

# War and ‘War Effects’: Post-War Chosŏn Economy in 17th Century after Imjin War of 1592

Sung-Woo Kim (Sŏng-u Kim) (Korean history professor, Daegu Haany University)

## I. Foreword

## II. Outbreak of Imjin War of 1592 and People’s Fury

1. Pent-up Fury of People
2. Pre-war Chosŏn Society on Verge of Collapse

## III. Scars of Imjin War

## IV. Efforts to Rebuild Dynasty

1. Royal Household Practicing Thrift
2. Implementation of *Yŏmin Hyusik* (Rest with People) Policy
3. Fiscal Austerity Program
4. Compilation of Government Budget
5. Tax Cut Policies

## V. Resurgence

## VI. Birth of Sage King: An Invented Myth

## I. Foreword

It was the Imjin War (1592-1598) that brought the most serious impact to the Korean society throughout the Korean history. The war was engaged in by all of the three major East Asian countries, Korea, China and Japan, and lasted for a long period of seven years. For this reason, the war left tremendous consequences on all of the three countries. In case of China, the war was followed by the dynastic transition in 1644 from Ming, ruled by the Han Chinese, to Qing of the Manchu people. In Japan, the Western Army (西軍, Segun) which was once under the leadership of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (豊臣秀吉) who spearheaded the invasion of Korea, lost power to the Eastern Army (東軍, Tōgun), led by Tokugawa Ieyasu (徳川家康), in the power shift in 1600.<sup>1</sup>

However, the Chosŏn dynasty and its ruling elites, *yangban*, survived for as long as 300 years after

---

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search For Modern China* 1, 1990, New York: W. W. Norton & Co Inc. (Translated by Kim Hŭi-gyo, *Hyŏndae Chungguk-ŭl Ch’ajasŏ* (1), Seoul: Yisan Press, 1998), pp. 43-61; Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* 1, Belknap Press, 2000 (Translated by Kim U-yŏng et al., *Hyŏndae Ilbon-ŭl ch’ajasŏ* (1), Seoul: Yisan Press, 2006, pp.43-64. The citations are based on the translated version.

the war.<sup>2</sup> Did Chosŏn's economy decline or grow after the war? Thus far, the Korean history researchers have paid greater attentions to the disasters of the war and long recessions after the war. A Korean history textbook for high schools describes the post-Imjin War circumstances as follows.

“Chosŏn sustained heavy damages from the Imjin War. Japanese killings, starvation and infectious diseases took the lives of huge number of people, with the loss of most of the land and household registers driving the state into total disarray. For the purpose of easing the financial crunch, the Chosŏn government issued Kongmyŏngch'ŏp (blank warrant of title, 空名帖), and it dismantled the rigid status system of the Chosŏn society.”<sup>3</sup>

The authors of the history textbook hold the view that the war effects were so serious that it disrupted the rigid status system. As to the point of recovery from the war, some hold that Chosŏn's economy started to make recovery in the late 17th century when the introduction of Taedongbŏp (Uniform Land Tax Law, 大同法) stimulated the distribution economy, while others point to the early 18th century when the Little Ice Age was drawing to end.<sup>4</sup> A question arises here: If the social unrest and economic recession had continued for 100 years, how could it have been possible for the Chosŏn dynasty to sustain itself for 300 years? As seen in the Chinese and Japanese history, such a long economic recession and social unrest must have been followed by a huge scale of political upheaval such as dynastic transition or power shift. The fact that the Chosŏn dynasty has sustained itself for 300 more years might be viewed, contrary to the prevalent views, as a result of the social stability and economic prosperity in the post-war period.

Here arises a need to critically reexamine the conventional perspective on the aftermath of the war. The war surely wreaked havoc on the dynasty by leaving a great number of casualties and dismantling the socio-economic achievements the dynasty had made till then. The existing researches on the war, emphasizing the catastrophic outcome of the war and post-war recession, largely held on to such conventional view. However, war might also have a positive effect as it offers an opportunity

---

<sup>2</sup> For further information about the long sustainability of the Chosŏn dynasty and the steadfast power of the ruling class, *yangban*, see James B. Palais, “A Search for Korean Uniqueness”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 55-2, 1995, pp.414-425.

<sup>3</sup> Chŏng Chae-jŏng et al., *Kodŭnghakgyo han'guksa* (Textbook of Korean History for High School), Seoul: Chihaksa Press, 2014, p. 156.

<sup>4</sup> Kang Man-gil (姜萬吉), "Overview", *Han'guksa* (Korean History) 12 – *Chosŏn Yangban Sahoe-ŭi Mosun'gwa Taeoe Hangjaeng* (Contradictions of Chosŏn's *Yangban* Society and Struggles Against Foreign Forces), Seoul: National Institute of Korean History, 1981, pp. 1-12; Yi Tae-jin (李泰鎭), *Sae han'guksa: Sŏnsasidae-esŏ Chosŏn hugi-kkaji* (New Korean History: From Pre-historical Period Until Late Chosŏn Dynasty), Seoul: Kkach'i Press, 2012, pp. 441-446.

to build a new social structure by drastically eliminating socio-economic contradictions before the war.

In the pre-modern society that had few conceptions of competition or competitive system, autonomous social reform was out of the question. Social reform could be pursued and achieved only on the occasions of radical or violent confrontations. Widespread peasant revolts or outbreaks of war offered such momentum for reform. Only after the end of peasant revolts or war, would the government start to discuss and make efforts for reform measures. In this respect, destruction would serve as a basis for creation.<sup>5</sup>

The critical view of this article is based on the premise of a historical paradox that a misfortune might turn into a blessing. Therefore, this article is aimed at confirming the historical paradox in the case of the Imjin War and the post-war Chosŏn society. This article is focused on the four major subjects: the fury of Chosŏn people erupted with the outbreak of the Imjin War in 1592 and its causes; the reformative efforts of the king and those in power and changes in their attitude toward people after the war; self-reflection of those in power and the post-war recovery policies based on concessions to people's demands; and social stability and economic prosperity that followed the recovery policies. This article aims at delving into the consequences of the war, after characterizing the elements that helped transforming the misfortune of the war into a blessing as 'war effects.'

## 2. Outbreak of Imjin War of 1592 and People's Fury

### 1) Pent-up Fury of People

Under the downpour at dawn on Apr. 30, 1592, King Sŏnjo and his royal family and the key bureaucrats of the Chosŏn government hurriedly left Seoul. It was an indefinite exile without destination. It was 16 days after the 1st division of Japanese Army led by General Konishi Yukinaga (小西行長) occupied the Pusan fortress on Apr. 14. The Japanese forces crossed Han River on May 2 and seized Seoul without meeting any resistance of the Chosŏn Army. The entourage of King Sŏnjo arrived in Kaesŏng in the evening of May 1 after two days of exhaustive flight. They reached P'yŏngyang, capital city of P'yŏngan-do province, on May 8, and could be relieved from the threat of the Japanese forces.

For the nine days of their flight from Seoul to P'yŏngyang, the royal entourage was informed through diverse channels of the rapid advance of the Japanese forces and worsened sentiment of the people in the areas seized by the Japanese forces. The news about the conditions of Seoul, delivered

---

<sup>5</sup> Refer to Peter Turchin, *War and Peace and War - The Rise and Fall of Empires* (Plume, 2006/Trans. Yun Kil-sun, *Cheguk-ŭi T'ansaeng* (Birth of Empire), Seoul: Woongjin Think Big Co., 2011), pp 289-364, 378-394, for a perspective that war offers the opportunity of a new leap forward by eliminating the seething contradictions of the pre-war society in radical way.

by a royal family member Yi Hyŏn (李偁) was quite shocking to the royal entourage.

