culture because Korea was the country that succeeded the superior culture of Ming China and not Qing. Accordingly, in order to clear itself of the disgrace, there emerged extensive reevaluation of former faithful subjects.

These new reevaluations appeared in several forms. One was putting a positive emphasis on the values of integrity and loyalty of the military leaders' activities during the Imjin Waeran. Even the loyal troops were established as subjects who overcame the Imjin Waeran. The second was a more active interpretation of commanders who won battles in the war. This was a manifestation of the desire for capable commanders who could dominate the enemy with strong fighting abilities when the Joseon government was confronted by losing the war with Qing China. Accordingly, this opportunity was taken to highly praise Yi Sun-shin because he won battles based on organized military strategy while Weon Gyun was evaluated more harshly because he had comparatively less military organizational skills. In particular, such a tendency was more consolidated as the

Seonjo sujeong sillok (Revised Chronicle of the Reign of Seonjo) was compiled full-scale at Daejehak Yi Sik's suggestion in February of 1642 (19th year of the reign of King Injo). This tendency to highly praise loyal troops and Yi Sun-shin but strongly criticize Weon Gyun can clearly be seen in the *Seonjo sujeong sillok*, which was completed in 1657, the 8th year of the reign of King Hyojong (Jang Hak-geun 1999; Oh Hang-nyeong 2003).

Thirdly, a wide number of figures such as faithful vassals and patriots during the war were given recognition to cement the loyalty of the vassals during the war with Qing China. This was applied to the commanders of loyal troops including Ko Gyeong-myeong and Jo Heon who were loyal to the Seoin faction in May of the 1669 (20th year of the reign of King Injo); a prestigious title was conferred on Yi Sun-shin posthumously. Such a measure shows an aspect of the ruling ideology of those days that stressed military achievements. Measures recognizing Yi Sun-shin appeared more frequently since the reign of Hyojong when an expedition to conquer Qing China was prepared. Yi Sun-shin's descendants were rewarded by order of King Hyojong in 1658 (9th year of the reign of King Hyojong), and a monument, Sindobi, was erected in his honor in Noryang, Namhae county the next year (*Hyojong sillok*, Book 20; *Hyojong sillok*, Book 21). Such measures to promote recognition of Yi Sun-shin have continued since Hyeonjong's period. In 1663 (4th year of the reign of King Hyeongong), King Hyeongong granted two hanging boards containing the characters "loyal subject" (loyal subject) to be displayed at each of the two shrines for Yi Sun-shin in Noryang and Tongjeyeong. In 1704 (30th year of the reign of Sukjong), a shrine was built in Yi Sun-shin's hometown of Asan at the request of a Confucian scholar from Chungcheong Province, and three years after, a hanging board written with the characters "Hyeonchung" was granted by the king to hang there. However, the characteristics of appreciation for Yi Sun-shin changed during the middle of the reign of King Sukjong.

All possibilities of Ming China's renaissance had disappeared as Rebellion of Wu San Gui, and a full scale rebellion in Qing China in the early period of the reign of King Sukjong was suppressed. Soon, Qing China greeted its heyday, and Joseon's movement for an expedition to the north became hard to realize. Accordingly, its policy turned to accomplish its original plan at the ideological and cultural level, not at the realistic level. In other words, as the expedition to the north based on Joseon's ideology of following Ming China's culture became difficult to justify, now it advocated the so-called Joseon as the center of culture (Joseon-centrism), which emphasized that Joseon was the center of the cultural

world because it inherited Ming China's culture. It materialized as a creation of *daebodan* (an altar for performing rituals for the Emperor of Ming China) where Ming China's Emperor Shen Zong and Emperor Yi Zong were worshipped in 1704 (30th year of the reign of King Sukjong). Since then, there appeared a consciousness suggesting Joseon's succession to traditional Chinese culture. In this circumstance, Yi Sun-shin's recognition came to have a different meaning.

