4 Political Culture in Early Modern Japan and Korea

Hideyoshi’s invasions of Korea in 1592 and 1597 resulted in not only irrevocable impairment to the individual Japanese and Korean states but also had a great impact on the overall East Asian political situation. Japan mobilised 303,500 soldiers, including 102,300 to the Nagoya base in Hizen and 201,200 to the Korean front. About 50,000 to 60,000 Korean troops and about 100,000 soldiers in a relief column from Ming China were mobilised, resulting in a great move of supplies and money. This war worsened the state of the Ming, contributing to its downfall and the rise of Ch’ing China. Due to the large-scale warfare, the Korean and Japanese economies were devastated and innumerable Koreans were taken away by the Japanese army for forced labour or slavery in Japan. Therefore, this war is also known as “the war of abduction” (hito sarai sensō).

Korean slaves were an important commodity in the Japanese–Portuguese trade of that time. After the war many Koreans were sold in Macau, Goa and other colonial cities of Portugal. Furthermore, several thousands of Korean captives who converted to Christianity in Japan played an important part in Japanese Christian history. In the records of Portuguese and Italian missionaries, many forced labourers and slaves were depicted in pictures of several daimyōs exchanging Korean captives for Portuguese guns and silks in Nagasaki and Hirado, and the Church even imposed severe punishment to end the corrupt practices of the Portuguese slave trade.

Wŏlbong haesangnok is an important record of Korean war captives, written by Chŏng Hŭi-dŭk who was a prisoner of war captured in 1597. From this diary the number of prisoners of war taken to Japan could be estimated as several tens of thousands of people. Many Koreans were taken to Awa province (Tokushima pref.) and Chŏng recounted that eight or nine out of ten people he met there were Koreans. Out of around 100,000 captives about 7,500 people were repatriated to Korea and as time passed substantial numbers of prisoners were naturalised in Japan. The repatriation of prisoners of war after Hideyoshi’s invasion, as at the time of the wakō, became a principal diplomatic issue for Korea with Japan. For Chosŏn, which based itself on the Confucian principle of “royal territory, royal people,” the abduction of people by other states was a direct threat to its sovereignty. Korea’s persistent requests for the repatriation of captives was therefore a central concern in the Korea–Japan relationship.

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Despite the failure of Hideyoshi’s incursion on the Korean peninsula, this war brought unexpected assets to Japanese Edo culture. These were the introduction of Korean printing technology, pottery and the Neo-Confucianism of Yi T’oegye to Japan. Korea possessed an advanced technique in printing. During the Koryŏ period, Korea started to use the woodblock printing technique, for example in the publication of the Tripitaka Korea. Later during the Koryŏ period Korea began printing with metal movable type, making Korea’s use of this method the earliest in history. The Bunroku wood printing book – the first Japanese wood printing book – was made by Hoan, a physician in ordinary to Toyotomi Hidetsugu, with the Korean printing type which was brought back during the first invasion of Korea in 1592 (Buntoku 1). Hideyoshi’s armies not only brought back Korean printing tools but also large numbers of Korean and Chinese books to Japan, which were held in the libraries of many daimyos. One example is Hōsa bunko in Nagoya that used to be in the library of the Tokugawa family. It holds a collection of 1391 Chosen bon (Korean printings) that were taken by gozan monks who accompanied Hideyoshi’s armies and some were confiscated from the monk Ankokuji Ekei after the battle of Sekigahara. The gozan monks, owing to their scholarship, were organised in the army of daimyos when they invaded Korea, taking part in negotiations and plundering the books. The plunder of Korean printing technology and books contributed to the advance of Tokugawa intellectual history. Sin Yu-han, a Document Official of the Korean embassy to Japan in 1719, was amazed by the richness of the publishing industry in Osaka and the popularity of Yi T’oegye’s books, as recounted in his observant travelogue of Japan Haeyurok. Japan’s present exuberant publishing industry can be traced back to the Edo period when Korean influence was instrumental to its flourishing. Hideyoshi’s war is also called the “war of pottery” (Yakimono sensō). Since the daimyos abducted many Korean potters from all over Korea, the traditional Korean pottery industry was brought to the verge of collapse. Arita yaki in the Hizen domain and Satsuma yaki in the Satsuma domain were some of the styles initiated by the abducted Korean potters.

Considering this influx from Korea, Abe Yoshio defines this war as a kind of revolution in terms of Japanese cultural development. He hypothesises that the war was one of the reasons for the intellectual revolution in Japan, since abundant Sung, Yüan and Ming Confucian books and publications of Chosŏn taken by the Japanese armies advanced the learning of the Japanese ideologues compared to thought of Buddhist monks who dominated the cultural scene during the Kamakura and Muromachi periods. Abe Yoshio’s work on the Korean influence evident in Tokugawa Neo-Confucianism demonstrates how closely Japan and Korea related to each other in early