“As the royal entourage took flight, the military officials called up to defend the state’s capital city also fled, grudgingly saying, ‘It is not the heaven’s punishment, but a man-made disaster.’ The soldiers also fled, abandoning their arms, and went on to say, ‘As the new king came, we are saved! We are willing to welcome the enemy forces!’ People were even pleased to see the royal refuge which had no followers, saying, ‘Now we came to revenge on the king.’”<sup>6</sup>

Upon the outbreak of the war, people vented their pent-up anger and fury at the Chosŏn government. The bureaucrats who belatedly found out the worsened popular sentiment after the war also joined the harsh voices of criticism over the administrative affairs in disarray. Yi Hyŏn’s criticism was the most pungent one. He pointed out the excessively lavish construction projects of the royal court, corruptions and extortions perpetrated by the princes, the royal storage filled with immense amount of valuables, abuse of authority by the royal concubines and favorite retainers, unjust reward and punishment, suppression of the complaints, and vexatious and heavy taxation on people as problematic features. Except for the “vexatious and heavy taxation,” all of the rest five were the irregularities in which the king and those in the royal court were deeply involved.

It was the people, commoners that were finally victimized by the irregularities and corruptions of the royal court. According to the memorial submitted to the king by Kim Sŏng-il (金誠一), who was in charge of the affairs to organize righteous militia in Kyŏngsang-do province as Ch'oyusa (senior officer in charge of the ‘righteous militia’, 招諭使), “Many of the people in Kyŏngsang-do would have their hair styled after the Japanese, wear the Japanese clothing and join the company of the Japanese to go on burglary spree.” The main cause of their traitorous acts was the heavy taxes and excessively severe penalties the Chosŏn government imposed on the people.<sup>7</sup> After all, the vexatious and heavy taxation, cited by Yi Hyŏn as problematic feature of the Chosŏn government, was also the result of the disarrays in the Chosŏn government and corruptions of those in power, including King Sŏnjo. In this respect, it might be said that King Sŏnjo and the power group surrounding the king should be held responsible for the traitorous acts of people and their fury right after the war.

## 2) Pre-war Chosŏn Society on Verge of Collapse

The pent-up fury of people intensified with the accession of King Sŏnjo (r. 1567-1608) to the throne in 1567. It was just that the social ills, accumulated since the early 16th century, started to worsen at that time. It was around the 20th year of his reign in the late 1580s, when he was in his late 30s, that

---

<sup>6</sup> *Sŏnjo Silrok* (Annals of King Sŏnjo), May 14, 25th year of King Sŏnjo (1592).

<sup>7</sup> *Sŏnjo Silrok*, June 28, 25th year of King Sŏnjo (1592).

his misrule went to the extreme. In those days, King Sŏnjo started to indulge his favorite concubines, and their sons were engrossed in amassing wealth. It was Lady Inbin Kim (仁嬪 金氏) who was most beloved by him among his concubines. As she gained greater influence at the royal court, his brother Kim Kong-nyang (金公諫) came to have more political power. Under the favors of King Sŏnjo and the royal concubine, he amassed huge wealth by meddling in every kinds of business of interests and influence peddling in the personnel affairs of the government.<sup>8</sup>

King Sŏnjo, his royal family and their relatives and in-laws enjoyed affluent lives with huge amount of the ill-gotten wealth. Their indulgences in luxury and wanton lives were financed by the taxes extorted from the people under various pretexts. The more the royal court and the relatives of the royal family indulged in extravagances, the more acute destitution the commoners had to endure and the greater anger they were nursing. Their pent-up anger exploded with the breakup of the war. Venting their old grudges, they resorted to ferocious act of retaliation by taking side with the Japanese to attack the government bureaucrats and kill the members of the ruling class, *yangban*. Even before the Japanese forces intruded into Seoul, they set fire on the royal palaces, ransacked the government offices and robbed the government grain storages. Among the bureaucrats, there was a rare, courageous official who dared to put checks on the irregularities of those in power around King Sŏnjo. In late 1591, Kim Sŏng-il, who was deputy director of the Office of Special Counselors, Hongmun'gwan (弘文館), pointed out the irregularities of the Royal Treasury and princes, who were untouchables at that time, in an unthinkable courageous act of accusing them as following.

1. They took bribes by interfering in the government personnel affairs and trials
2. They put arbitrary prices on the items of tribute or donations to the king and pocketed undue profits as much as 10 times the original prices of the tributary items
3. They monopolized the rights to secure firewood in the mountains around Seoul
4. They illegally occupied the farmlands of others
5. They privatized the fishing grounds and salt farms
6. They enslaved the commoners as servants for the palace
7. They forcibly kept daughters of commoners as their wives or concubines.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> The bureaucrats who served King Sŏnjo after the war demanded in unison for punishment of Kim Kong-nyang and Chief State Councilor Yi San-hae (李山海) who carried favor with the former, accusing them of the irregularities they were involved in (*Sŏnjo Silrok*, May 2, 25th year of King Sŏnjo (1592)).

<sup>9</sup> Kim Sŏng-il (1538-1593), "A memorial asking for a halt to the fortress construction project and criticizing the ill

After all, accused of provoking the king's wrath, he was demoted to a military commander post in Kyöngsang-do province on Apr. 11 in a rare punishment for a civil official. It was an evidently retaliatory action taken against him two days before the outbreak of the Imjin War.<sup>10</sup> In the face of the grim situation in which such esteemed Neo-Confucian scholar and high ranking civil official as Kim was banished to the remote military post, there was almost none who could dare to criticize the irregularities involving King Sönjo and those around him. As the king, and his family members, relatives and in-laws were indulged in debauchery, the bureaucrats in the central government and provincial government officials had to curry favor with them. The bureaucrats also had to bribe the royal family members for their promotion. For this reason, all the bureaucrats at the central and provincial offices were engrossed in extorting the people under their jurisdiction. In another memorial submitted in winter of 1591, Kim Söng-il claimed, "Those who are called good local magistrates are none but 'those who imposed heavy taxes'; skilled functionaries those who pester the people for tax payment; officials deemed to have bureaucratic acumen those who give cruel punishments; and earnest officials those who extort the people and offer bribes to those in power. As a result, "there were few respectable and generous magistrates in about 360 counties and prefectures across the country, with most of them only engrossed in extorting the people to amass wealth."<sup>11</sup>

Under exploitative authorities, the commoners were helplessly reeling from indescribable financial difficulties. Kim Söng-il once testified to the destitute conditions of farmers, citing the example of a peasant family he visited. In spite of the year-long labor, the poor peasants were often left with bare hands after repaying their debts with their harvests. They could barely survive on acorns, herb roots, rice bran, or some edible greenery. Even rich peasant families could store just a few bags of rice after harvest, and those who could afford to do so were extremely hard to find.<sup>12</sup>

There was no means for the poor peasants who could not pay off the debts of the current year to be freed from the accumulated debts for years. They were destined to reel under the debts for their lifetime. Those who fail to repay their debts were subject to floggings, and even their family members and neighbors were often held collectively accountable for it. Under the grim situation, some fled to other regions and others were enslaved by the ruling class. Among the commoners, the proportion of

---

practices at that time", *Hakbong Chönjip* (Collected Works of *Hakbong*, 鶴峰全集) vol. 3, winter of 1591.

