Book Reviews

James B. Lewis, ed.

*The East Asian War, 1592-1598: International Relations, Violence, and Memory.*

This collection of essays provides important multidisciplinary and multinational perspectives on what Koreans call the Imjin War (1592-98), the bloodbath that resulted from Toyotomi Japan’s invasion of Chosŏn Korea and the intervention of Ming China. ¹ Despite the intervening years since the inception of this volume at a 2001 conference held at Oxford University, with additional essays solicited and original contributions revised, this book is still one of only a few works to provide perspectives from Korean, Japanese, and Chinese scholarship. The volume also provides significant service in offering translations of works by important scholars from Korea and Japan who deserve to be better known in the Anglophone world.

The contributors do an excellent job explaining the significance of the Imjin War. One of the largest conflicts of the early modern world, it involved upwards of 500,000 combatants from Korea, China, Japan, and even Southeast Asia. The war laid waste to Korea, and transformed China and Japan as well. The war generated huge archival seams in China, Japan, Korea, and Europe that scholars in this volume mined in order to explore a range of issues. In his introduction, editor James B. Lewis enumerates the topics that organize the book into three sections: the shape of prewar relations; experiences of the war (including explanations for the instigation of the war by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Japanese administration in Korea, Korean resistance, Chinese intervention, cultures of

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¹ Imjin refers to the Korean pronunciation of the year 1592 in the Chinese sexagenary calendar. Terms for the war illustrate the political contexts in which historiography of the war operates. Chinese often referred to the war as “The Rescue of Korea” (*yuan Chaoxian*). The Japanese in the Tokugawa period often used the term “conquest of Korea” (*seikan*), while in the post–World War II period, Japanese scholars often employ the name “Invasion of Korea” (*Chōsen Shinnryaku*).
war, and international relations); and the impact of the war as reflected in war memory, literature, and gender relations.

The first essays by Saeki Kōji, Han Moon Jong, and Kenneth R. Robinson show how no prewar structures existed to stem the tide of war. By the mid-sixteenth century, the tributary framework by which Japan had interacted diplomatically and commercially with China and Korea in earlier decades no longer reached the political center of an archipelago rent by civil war. Regional warlords and merchant groups in Japan, Europeans, and “Japanese pirates” (Jp. wakō, Kn. waegu, Ch. wokou)—multiethnic bands led by Chinese expatriate merchants—seized control of the traffic linking Japan with Korea and China. Exchange consisted largely of multilateral raiding and trading ventures circulating silver, Southeast Asian spices and aromatics, and other goods. Contributors devote considerable attention to clarifying Japan-Korea relations. The Sō family, rulers of Tsushima, monopolized traffic between Korea and Japan. Economically dependent on trade with Chosŏn, the Sō incorporated maritime trade privileges into their vassalage structures. The Sō frequently conducted trade with Korea using so-called imposter envoys. They falsified credentials in order to disguise trade envoys as high-ranking Muromachi shogunal officials and other dignitaries in order to receive trading privileges at a higher grade than an embassy might otherwise warrant. The Chosŏn court in the sixteenth century reversed earlier practices and supported these deceptions in order to encourage Tsushima mariners to trade peacefully instead of engaging in piracy.

Emphasizing their extra-official character, Saeki characterizes these interactions as “piratical” (11). While acknowledging that these relations generated considerable micro-scale cosmopolitanism, Saeki argues that the lack of connections between political centers reduced the chance for mutual exchange of knowledge at the state level. Indeed, as several contributors note, the dominance of “pirate” as the defining image of Japanese in Korean and Chinese discourse also caused Chinese and Korean officials to misinterpret aggressive signals emanating from Japan as another pirate raid.

Han explains how factionalism among the ruling yangban class paralyzed the Chosŏn court and compounded other changes that weakened Korea’s response to the invasion. Privatized land holdings transformed peasants into tenants, reducing numbers of conscripts; corruption in tax collection and delivery and military conscription further reduced available fiscal and human resources. Factions did not pursue active intelligence gathering as long as relations were peaceful. Still, Han notes improvements in coastal fortifications and shipbuilding after pirate raids in the 1550s.

Kenneth R. Robinson innovatively presents a long sixteenth century perspective that places the war and its aftermath into a cyclical history of