In 1710 (36th year of the reign of King Sukjong), the matter of granting a hanging board at Yi Sun-shin's shrine in Gogeu Island, Gangjin, Jeolla Province was decided (*Sukjong sillok* book 49). Gogeu Island was the place where Ming China's head of naval forces, Chen Lin, arrived as a relief force and set them up a military camp with Yi Sun-shin's fleet during the Jeongyu Jaenan. Chen Lin built the tomb of Guan Wu here, and Jeolbusa Ryu Bi-yeon repaired it as it had decayed due to lack of care and also built shrines of Yi Sun-shin and Chen Lin on both sides in 1684 (10th year of the reign of King Hyeonjong). But this was not widely known at that time. In the reign of King Sukjong, the matters of giving an offering and of granting hanging boards were discussed as those shrines got more important. In particular, since the 36th year of the reign of King Sukjong, the royal court sent an official and had him perform a religious service twice a year. And this measure is fairly significant.

The recognition of Yi Sun-shin basically meant a special treatment for those who showed military merits during the Imjin Waeran. So, it was general to establish a shrine and grant a hanging board in places where victory was gained, such as Noryang, and where Tongjeyeong used to be. However, a religious service in the tomb of Guan Wu and the shrines of Chen Lin and Yi Sun-shin in Gogeu Island at the court level strongly show the intention to maintain close relations between Joseon and Ming China through the agency of Yi Sun-shin. This is clearly shown both in understanding this religious service in connection with the creation of *daebodan* and also in the remarks of Lee Yi-myeong who was then the Panbusa that Yi Sun-shin was closely related to Chen Lin as well as being ranked next to Guan Wu, so those three's enshrinement in the same place had great significance (*Yi chungmugong jeonseo* book 11).

Such a characteristic change of Yi Sun-shin's recognition is based on the ideology of the time to be loyal to the legitimate dynasty of Ming China, in which it tried to understand and recognize loyal subjects and patriots sacrificed during two wars (Imjin Waeran and Byeongja Horan) not only as those who simply protected Joseon but also as those who distinguished themselves in protecting traditional Chinese culture in East Asia; the establishment of *daebodan* in

Sukjong's period was a national level recognition (Jeong Ok-ja 1998: 103-104). At the same time, shrines were set up all over the country whose number was even incomparable to the one before.³ In addition, the subjects of religious services in those shrines were mostly for the martyrs and those who died in battle and devoted sons, which reveals the fact that shrine establishment of those days was closely related to the project of recognizing of loyal subjects and patriots sacrificed during the two wars. Establishment and Repair of Yi Sun-shin's shrines and the performance of a religious service at the national level show a part of the atmosphere at that time.

The characteristic change of Yi Sun-shin's recognition according to a raise in the level of Joseon as the center of culture (Joseon-centrism) had positive significance both ideologically and politically. It could be pointed out that the supervisor in setting up *daebodan* was the king of Joseon although it was built as a mark of Joseon's succession to traditional Chinese culture that is extinct in China. In other words, Sukjong's will to break the political power of the Noron faction in the third decade of the reign of King Sukjong was included in this measure by showing the idea that the successor of traditional Chinese culture was ultimately the king of Joseon (Yi Tae-jin 1994). It was in the same context that the Joseon king's shrine of worship visiting and worshipping in the tomb of Guan Wu constructed by Ming China's admirals was regularized during the third decade of the reign of King Sukjong (Sim Seung-gu 2003). In this situation, Yi Sun-shin became an important object of recognition in the sense that he was a loyal subject of Joseon's king as well as a symbolical figure in Joseon as the center of culture (Joseon-centrism) in that he protected traditional Chinese culture with Ming China's forces during the Imjin Waeran.

Yi Sun-shin's recognition was based on Joseon as the center of culture continued in the reign of King Yeongjo. This was closely related to his descendants' continued loyalty. Particularly during Musinnan, a large-scale rebellion directed by Yi In-jwa of the Soron group, the death of Yi Bong-sang, a soldier from Chungcheong Province killed by a rebel army, strengthened such a policy as he was one of Yi Sun-shin's descendants. For Yeongjo, who experienced abuses of faction during Musinnan, it was necessary to emphasize the reinforcement of central forces and loyalty toward the king in order to strengthen his sovereign power.⁴

3. A total of 141 shrines were built during the reign of King Sukjong, which is around twice the number built during the reigns of King Seonjo and King Hyeonjong (Jeong Man-jo. 1975).

4. The formation of the military nobility family reflects this situation clearly. See Jang Pil-gi

In this situation, Yi Sun-shin's recognition was natural as he was the most well known figure in the ideology of the time to be loyal to the legitimate dynasty of Ming China and a symbol of loyalty toward a king.