<sup>10</sup> In a collection of his works, Kim ascribed his demotion to the retaliation by the relatives and in-laws of King Sönjo who were jealous of and complaining about him (Kim Söng-il, "Chronology" (年譜), *Hakbong Chönjip* (Collected Works of *Hakbong*, 鶴峰全集)).

<sup>11</sup> Kim Söng-il, "A memorial asking the king to reflect on himself in the face of the national disaster", *Hakbong Chönjip* (Collected Works of *Hakbong*, 鶴峰全集) vol. 3, winter of 1591.

<sup>12</sup> Kim Söng-il, "A memorial asking for a halt to the fortress construction project and criticizing the ill practices at that time", *Hakbong Chönjip* (Collected Works of *Hakbong*, 鶴峰全集) vol. 3, winter of 1591.

those who married with slaves rose over 50 percent in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup>

Amid the plight of poverty, they suffered from malnutrition, which weakened their immunity, and the frequent outbreak of epidemics such as bacillary dysentery and measles took a huge death toll. The population of Chosŏn started to show the signs of stagnation and decline, after reaching 10 million in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> The destitute and grim conditions of the life of peasants were making sharp contrast with the debauchery of the king and those in power.

From the spring of 1591, one year before the war, the Chosŏn government got down to all out efforts to prepare for defense against the Japanese invasion, right after the diplomatic mission to Japan reported that the Japanese new shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi had the ambition to invade Chosŏn and Ming China. However, the war preparation went to no avail. The Chosŏn forces was instantly crushed by the full scale offensive of the Japanese forces at the start of the war without any proper resistance to it, with the commoners turning their back on the Chosŏn dynasty and voluntarily siding with the Japanese forces.<sup>15</sup> The Imjin War was an international war waged on the Korean peninsula between Chosŏn and Ming China on one side and Japan on the other. There were also scenes of a sort of civil war in the Japanese occupied region, where the oppressed and oppressor were killing each others. From the start of the war, the ruling class of *yangban*, which has fallen prey to the persecution of the oppressed, hurriedly fled or were killed by the commoners, who emerged as new rulers of the liberated world eager to get their revenge on the establishment of the Chosŏn dynasty. Their retaliatory terrorism against the ruling class was far more intense and cruel than the Japanese action against them.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Scars of the Imjin War

The Imjin War was a long war protracted for seven years and an international war waged by the major three East Asian countries China, Korea and Japan on the Korean peninsula. The war has evolved into three phases. The first phase was the first eight months (Apr. 14, 1592 – Jan. 8, 1593) from the Japanese invasion of Chosŏn until the recapturing of P'yŏngyang fortress by the allied forces of Chosŏn and Ming China. During this phase, the Japanese forces were enforcing occupation policies on most of the regions seized by them. Map 1 shows the area under the rule of the Japanese

---

<sup>13</sup> Kim Sung-woo (Kim Sŏng-u), *Chosŏn Chunggi Kukga-wa Sajok* (The State and Gentry in Mid-Chosŏn Period), Seoul: Yŏksa Pip'yŏngsa Press, 2001, pp. 134-144.

<sup>14</sup> Tony Michell, "Fact and Hypothesis in Yi Dynasty Economic History; The Demographic Dimension", *Korean Studies Forum* No. 5, Winter/Spring 1979.1980/ Trans. Kim Hye-jŏng, "Chosŏn sidae Ingu pyŏndong-gwa Kyŏngjesa – Ingu t'onggyehakjŏkin ch'ŭngmyŏn-ŭl chungsim-ŭro", *Pusan Sahak* 17, 1989, pp. 88-94.

<sup>15</sup> Kim Sung-woo, "What Made the Chosŏn Forces Frail and Inept During the War with Japan in the 1590s", *Yŏksawa Hyŏnsil* 87, 2013, pp. 503-506.

<sup>16</sup> Kim Sung-woo, *Chosŏn Chunggi Kukga-wa Sajok*, pp. 332-341.

occupation forces.

<Map 1> The areas under the Japanese control in 1592

The second phase covers the four-year and six-month period (from Jan. 8, 1593 until July, 1597) from the recapturing of P'yŏngyang fortress until the start of the second Japanese offensive in 1597. During this period, the Japanese forces built their 16 strongholds in southern coastal areas in Kyŏngsang-do province in confrontation with the allied forces of Chosŏn and Ming China. The third phase was the one year and four-month period (July, 1597 – Nov. 19, 1598) from the second offensive of the Japanese forces till the withdrawal of the Japanese troops from the Korean peninsula. During the third phase, the allied forces of Chosŏn and Ming China took the upper hand over the Japanese forces which were barely managing to safeguard just a few strongholds in the southern coastal areas. The Imjin War saw the fiercest battles in the first phase, taking the greatest death toll. However, it was in the one year and six-month period from the winter of 1592 till the summer of 1594 that the catastrophic effect of the war began to appear, as the peasants could not engage in farming from the spring of 1592 when the war broke out till the summer of 1593 when the Japanese retreated to the southern coast in Kyŏngsang-do. Therefore, the entire state was suffering from severe famine from the winter of 1592 till the summer of 1594. The extreme plight from famine can be found in the records of Yu Sŏng-nyong (柳成龍), chief state councilor, which described the miserable scene of the winter of 1593.

“The entire state of Chosŏn was reeling from famine. Exhausted from the hard labor of delivering the military provisions, old men and children collapsed here and there. Those who had any strength to move became thieves, with the rest of the people being killed by epidemics. The plight from the famine went to such extremes of driving fathers and sons to slaughter each others to feed on them, with husbands and wives killing each others. Bones of the dead were scattered around streets like weeds.”<sup>17</sup>

However, the living conditions of peasants started to improve in the autumn of 1594 under the farming promotion policy implemented from the early spring of that year. Yu sŏng-nyong recalled of the times, “The number of those who starved to death drastically fell, and the vagrants went to their hometowns after the winter of 1594.”<sup>18</sup> Given the circumstances, the casualties of the war were

---

<sup>17</sup> Yu Sŏng-nyong (1542-1607), *Chingbirok* (A Record for Penitence and Warning, 懲忿錄), winter of 1593.

<sup>18</sup> Yu Sŏng-nyong, 'Military Training Office (訓練都監)', "Miscellaneous Writings" (雜著), *Sŏae-jip* (Collected Works of *Sŏae*, 西厓集).

deemed to be concentrated to the two years from the spring of 1592 till the summer of 1594. To estimate the number of deaths during the 7-year war period, two statistical data could be used as references. One is the Table 1, which shows the proportion of the discontinued lineage of Sönsan Kims, a renowned local *yangban* family in Sönsan, Kyöngsang-do province, during the 16<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<Table 1> Discontinued lineage of Sönsan Kim family in the 16<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> centuries

Generation	Period	Families with Discontinued Lineage	Families with Adopted Children	Total Number of Families
6 <sup>th</sup>	1540s	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	12
7 <sup>th</sup>	1570s	2 (8.3%)	2 (8.3%)	24
8 <sup>th</sup>	1600s	10 (31.3%)	0 (0%)	32
9 <sup>th</sup>	1630s	8 (36.4%)	0 (0%)	22
10 <sup>th</sup>	1670s	3 (9.4%)	2 (6.2%)	32
11 <sup>th</sup>	1700s	1 (2.4%)	7 (21.9%)	42

Source: *Sönsan kimssi Chokbo* (Genealogical Records of Sönsan Kim Family) (1869)

Note: As sons of concubine were not entitled to be members of the ruling class, the lineage succession by them was excluded from the statistics.

Table 1, shows the highest proportion of discontinued family lineage of Sönsan Kims in the period from 1600s to 1630s, at 31.3 - 36.4 percent. Compared to the proportions in previous and following years, ranging at 8.3 – 9.4 percent, it is an unusually high proportion. It was due to the great number of war deaths, and it was also impossible to adopt children to succeed the family lineage during the wartime. The steep rise in the number of Sönsan Kims whose lineage discontinued in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century is ascribed to the war effects. Given the practice at that time not to enlist the children under the age 10 in the family register due to the high infant mortality, actual number of deaths among the sons of Sönsan Kim family is deemed to have been greater than the Table 1 shows. Therefore, the mortality rate in Sönsan Kim family is estimated to have been over 40 percent during the wartime.

The second statistical record based on the data of the Chosön government shows the migration of the population during the wartime in Table 2. In 1625 (3<sup>rd</sup> year of King Injo), 30 years after the war, the Chosön government conducted a nationwide census for the first time after the war. The census adopted a method to tally the number of natives and refugees separately at each county and prefecture. The population of natives and refugees in Sönsan and Ch'öngdo, Kyöngsang-do province, at that time is shown in Table 2.

<Table 2> The proportion of natives and refugees in Sönsan and Ch'öngdo in 1625

	Natives	Refugees	Total (households)
Sönsan	706 (62.8%)	418(37.2%)	1124
Ch'öngdo	256 (47.5%)	283 (52.5%)	539

Source: Sönsan – Ch'oe Hyön (1563-1640), "Household", *Ilson-ji* (一善志).

Ch'öngdo – *Injo Silrok* (Annals of King Injo), Dec. 15, 3<sup>rd</sup> year of King Injo (1625).

Sönsan had greater number of native households (accounting for 62.8%) than refugees (37.2%), while Ch'öngdo had more refugee households (52.5%) than native ones (47.5%). Though the proportions of the refugee households of the two counties differ from each others, it is notable that the proportion of the refugees accounted for as much as 37.2 – 52.5 percent. The Registration Administration (號牌廳), responsible for the census, regarded the case of Ch'öngdo as exceptional one, but did not fail to add, “other counties or prefectures are not much different from Ch'öngdo,”<sup>19</sup> thus confirming that the war also exerted greater influences on migration. Supposing that the case of Sönsan is presumed to have been more similar to a general trend than that of Ch'öngdo, it is presumed that at least one third of the state’s population were displaced for some reasons during the wartime.

Table 1 indicates that about 40 percent of the ruling *yangban* class was killed during the war, while Table 2 shows that the refugees accounted for more than one third of survivors of the war. Taken overall with the two tables, the death toll of the war is presumed to have been about one third at the lowest estimate. As seen above, the Imjin War was a great calamity which took heavy tolls on Chosön’s economy and people.

#### 4. Efforts to Rebuild the Dynasty

##### 1) Royal Household Practicing Thrift

King Sönjo returned to Seoul in Oct. 1, 1593. It was one year and five months after he had escaped from Seoul. Once returned, the King was not what he used to be. He became a frugal monarch who would do everything to practice thrift and frugality. He wore only coarse cotton clothes until the last day of his life and instructed that the meat dish should not exceed one on his royal table. He also issued a reform in dress code, forbidding expensive Chinese silk clothing (紗羅綾緞) with colorful patterns, while prescribing tight sleeves and narrow brimmed hats for men for practical purposes.<sup>20</sup> The King emphasized and practiced thrift in all aspects of the royal court such as palace (Chöngdong temporary quarters), royal meals, and royal costume.

As the King made such a dramatic change, the royal family and high-ranking officials who used to

<sup>19</sup> *Injo Silrok*, Dec. 15, 3<sup>rd</sup> year of King Injo (1625).

<sup>20</sup> *Sönjo Silrok*, Aug. 28, 26<sup>th</sup> Year of King Sönjo (1593); Sept. 2, 26<sup>th</sup> year of King Sönjo; Sept. 22-Oct. 1, 26<sup>th</sup> year of King Sönjo.

be indulged in luxury had to followed suit to “improve their habits.”<sup>21</sup> The thrift campaign of the royal family and high ranking officials made a room for downsizing the overblown budget of the government. It was the first step to reform the lax management of royal treasury, which was the main culprit behind the destitution of the people before the war.

The most urgent task of reform was to implement the fiscal austerity program through the means of cutting the government budget. For a tighter rein on the expenses of the government, the amount of tributes paid to the government agencies had to be reduced. To the end of institutionalizing the austerity measures, the government had to revise *kongan* (tax revenue list, 貢案), as it served as a guideline for budget compilation for the Ministry of Taxation, Hojo (戶曹), whose mission was to extend budget for the royal court and central government agencies after figuring out the size of their expenses.

King Sŏnjo gave directions to the Ministry of Taxation to revise *kongan* six months after his returned to the capital on May, 1594. Kim Su, minister of taxation, who was delegated all the authority over the revision project, got down to the work to revamp *kongan*, based on *Kyŏngin kongan* compiled in 1470 (1st year of King Sŏngjong), which was widely praised as that of thrift and frugality, strictly in accordance with the austere policies in the early Chosŏn Dynasty. The fact that the government took note of the tax revenue list compiled one hundred and twenty-five years before proves the determination on the part of King Sŏnjo to reenact the glory of the early Chosŏn Dynasty. The revision work was done without a hitch by summer of the same year. The revised tax revenue list was called *Kap'o kongan* (Kongan of 1594).<sup>22</sup>

It was thanks to the determination of the King and those in power to implement financial austerity program that the revision was done so swiftly by summer of the same year. It was the first fruition of mutual efforts of the king and royal family who set the example of thrift and the bureaucrats who, in turn, extolled the King’s virtue and conformed to the austerity drive. As the government succeeded in accomplishing both missions to downsize the national treasury and to operate fiscal austerity programs, the government and bureaucrats earnestly pinned high hopes on the reform measures.

---

<sup>21</sup> Chŏng Chae-ryun (1648-1723), *Kongsa kyŏnmunnok* (Records of Experiences in Public and Private Life, 公私見聞錄) 1. Chŏng was a son-in-law of King Hyojong, a great grandson of King Sŏnjo. He wrote *Kongsa kyŏnmunnok* which described the lifestyle of the king and the royal family, thus permitting a look into the frugal lives of the royal family in the 17th century.

<sup>22</sup> *Sŏnjo Silrok*, May 14, 27th year of King Sŏnjo (1594). *Kap'o kongan* was named after the year it was compiled in 1594 (the year of kap'o in the sexagenary cycle). All the major taxation guidelines such as *yanggan* (land register) and *hojŏk* (household register) were called by the year they were compiled like *Kyemyo yanggan*, or *Pyŏng'o Hojŏk*.