A symbolical example showing this was the measure that made another descendant of Yi Sun-shin, Lee Tae-sang, perform a religious service as a priest, and the descendant of Li Ru Song, Ming China's commander during Imjin Waeran, Yi Hwon, recited a written prayer in the religious service for Ming China's soldiers who died during Imjin Waeran in Noryangjin in May of the 36th ruling year of Yeongjo (*Yeongjo sillok* book 95). At the same time, the court engaged their descendants as well. In other words, making their descendants perform the religious service for Ming China's deceased soldiers altogether not only shows that Yi Sun-shin was a commander of Joseon, but also clearly shows that he was a commander who protected traditional Chinese culture of Ming China. In the 48th ruling year of Yeongjo, the court sent a courtesy official and made him perform a religious service for Yi Sun-shin and soon ordered religious services for the heads of royal troops including Jo Heon, Ko Gyeongmyeong, and Dongnaebusa Song Sang-hyeon. Such a fact reveals that Yi Sun-shin was being positively evaluated again for his victory in the Imjin Waeran.

Yi Sun-shin's recognition was enlarged in the reign of King Jeongjo. This was closely related to Jeongjo's strengthening of sovereign powers based on a policy of impartiality through which the king tried to secure his absolute power. Various trials were made to encourage loyalty toward the dynasty. They appeared full scale especially after the 15th ruling year of Jeongjo when the king's power was stabilized, unlike his early rule. Not only did he send an official to Yi Sun-shin's shrine and make him perform a religious service many times, but also he took a special measure in July of his 16th ruling year that made one of Yi Sun-shin's descendants worship *mangbaerye* (worship performed in *daebodan*) in *hwangdan* (*daebodan* placed in front of great vassals) with a loyal vassal during the Byeongja Horan. It was the same measure that made a descendant of Song Si-yeol a symbol of Daemyeonggiri worship in *mangbaerye*, and shows that Yi Sun-shin was given preferential treatment as another symbol of ideology of the time to be loyal to the legitimate dynasty of Ming China (*Jeongjosillok* book 35). There also appeared understanding in those days that Yi Sun-shin's merits during the Imjin Waeran were a protection

(1999) for the formation of the noble military family in late Joseon.

of traditional Chinese culture, equivalent to what happened during the Byeongja Horan. He was even elevated as a Confucian sage. And in July of the year after, the 17th ruling year of Jeongjo, Yi Sun-shin was conferred posthumous honors as Yeonguijeong, the highest position in the court in remembrance of an anniversary of the death of Ming China's Emperor Shen Zong. In the 18th year of the reign Jeongjo, his monument, Sindobi, was erected, whose epitaph was composed by Jeongjo himself, and in September of his 19th ruling year, *Yi chungmugong jeonseo* (Complete Book on Yi Sun-shin) was published as ordered by Jeongjo.

The publication of *Yi chungmugong jeonseo* in those days was in the same context as the publication of books recording merits during two wars such as the *Yangdaemasasilgi* (A Record of Meritorious Service in the Imjin Waeran, written by a military leader) and the *Yimchungmin silgi* (A True Record of General Yin Chung-min) and *Keumchunjangyusa* (a biography of Kim Deok-ryeong, a military leader in the Imjin Waeran). This was a very important business for Jeongjo, who was pursuing a new political system through impartial rule. In other words, it implied strongly an encouragement of loyalty toward the dynasty (Yi Tae-jin 1994: 7). Such a concentrated recognition on Yi Sun-shin in the later part of the reign of King Jeongjo is somewhat different from the one in the former days in the sense that it had a close connection with the political background at that time in which loyalty toward the king was fundamentally required, although it was based on Joseon as the center of culture on the surface.

As examined above, Yi Sun-shin's recognition has continued since the Imjin Waeran and has been managed at the national level since the reign of King Hyeonjong. In particular, it is important that Yi Sun-shin's evaluation changed to a figure that protected traditional Chinese culture with Ming China's relieving force, not only limited to being a loyal subject of Joseon. This basically reflects Joseon's ideological and political trend at that time, and at the same time, shows that descriptions about Yi Sun-shin could be different to historical facts during the Imjin Waeran. Yi Sun-shin as the central figure is who has distinguished the role of naval forces in overcoming the Imjin Waeran is reflected in the evaluation of Yi Sun-shin. But it can clearly be pointed out that positive evaluation and the movement to recognize Yi Sun-shin were not raised to the national level until modern times. However, it is clear that understanding on Yi Sun-shin formed according to the historical situation in the late Joseon period and was recorded in history books and literary works, and has played a very important role in his appearing as a national hero since modern times.