## 2) Implementation of the *Yömin Hyusik* (Rest with People) Policy

Even with the successful austerity program, the government has yet to solve other problems plaguing the dynasty. The ultimate goal of reform was to stabilize the society and recover the economy by extending a wide range of benefits to the peasants and rebuilding their trust in the government. It was the only measure that could rescue the Chosön Dynasty on the brink of collapse and secure a foothold to rebuild the dynasty. To restructure the government and to regain popular support, the government had to push for a full-scale reform to the extent of rebuilding the dynasty. It was the Border Defense Council, Pibyönsa (備邊司), that assumed the leading role in implementing the reform. The Border Defense Council, which emerged as the supreme decision-making agency of the government as well as top administrative unit after the outbreak of war, presented the twelve-point reform program to reconstruct the dynasty in September, 1600 (33th year of King Sönjo).<sup>23</sup>

Presenting the reform program, the Border Defense Council stressed the need to “build up the national strength while taking rest with people,” in particular. After witnessing the popular rage and indignation exploded right after the outbreak of war, the government was also keenly aware that it should not overburden the populace and civil society. The King and the government officials believed that the populace and civil society should take a leading role in the project to restore the dynasty and that the government should provide a foothold, based upon which the dynasty and populace could jointly enjoy economic growth and social stability. This belief was a result of the scathing reflection on the heavy tax burdens imposed on the populace, the evil practices of intervening in civil society and market economy, and the other atrocities the government inflicted on the populace before the war. The alternative to those previous malpractices was the so-called ‘*Yömin Hyusik* (Rest with People, 與民休息) policy’ under which the government takes a rest along with people. It was the policy of ‘government’s minimum intervention’ in the private sector in other words.

The policy was historically famous as a success model of the Emperors Wendi (文帝) and Jingdi (景帝) in the early years of the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-8 A.D.) of China. The *Yumin Xiuxi* (與民休息) policy, put forward by the two emperors, was designed to act on the utter failure of the immediately preceding dynasty of Qin (221 B.C.-206 B.C.). Qin Shi Huangdi (221 B.C.-210 B.C.), who was the first emperor of the unified China, made a mistake of applying too harsh a control on the civilian society and of excessively intervening in civil affairs. Thus the Qin Dynasty collapsed only 15 years after the unification.

The emperors of the Western Han Dynasty, who learned a lesson from the mistakes of Qin Shi Huangdi, tried to check the intervention of the government in civil affairs and made earnest efforts to help the private sector autonomously reinvigorate the economy. The major policies of the two

---

<sup>23</sup> *Sönjo Silrok*, Sept. 26, 33rd year of King Sönjo (1600).

emperors included the austerity campaign led by the imperial household, drastic cut in the tax on the peasants by one third of that of the previous period, permission to the civilian access to the state-owned forest and inland water areas, and mitigation of legal penalties. The policy made a surprising result for the 60 years of the benign rule since the foundation of the Han Dynasty. The Chinese traditional scholars of history regarded this era as one of the most successful periods of China, calling it the 'Wenjing zhi zhi' (Rule of Wendi and Jingdi, 文景之治)(179 B.C.~141 B.C.).<sup>24</sup>

The state of affairs in Chosŏn after the Imjin War of 1592 was not far from the Chinese society which remained thoroughly devastated for eight years after the fall of Qin Dynasty until the inauguration of the Han Dynasty. The seven years' war brought death to one third of the whole population, displaced another one third of people and turned lots of farmlands into wasteland. Under the gruesome circumstances, the King and those in power agreed to benchmark the Rule of Wendi and Jingdi for reconstruction and resurgence of the dynasty. The argument of Inspector-General, Taesahŏn (大司憲), Yun Sŭng-gil in March, 1601 (34<sup>th</sup> year of King Sŏnjo) which came in this vein is as follows.

“ Now we have our peace back again with the help of the Heaven, after the disastrous war. It is truly high time to reform all the misrules and stabilize the dynasty once and for all, following the path of Restoration (維新) of the Zhou (周) Dynasty and Revival (中興) of the Han Dynasty... we should immediately do something, as we do to rescue people at the risk of being burnt or drowned to death, to allow people to rest by abolishing all the malpractices which driven the state into total disarrays.”<sup>25</sup>

Yun Sŭng-gil presented the 'Rest with people' policy, stressing that the government should take a measure to accomplish what the Restoration of the Zhou Dynasty and Revival of the Han Dynasty did. The prerequisite of the policy was the austerity program led by the King and the royal household as well as active support to and participation of government officials in it. It also required those with power and vested rights to endure the difficulties and pain from the austerity drive and to refrain from intervening in the affairs of civil sector, so that it might give people the benefit of tax cuts. In 1594, the compilation of *Kap'o kongan* was swiftly completed, thanks to concessions made by King Sŏnjo and the royal family. Given the social atmosphere, there was no reason to doubt the success of the reform project to rebuild and resuscitate the dynasty.

---

<sup>24</sup> Xu, Lian-da (徐連達), Wu, Hao-kun(吳浩坤), Zhao, Ke-rao(趙克堯), *Zhongguo Tongshi* (History of China, 中國通史), Shanghai: Fudan Daxue (復旦大學) Press, 1986 / Chungguksa Yŏn'guhoe trans. *Chungguk T'ongsa*, Seoul: Ch'ŏngnyŏnsa Press, 1989. pp. 155-192.

<sup>25</sup> *Sŏnjo Silrok*, March 22, 34th year of King Sŏnjo (1601).

### 3. Fiscal Austerity Program

To help the peasants realize the government's will to take audacious measures of reform, the government had to drastically ease their burdens of tax. It was the only way for the government to gain their confidence in its commitment to reform measures. To lessen the tax burden, *kongan* (tax revenue list) and *yangan* (land register, 量案) had to be completely revised. *Kongan* was a kind of architectural design for the state coffer, and *yangan* was the basic source to estimate the tax revenue. For this reason, the dynasty rebuilding program the Border Defense Council submitted to King Sŏnjo in September, 1600 called for revision of *kongan* in its Clause 7 and readjustment of *yangan* in its Clause 8.<sup>26</sup>

The most important project of the reform was revision of *kongan*. Only on condition of revision of the revenue list, could the government figure out the exact size of the government expenses, implement austerity program, based on the new *kongan*, and at the same time, ease the tax burden on the peasants. *Kongan* has once undergone revision in the name of *Kap'ŏ kongan* in 1594. However, the revision of *kongan* that year was nothing more than a palliative measure hurriedly taken during the wartime, based on *Kyŏngin kongan* in 1470. The government was in need of a more complete shape of *kongan* to implement a full-scale reform to rebuild the dynasty after the war. In the face of the pressing need for a new revenue system, the government got down to the work to revise *kongan* from January, 1601 (the 34<sup>th</sup> year of King Sŏnjo), just three months after the Border Defense Council presented the 12-clause reform program.