The Change in Understanding Yi Sun-shin since the Twentieth Century

1. Raise of a National Hero and a Man of Character

Modern times in Korea began with an invasion of Japanese Imperialism and a response against it. In the process of responding to Japan's invasion, Koreans developed a national consciousness rapidly; the consciousness that a nation should be an organism consisting of national spirit, was strongly presented by intellectuals of those days. Under this consciousness, it is naturally one of the most important tasks for history to examine what is relevant to national sovereignty and territory, which are the major factors comprising the nation-state. A national hero began to be raised under this circumstance. It is a recognition that a hero who shows his leadership in struggles with the outside for the protection the nation's sovereignty and expansion of its territory. Accordingly, various national heroes began to be created such as Choe Yeong, Yi Sun-shin, the Great King Gwanggaeto, Euljimundeok, and Daejoyeong and their biographies were narrated by historians (Han Yeong-woo 2002: 239-240).

Yi Sun-shin was very important being among many national heroes in the Korean mind amidst the circumstance of Japan's imperialistic invasion in the early 20th century. In other words, his status cannot but be raised higher than other heroes as he directly fought and defeated Japan itself. Thus, many biographies were written on Yi Sun-shin in the early 20th century. The best example is *Joseonjeilwiin Yisunshinjeon* (Biography of the Greatest Man Yi Sun-shin) written by Shin Chae-ho. This book was serially published in the *Daehan maeil sinbo* (a newspaper) from May 2 to August 18 in 1908, and consisted of 19 chapters. It describes in detail his whole life from his childhood to death based on many data, and is remarkably different in two points from many other biographies on Yi Sun-shin written in the late Joseon period.

First of all, this book compares Yi Sun-shin to Britain's naval admiral Nelson (*Horatio Nelson*, Naerison). Shin Chae-ho explains common points between Yi Sun-shin and Nelson in detail, and then, values Yi Sun-shin more highly in the sense that he managed battles from a more inferior situation in every regard compared to Nelson. Shin Chae-ho wrote this book in order to tell of Yi Sun-shin's greatness to the Korean people because he felt sorry about the reality in which Yi Sun-shin was not widely known to the world due to the weak national power of Daehanjeguk at that time. Such recognition that Yi Sun-shin is more

highly evaluated than Nelson seems to have been widely spread in Joseon in the early twentieth century, but it came from Japan.

Secondly, the description on the Turtle Ship went into detail and especially, was highly considered to be the origin of ironclad ships in the world. The Turtle Ship was originally an improvement on the Joseon military ship, Panokseon, covered it with wooden planks so that its crews were protected from the enemy's matchlocks. Iron spikes on the cover prevented the enemy climbing on the ship (Kim Jae-geun 1994; Jang Hak-geun 1995). Therefore, evidence is insufficient to see it as an ironclad ship. All records in the late Joseon period basically do not present obvious evidence that the Turtle Ship was an ironclad ship.⁵ Furthermore, in various records praising Yi Sun-shin, the Turtle Ship was not particularly mentioned as being an important part of the story.⁶ So, such recognition seems to have been widely spread since records in various western diaries on naval battles consider the Turtle Ship as the first iron ship in the world. In fact, the late nineteenth century was a period when warships were mostly constructed with iron worldwide; a large iron war ship was representative of a Western nation's military power. Therefore, general recognition at that time regarding the Turtle Ship as an original iron ship in the world was the creature of such a situation.

Yisunshinjeon by Shin Chae-ho reflects the general understanding about Yi Sun-shin and wishes for a hero's birth, and seems to contribute to further raise Yi Sun-shin as a national hero. And such understanding of Yi Sun-shin as a national hero seems to have been inherited by other historians. A typical nationalistic historian Bak Eun-sik's *Yisunshinjeon* (The Biography of Yi Sun-shin) shows it clearly.

Written in Shanghai, China in 1915, this book concentrates on raising Yi Sun-shin's greatness and Turtle Ship's originality as seen in the subtitle *Gogeumsugunui jeilwiin, segyecheolhamui balmyongsijo* (The First Great Man in Naval Forces of All Ages, The First Inventor of the Iron Ship in the World) (Park Hyun-gyu, Gwon Hyuk-tae 2003).⁷ In the introduction of this book, Yi

5. Among records in late Joseon on the Turtle Ship, there appears a short record that iron pieces were attached to the cover only in a novel, *Imjinnok*, but its basis is weak.

6. There are frequent mentions about Yi Sun-shin's loyalty and courage in Yi Sun-shin related poetry and prose written by many in the late Joseon period in *Yichungmugongjeonseo Book 12*, but words on Turtle Ship were not particularly seen except in Guseonsong by Yi Byeong-mo around the nineteenth year of the reign of King Jeongjo.

7. See Park Hyeon-gyu, Gwon Hyeok-tae 2003 for the contents of this recently discovered book.

Sun-shin is depicted as a perfect person who was a great commander winning every battle and who had wisdom and courage, loyalty and filial piety, fairness and intelligence, and amicable personal relations. And it also reveals a wish that Joseon could have been a powerful nation if it dominated the seas using the Turtle Ship. According to the book, Joseon people did not study about him due to Korean aristocratic misdirection like party strife and philosophy, whereas Japan made him a teacher. Therefore, it claims Koreans should follow his example in order to restore the nation. Bak Eun-sik proves that Yi Sun-shin's greatness surpasses Nelson by describing their common and different points in detail as Shin Chae-ho did in the conclusion of the book.

Such recognition was widespread at that time, claiming succession to Yi Sun-shin's spirit by raising him to a national hero and emphasizing the success of the Turtle Ship. Kim Chang-suk, who wrote the "preface" in *Yisunshinjeon* (Biography of Yi Sun-shin) urges the continuance of Yi Sun-shin's spirit because Joseon was occupied by Japan after Yi Sun-shin and Turtle Ship became forgotten. This tendency of Yi Sun-shin's recognition as a heroic person, who was evaluated to be Nelson's superior in heroic features and invented the first iron ship in the world, influenced many. Only in the 1920s under the Japanese rule, did there appear some change in his evaluation. That is, his perfect human features became valued more than his heroic features. Biographies published in the 1920s show this, and examples are *Yisunshin silgi* (A True History of Yi Sun-shin) (1925) published by Yeongchangseogwan and *Yisunshinjeon* (1927) published by Aedongseogwan. These two books describe his life realistically according to his historical achievements. So, they depict him rather as a model of a perfect human being without revealing superhuman ability showing heroic features (Jang Gyeong-nam 2000).⁸ For example, in chapter 10, "Yi Sun-shin's Many Deeds" in *Yisunshinjeon*, he is only depicted as a politician, an economist, a sociable person, an inventor, a dutiful son, a patriot and an honest person and so on.

Such a change describing Yi Sun-shin as a model of a perfect human being has a close relation with the suppressing circumstances under Japanese rule, and partly reflects a situation where it is hard to describe him as a symbolical hero of the nation's independence in a direct way. But it has closer relation with some of the nationalistic camp's change in method for independence at that time. While

8. See Jang Gyeong-nam 2000 about the general contents of *Yisunshin silgi* and *Yisunshinjeon*.

the 1919 Independence Movement was not successful inside the country, as the socialist movement gathered strength, some nationalists in the country compromised Japan that advocated cultural government and claimed “Improvement of national characteristics” and “cultivation of abilities” in the early 1920s (Gang Man-gil 1994: 31-32). “Minjokgaejoron” (An Essay Claiming for Improving National Characteristics) by Yi Kwang-su printed in the *Dong A Ilbo* is an exemplary editorial. Yi Kwang-su diagnosed Koreans of those days in his editorial as false, lazy for only enjoying daydreaming and academic argument, having no faith or loyalty, as well as having no courage in work. And he claimed that Joseon’s decline was caused by these degrading national characteristics. Yi Kwang-su’s position is clearly shown in the novel *Yi Sun-shin* serially published in the *Dong A Ilbo* in 1931.