Pushing for the reform measures, the Chosŏn government focused most of its efforts on belt-tightening policy. The government pursued the fiscal austerity program by compiling the national budget, strictly based on the current expenses, and by cutting down on the total size of its expenses. The government budget was largely divided into current expenses and extraordinary ones. Current expenses, managed by Hojo (Ministry of Taxation, 戶曹), comprised the salaries paid to bureaucrats and military servicemen, defense budget, spending on the national and royal memorial services, and expenses on construction and maintenance of royal palaces and government office buildings. The budget for extraordinary expenses, set aside for the royal court and the central government offices,

---

<sup>26</sup> Among the 12-clause reform measures put forward by the Border Defense Council, four were related to economic reform. (*Sŏnjo Silrok*, Sept. 26, 33<sup>rd</sup> year of King Sŏnjo (1600))

1. Clause 2: Write off all the pre-war debts
2. Clause 7: A new *kongan* should be set up to redress the unfair tributary payments
3. Clause 8: Land survey should be conducted to find out the basis for the state finance.
4. Clause 9: To secure rice reserve in the government granary, land taxes should be imposed on the currently arable land (時起田), and the wasteland should be reclaimed as official colony land to subsidize the government offices.

was either secured by the latter's own revenue source or subsidized by Hojo. Given this composition of the government expenses, current expenses took the core part of the government budget, with the extraordinary expenses being merely a supplement to the current expenses. About the operation of the government's current and extraordinary expenses and the means to secure the revenues, Yu Hyŏng-wŏn (柳馨遠), a respected reformist scholar in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, presents his views as follows:

“The current expenses of the government should be set under the limit of ordinary tax revenues only, and other additional taxes should be abolished (author's note: A law should be enacted to enforce the government to make ends meet with ordinary taxes alone)... Under the current system, all the land tax revenues should be remitted to Seoul (central government) to be spent for payment to bureaucrats, military budget and other expenses. In addition to the land tax, there are tributes and offerings to the royal court. The payment to the local magistrates and other officials is not financed by the budget for current expenses. So, the local officials collect taxes from the local communities if there arises any need for additional spending, including their salary. For this reason, the local taxes can be regarded as extra taxes. With the prevalence of this kind of malpractices, the extra taxes in local tributes kept on growing.”<sup>27</sup>

As the main source of the revenue of current expenses was land tax, it was called ordinary tax (or regular tax (正稅)). The revenue for extraordinary expenses, which was not financed by the Ministry of Taxation, was collected in the form of additional taxes (or tributes). Therefore, the austerity program focused on curtailing the extraordinary expenses. Aside from the belt-tightening measures, the government gave the royal court and central government offices a free hand in securing their own revenues. What draws attention in connection with the measure is the policy on the official colony land (屯田) in 1594 and Clause 9 of the dynasty rebuilding program of 1600.<sup>28</sup> These measures were aimed to have the government offices balance their budget by permitting them to secure their own revenues through the operation of official colony lands. The policy had the effects of accomplishing two missions with one action, as it could implement the austerity program through drastic cuts in extraordinary expenses while demonstrating the government's leading role in reclaiming the wastelands.

---

<sup>27</sup> Yu Hyŏng-wŏn (1622-1673). 'Expenses' (經費), "Chŏnje hurok" (Postscripts on Land Policy, 田制後錄) 1<sup>st</sup> part, *Pan'gye surok* (*Pan'gye's Occasional Notes*, 磻溪隱錄). For the audacious vision of reform of Chosŏn society in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, refer to James B. Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions - Yu Hyŏng-wŏn and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> *Sŏnjo Silrok*, Oct. 17, 26<sup>th</sup> year of King Sŏnjo (1593); Sept. 26, the 33<sup>rd</sup> year of King Sŏnjo (1600). Refer to footnote 26.

Under much eased burdens to achieve balanced budget thanks to the cut in extraordinary expenses, the government made all-out efforts to set the budget for its current expenses. The salaries to the bureaucrats for a year amounted to about 40,000 sŏm of rice (about 132,000 bushels of rice; 1 sŏm = 90kg = 3.3 bushels) with those to military servicemen to about 20,000 sŏm of rice (about 66,000 bushels of rice). On top of the spending on salaries, the expenses for military operation and other purposes cost the government about 40,000 sŏm of rice. Therefore, the total size of the current expenses of the government amounted to about 100,000 sŏm of rice (about 333,000 bushels of rice), about half of the government budget which amounted to 200,000 sŏm of rice in the pre-war period.<sup>29</sup>

The austerity program also drastically cut all the expenses, without any exception. One example is the reduction of the government budget size from 200,000 sŏm of rice to 100,000. The determination of the government to cut the budget is also confirmed by the reduction in the annual amount of ginseng offered to the Chinese emperors. Before the Imjin war, Chosŏn donated 1,900 kŭn (41.9 bushels; 1 kŭn = 600g) of ginseng to China, but the donation was reduced to 500 kŭn under *Kap'okongan* in 1594, and further to 200 kŭns after the war.<sup>30</sup> Ginseng donations to China in 1594 and 1600 accounted for just 26.3 percent and 10.5 percent of the total size of offerings in the pre-war period. Han Hyo-sun, a working-level supervisor of Kongan Dogam (Budget and Taxation Committee, 貢案都監) at that time, went on to comment, “The amount of donations (to China) is very small.”<sup>31</sup>

As the annual budget of the government was set, the government could set the annual size of tax revenues at 100,000 sŏm of rice, equal to the size of current expenses of the government. After settling on the total revenue, the government got down to compilation of land register (量案), as it could obtain the total amount of tax revenues with the register, and figure out the due amount of tax per kyŏl (about one or two hectares). The government, at that time, adopted a new method of ‘autonomous survey of the land size,’ called *kakja t'aryang* (各自打量), instead of the ‘uniform land survey’ (一括量田) in the pre-war period. The new method was to permit the local communities of counties and towns to register their currently arable land (時起田) only.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, the government allowed peasants to register their lands as lowest 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grades for the

---

<sup>29</sup> *Sŏnjo Silrok*, Aug. 13, 34th year of King Sŏnjo (1601). Chief State Councilor Yi Hang-bok (李恒福) estimated the annual budget of the government at about 200,000 sŏm of rice in the pre-war period, with 80,000 sŏm of rice for bureaucrats, 40,000 for military servicemen, 40,000 for national memorial services and 40,000 for extraordinary expenses at central government offices.

<sup>30</sup> *Sŏnjo Silrok*, March 17, 34th year of King Sŏnjo (1601).

<sup>31</sup> *Sŏnjo Silrok*, Oct. 28, 34th year of King Sŏnjo (1601).

<sup>32</sup> *Sŏnjo Silrok*, Sept. 26, 33rd year of King Sŏnjo (1600).

purpose of minimizing the unrests resulting from the new land survey system and lowering their tax burdens. As the original purpose of the new land register system was to estimate the tax revenues for the current expenses of the government, it did not have to pay heed to whether the peasants register the size of their land correctly or not. Upon the new government policy on land survey, the peasants at that time showed “keen interests in reclaiming barren lands, in spite of the additional tax burdens incurring from it.”<sup>33</sup> In the name of *Yömin Hyusik* policy, the government started to implement the policy to set the people at ease and not to interfere with their economic activities.