Yi Kwang-su tried to depict Yi Sun-shin as a self-sacrificing and loyal man of character and patriot rather than an inventor of an iron ship or a subject overcoming the Imjin Waeran. In other words, he depicted Yi Sun-shin as a soldier fallen as a victim to party strife that is emphasized as the chronic evils of Koreans, and is also depicted as a hero reconstructing inferior people with his own moral personality, not as a hero as seen in historical novels of the past. He also asserted that the negative national characteristics were responsible for the Imjin Waeran and believed their reconstruction lay in moral revolution (Yun Hong-ro 1992: 134-136; Yi Jun-sik 2002: 184-186).

Yi Sun-shin began to be described as a loyal man of character by some of the reformist nationalistic lines after the middle of 1920s, suggesting a major frame in understanding him as an image as a national hero overcoming a national crisis as well as the inventor of the Turtle Ship. The stressed points in those two major images differed according to the age. In particular, according to periodic circumstantial changes of repressing political systems since 1960s, two somewhat contradictory images of Yi Sun-shin were emphasized, together or separately.

2. Development in Understanding Yi Sun-shin since Independence

A desire to set up a new nation-state increased as the nation was liberated from Japanese rule in 1945. However, the movement trying to establish a unified nation-state was frustrated due to the division of the Korean peninsula and was immediately followed by the Korean War. In this periodic circumstance, Yi Sun-shin as a national hero overcoming national crisis was raised again. The books such as *Seongung Yisunsin* (The great Hero Yi Sun-shin) (written by Yi Yun-jae)

and *Yichungmugong Ildaegi* (Biography of Yi Sun-shin) (written by Yi Eun-sang) published in 1946 and *Yisunsin* (written by Yi Moo-yeong) published in 1952 are good examples. Besides, Yi Sun-shin was evaluated as one of the many national heroes overcoming a national crisis in many textbooks published in troop information and the education bureau of the Ministry of the National Defense.

It was since the military coup of May 16 of 1961 when he began to be evaluated as the greatest national hero. The military dictatorship system of Park Chung Hee, who came into power via military coup, tried to construct a ruling ideology to secure its political authority while promoting economic development plans in order to fill their lack of their legitimacy. The Park Chung Hee regime's ruling ideology in the early 1960s was a combination of anti-communism giving priority over national security as a base, with development-oriented ideology promising economic wealth through quantitative economic development (Yim Hyeon-jin, Song Ho-geun 1994: 181-182). In the process of realizing this ruling ideology, historical facts of Korea became a very important basis in supporting it.

Park Chung Hee identified Korean history as a series of retrogressions, crudeness, and stagnation and sharply criticized that it was only an extension of survival under a foreign power's repression and subjugation. He also claimed that Koreans disputed severely in factions, lacked independence, lacked the original will to improve the economy, thus, Korean history needed to reform itself thoroughly (Park Chung Hee 1997: 252-256). With this recognition, he identified Yi Sun-shin and Jeon Bong-jun as figures showing patriotism in overcoming national crises and the periods of Sejong, Sejo, and Yeongjo as the renaissance periods of Joseon, thus he evaluated them as major historical figures for overcoming national crises and created new culture. Particularly, Yi Sun-shin and Sejong became subjects of concentrated recognition afterwards as representative figures (Jeon Jae-ho 2000:95) of various projects to promote the making of heroes. For example, repair and expansion of concerned remains including the temple called Hyeonchungsa, religious services or rituals for paying tribute to Yi Sun-shin, and the publication of books and spread of songs related to him (Jeon Jae-ho 1998: 249-251). Park Chung Hee even visited Hyeonchungsa in Asan and recited a commemorative address on Yi Sun-shin's birthday on five different occasions during seven years from 1964 to 1970 in his early period in power.

It can be seen that Yi Sun-shin's evaluation was changing subtly as time

passed in four commemorative addresses of the president.⁹ In the one on April 28, 1964, he was described as a hero who saved the nation by distinguishing himself eternally on the field of battle in the crossroads of the nation's rise and the fall. This is a reflection of the situation where anti-communism giving priority over national security is valued in the early 1960s. However, Yi Sun-shin's established image changed as economic development policy became full scale with the middle of 1960s as a turning point. In the commemorative address of 1966, his image contained the one of a prophet possessing the gift of foresight, as an eminent strategist who sought for countermeasures preparing for Japan's invasion in advance, as well as being one of the great patriotic commanders. In the address of 1967, he appeared as a historical symbol of the so called nation's modernization, as the image of a scientist inventing the Turtle Ship. This reflects the circumstances when development-oriented ideology was valued along with anti-communism from the late 1960s.