The project to compile the land register, started from the autumn of 1602, was completed in the spring of 1604. The land register of 1604 is called *Kyemyo yangan* (Land Register of 1604).<sup>34</sup> The size of the lands enlisted in the register of 1604 totaled 530,000 kyöl (530,000-106,000 hectares) across the country. The three southern provinces of the state, Ch'ungch'öng-do, Chölla-do and Kyöngsang-do, which had greater population and arable lands than other regions of the state and thus remained the main source of tax revenues, reported a total of 380,000 kyöl (Kyöngsang-do 130,000, Chölla-do 130,000 and Ch'ungch'öng-do 120,000). A total of 530,000 kyöl of land across the country, however, was far smaller than the bureaucrats expected, even in consideration of the new method of autonomous survey of the land, given the fact that the government was securing a revenue of 290,000 kyöl in the three southern in 1600 provinces (100,000 in Kyöngsang-do, 100,000 in Chölla-do and 90,000 in Ch'ungch'öng-do), two years after the end of the war.<sup>35</sup> Thus, The Land Register of 1604 ended up with a mere increase of 31 percent (90,000 kyöl ) in the number of taxable lands over that of the year right after the end of the war.

The revision of *kongan* was completed in 1601 but put to hold, and it was finally promulgated in 1605 (38<sup>th</sup> year of King Sönjo), one year after the *yangan* (land register) system was completed in 1604. The one promulgated in 1605 is called *Ulsa kongan* (The Tax Revenue List of 1605). Three major economic reform measures of revision of *kongan*, establishment of *yangan* and implementation of fiscal austerity program were completed in 1605, seven years after the end of the war.

#### 4. Compilation of Government Budget

The total size of the Chosön government budget in 1605, set after the three major economic reform measures were implemented, was 100,000 sŏm (about 330,000 bushels) of rice. The greatest portion of the government budget was the salaries to the bureaucrats and military servicemen, amounting to 60,000 sŏm of rice. The rest of current expenses, such as defense budget, and spending on memorial services and construction projects, was due to be financed by the revenues from the official colony

---

<sup>33</sup> *Sŭngjŏngwŏn Ilgi* (Daily Records of Royal Secretariat), Jan. 27, 13<sup>th</sup> year of King Injo (1635).

<sup>34</sup> *Sönjo Silrok*, Feb. 10, 37<sup>th</sup> year of King Sönjo (1604).

<sup>35</sup> *Sönjo Silrok*, Aug. 13, 34<sup>th</sup> year of King Sönjo (1601).

lands. Therefore, the government could manage to make ends meet, if it could secure the revenues for its current expenses of 60,000 sŏm of rice. To raise the land tax in kind of 60,000 sŏm of rice from the 530,000 kyŏl of land, the government had to collect just 4 tu (or 24 liters; 1 tu = 6 liters) of rice per one kyŏl of land.<sup>36</sup> The land tax collected thus and remitted to Seoul in a year totaled 71,000 sŏm of rice,<sup>37</sup> almost doubling the size of the revenue for the government's current expenses estimated at 40,000 sŏm of rice.<sup>38</sup>

However, the tax revenues in 70,000 sŏm of rice could not fully cover the government's expenses, as its spending always surpassed the revenues, in spite of the belt-tightening efforts. The budget deficit was inevitable, as defense budget, national ceremonies and memorial services, and renovation and maintenance of the palace and government offices were financed by the tax revenue for the current expenses. After all, the budget deficit from additional spending imposed burdens on the government. In addition, unexpected expenses frequently arose in such case as when the government had to receive the Chinese envoys. Therefore, the government could not sustain its austerity program just by enforcing belt-tightening measures on the royal family members and their relatives, and bureaucrats. Amid the chronic financial crunch, there were growing voices among the bureaucrats calling for an additional collection of land taxes.

In 1606, one year after *Ŭlsa kongan* (The 1605 Tax Revenue List) was promulgated, the government eventually raised the land tax to 6 tu (36 liters of rice) per kyŏl.<sup>39</sup> With the increase of the tax by about 31 percent, the annual revenues of the government rose to 95,000 sŏm of rice. In spite of the tax raise, however, it was not easy for the government to avoid the financial crunch, and the tax rates kept on increasing. During the reign of King Kwanghae-gun (r. 1608-1623) who succeeded King Sŏnjo, the government additionally collected 2.2 tu (13.2 liters) of rice per kyŏl in the name of *samsu-mi* (rice for three divisions of troops, 三手米) to subsidize the budget of the Military Training Agency (訓練都監). In the reign of King Injo (1623-1649) who succeeded King Kwanghae-gun, 1.5 tu (9 liters)

---

<sup>36</sup> The farmland size of one kyŏl produced an average of 600 tu (3,600 liters) of unhulled rice, or 240 tu of milled rice. In case of paddy field, the size of one kyŏl amounted to 3,000 p'yŏng (1 hectare), and in case of dry field, 6,000 p'yŏng (2 hectares). The minimum tax on one kyŏl, graded the lowest at 6th, and for the poorest harvest year, was 4 tu (24 liters of milled rice). If the harvest size rises to mid-lower level, it increased to 6 tu (36 liters of rice).

<sup>37</sup> The taxable lands registered in the Land Register of 1604 totaled 530,000 kyŏl, but the actual amount of taxes in kind of rice remitted to Seoul was about 71,000 sŏm of rice, as the tax was exempted on the lands damaged by natural disasters (about one third of the taxable lands), with the local rice reserve (on 130,000 kyŏl) in the three northern provinces (P'yŏngang-do, Hamgyŏng-do and Hwanghae-do) excluded from taxation ( $[400,000 \text{ kyŏl} \div 2/3] \times [4 \text{ tu of rice} \div 1 \text{ sŏm of rice (1 sŏm = 15 tu)}] = 71,040 \text{ sŏm of rice}$ ).

<sup>38</sup> *Sŏnjo Silrok*, June 25, 39th year of King Sŏnjo (1606).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

of rice was added again to the tax rate per kyöl in the name of Tangnyang (唐糧). Eventually, the land tax rose to 9.7 tu (58.2 liters) of rice, increasing by 5.7 tu (142.5 %) from the original tax rate (4 tu). With the raise of the land tax, the government's tax revenue amounted to 172,300 sŏm of rice, a sufficient size to help the government to avoid budget deficit. Therefore, the land tax rate was fixed on 9.7 tu per kyöl. As the rice transportation cost and other miscellaneous charges were added to the tax, the total land tax was largely perceived amounting to 16 tu (96 liters) of rice per kyöl.<sup>40</sup>

It is also notable that some taxes in local tributes were included in the revenue sources for the current expenses to finance the government budget in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Taedong tax (Uniform Land Tax, 大同稅) imposed on land was one of them that replaced the taxes in local tributes. The Uniform Land Tax Law, Taedong-bŏp, to levy taxes in local tributes on land went into a trial operation in Kyonggi-do from 1608 (1<sup>st</sup> year of King Kwanghae-gun) before being implemented across the country. The revenues from Taedong tax, levied on the currently arable lands, was managed and spent by the Agency to Bestow Blessings (宣惠廳). It took as long as 90 years until the Uniform Land Tax Law went into effect in the three southern provinces and Hwanghae-do in the north, finally.<sup>41</sup> Because of this prolonged procedure of the law to go into full-scale effect, it is hard to figure out the total amount of revenues raised through the tax and how much of it was used for the current expenses of the government.