In the 1970s, Yi Sun-shin's image became quite different. In the commemorative of April 28, 1970, he was identified as a man of perfect character rather than a national hero. In other words, terms such as justice, loyalty and courage, love and integrity, righteousness and brightness became keywords symbolizing Yi Sun-shin. He was also evaluated as a symbol creating a new history of unification and prosperity at the same time. It was the time when Park Chung Hee regime's centralization of power was intensified through a constitutional amendment allowing a presidential election for a third term. In addition, it was the time when various kinds of society controlling methods such as reserve troops, military training in schools, and a certificate of residence were strongly demanded against an increasing North Korean military threat. That is, an authoritative system began to appear in full force. So, ordinary people were asked to be loyal subjects who could reserve their own interests for the nation's interests rather than be healthy citizens. Under this circumstance, Yi Sun-shin's image as a national hero saving the nation faded and his image was lost as a symbol of loyalty and justice.

As Yi Sun-shin's image changed, other historical figures began to be raised in comparison. Representative examples were King Sejong and the Hwarang, the flower of youth in the Silla dynasty. Park Chung Hee evaluated highly Silla's

9. Parkjeonghuidaetongryeong yeonseolmungip (1-16) (The Collection of President Park Chung Hee's addresses) published by the president's secretariat is used for presidential commemorative addresses for Yi Sun-shin's birthday.

unification of three nations as a historical turning point that laid the foundation of a unitary nation-state, and King Sejong's period was viewed as the renaissance in the nation's history in *Minjok jungheungui gil* (The way to Revive the Nation) in 1978. Therefore, he raised the Hwarang and King Sejong as symbols of unification and revival (Park Chung Hee 1978:3). The Hwarang were particularly evaluated highly as symbolic of the so-called integration and unity tradition, where people sacrificing themselves for the nation. Comparatively, Yi Sun-shin's spirit was somehow lowly evaluated as a "Revival of Hwarangdo in Joseon way" (Minjugonghwadang 1977: 342). Under the authoritative regime in the 1970s when the president himself became an object for worship with the phrase, "Korean Peoples' Leader," Yi Sun-shin as a national hero could not have but become insignificant.

Conclusion

Deifying Yi Sun-shin at the national level under Park Chung Hee faced a new phase with Park's fall. The regime of Jeon Du-hwan (Chun Doo-hwan), who grasped power in a coercive way, strongly demanded various methods to dilute its own negative image. One of them was stopping deifying Yi Sun-shin and re-illuminating Sejong as the nation's spiritual base. This included a political intention that the negative image of military government could be reduced by putting up Sejong, who became a new symbol of culture since he created the Korean alphabet. In this circumstance, new evaluation emerged on Yi Sun-shin carved out as the best hero. For instance, there appeared a positive evaluation on Weon Gyun who was only regarded as comparatively too vicious a person (Yi Jae-beom 1983). In the 1990s, mysteries about Yi Sun-shin prevailed such as the possibility of his committing suicide and seclusion. Recently, a recent novel depicts him as a whole character who was afflicted with human sufferings and missing his family, not only as the great hero.¹⁰ Even a movie in which young a Yi Sun-shin is a prodigal ginseng smuggler as he fails in the military service examination is at work.

However, due to excessive deification and political use of him in the 1960 and 1970s, more objective study of Yi Sun-shin has not progressed.

10. Kim Hun 2001, Kim Tak-hwan 1998, Hong Seong-won 1993 are good examples.

Accordingly, it is hard to judge that recent various evaluations on Yi Sun-shin are based on sound understanding. In other words, overly positive evaluations on Yi Sun-shin as a national hero or needless humbling of him prevent his real character as a historical figure from being seen, and this turns up as a new distortion in recognizing history. Now, a more reasonable understanding of Yi Sun-shin should be started by distinguishing his characteristics as a historical figure from the ever-changing recognition on him according to the political and ideological backgrounds of later periods.

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