However, it is possible to surmise through a few means the size of the tax in local tributes which was used for the current expenses. The report about the annual revenues of tax in tribute by War Minister Yi Si-bang in October, 1647 (25<sup>th</sup> year of King Injo) to King Injo draws attention in regard to the tax in local tributes. In the report, Yi said that the size of the revenues from tributes from the eight provinces across country amounted to 90,000 sŏm of rice and that from the four southern provinces, including Kyŏnggi-do, to 50,000 sŏm of rice.<sup>42</sup>

Around the time when *Ŭlhae yangan* (Land Register of 1635) was established in 1635 (13<sup>th</sup> year of King Injo), taxable lands sharply increased to 754,300 kyöl across the country. Based on the Land Register of 1635, the taxes in local tributes from 8 provinces, appropriated into current expenses of the government, amounted to 1.8 tu (10.8 liters) of rice per kyöl, and those from four southern provinces (536,500 kyöl) to 1.4 tu (8.4 liters) of rice per kyöl.

The Uniform Land Tax Law already went into effect in Kyŏnggi-do and Kangwŏn-do at that time.

---

<sup>40</sup> Yi Chŏng-ch'ŏl, "Taxations in Ye'an county in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century seen through *Kyeam ilrok* (Kim Nyŏng's Diary)", *Han'guk sahakbo* vol. 53, 2013, pp.255-259.

<sup>41</sup> The Uniform Land Tax went into a trial operation in 1608 (1<sup>st</sup> year of King Kwanghae-gun) in Kyŏnggi-do in the name of Sŏnhye-bŏp (Law to Bestow Blessings, 宣惠法), and finally went into effect in Hwanghae-do in 1694 (20<sup>th</sup> year of King Sukjong), settling as a representative tax in local tributes of the state.

<sup>42</sup> *Injo Silrok* (Annals of King Injo), Oct. 3, 25<sup>th</sup> year of King Injo (1647).

The tax per kyöl in the two provinces was averaged at 16 tu (96 liters) of rice. Under the related regulations, 10-14 tu of them was supposed to be remitted to the central government, with the rest 2-6 tu of rice allotted for the reserve of local governments.<sup>43</sup> Among the offerings (10-14 tu of rice per kyöl) in Taedong tax to the central government, 2 tu of rice were appropriated into the current expenses of the government. The ratio of the tax in local tributes appropriated into the central government among Taedong tax is confirmed by the discussions in Ch'ungch'öng-do in July, 1651 (2<sup>nd</sup> year of King hyojong) on Samdumi-böp (Three-Tu of Rice Law, 三斗米法), aimed at raising 3 tu of rice per kyöl . It was an alternative measure to the Taedong Tax Law which Chief State Councilor Kim Yuk (金堉) vainly sought to enact in Ch'ungch'öng-do.<sup>44</sup> Given the circumstances, the tax in local tributes appropriated to the revenue for the current expense of the dynasty is presumed to be 2-3 tu of rice per kyöl .

We can figure out the budget size of the Chosön government, based on the presumed amount of the land tax and Taedong tax allotted for its current expenses. Supposing that the revenues from the land tax per kyöl was 9.7 tu of rice, the yearly revenue for its current expenses total 172,000 sŏm of rice. Granted that the portion of Taedong tax appropriated to the revenues for current expenses was 2-3 tu of rice per kyöl , the revenues from Taedong tax are presumed to total 47,000 sŏm of rice (in case of 2 tu per kyöl ) or 70,600 sŏm of rice (in case of 3 tu per kyöl). Therefore, the budget of the government in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century is estimated at 219,000-242,900 sŏm of rice (170,000 sŏm of rice in land tax + 50,000~70,000 in tax in local tributes). The total budget of the dynasty set at 230,000 sŏm of rice at that time amounted to 115 percent of the government budget in the pre-war period.<sup>45</sup> The Chosön government is presumed to have managed to make end meet with the budget size given above.

## 5. Tax Cut Policies

The ultimate purpose of the government to push for economic reform was to give benefits to the peasants through tax cuts, which would in turn help gaining popular confidence in the dynasty. To give the tax breaks, the government had to drastically reform the taxation system, which bore heavily on the people. The most problematic features of the taxation system of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was *pangnap* system (indirect payment system, 防納構造), which made it almost impossible to pay taxes without

---

<sup>43</sup> *Kwanghae-gun Ilgi* (Annals of King Kwanghae-gun), May 7 of 1<sup>st</sup> of King Kwanghae-gun (1608); *Injo Silrok*, Aug. 29 of 2<sup>nd</sup> year of King Injo (1625); Feb. 7 of 3<sup>rd</sup> year of King Injo (1626).

<sup>44</sup> *Hyojong Silrok* (Annals of King Hyojong), July 18, 2<sup>nd</sup> year of King Hyojong (1651).

<sup>45</sup> As of 2013, the official price of one bag of rice (80 kg) is 170,000 Korean won. Supposing that one sŏm of rice (90 liters) in the pre-modern period weighed the same as the bag of rice in modern day, the market price of 230,000 sŏm of rice is valued at about 39.1 billion won and at 35 million U.S. dollars (supposing the exchange rate at 1,100 Korean won for dollar).

the aid of *sajuin* (middlemen in tax payment, 私主人) and the "light land tax versus heavy tax in local tributes (正稅輕. 雜役重)" phenomenon.

These two exploitative taxation practices were doomed under the government's aggressive reform measures. It was a closed taxpaying system, in which *sajuin* monopolized all channels to deliver the taxes to the royal court and central government, that troubled the peasants most. The practice of *sajuin*, a sort of brokers, was called *pangnap* (防納), or blockade at payment, and the indirect tax payment system operated by them was called *pangnap* system. The main reason that the indirect payment of taxes through *sajuin* was prevalent all through the 16th century was ascribed to the exclusive rights of *sajuin* to collect and pay taxes under the patronage of those in the royal court and their in-laws. The latter was the very political force that supported *sajuin*'s monopoly of taxpaying channel.

The taxpaying middlemen, *sajuin*, collected three times the due amount of the tax in local tributes from the peasants. One third of the taxes thus collected were presented to those in the royal court and their in-laws, with another one third of the taxes being spent for operation cost of them.<sup>46</sup> It eventually resulted in about two thirds of the taxes in local tributes levied on the peasants pocketed by the few in power and *sajuin*. The huge wealth and indulgences of the royal family members and their relatives was the result of the malpractices in taxation. All the riches concentrated in the hands of the royal family and their in-laws, and their luxury and debauchery were indebted to the blood and sweat of the peasants.<sup>47</sup>

Those in the royal court and reform-minded bureaucrats, who vividly remember the pent-up fury and rebellious actions of the peasant right after the war, made earnest efforts to abolish the indirect taxpaying practices. An alternative measure to *pangnap*, proposed by the bureaucrats, was the tax policy under which the government assumed the role of *sajuin*. Under the measure, the central government set the value of local specialties to be paid in kind of rice and cotton cloths in terms of the market prices in Seoul, and local governments of counties and prefectures presented the taxes in rice and cotton cloths in lieu of the local specialties to the government so that the government offices (such as the Taxation Ministry and the Agency to Bestow Blessings) might procure the local specialties with the taxes in kind. The new tax payment system settled as a representative method of collecting tax in local tributes, as the Uniform Land Tax Law gradually went into effect across the country. The direct involvement of the Ministry of Taxation and the Agency to Bestow Blessings in

---

<sup>46</sup> Yu Sŏng-nyong, "Memorial on Current Affairs", *Sŏae-jip* (Collected Works of Sŏae) 5, April, 1594.

<sup>47</sup> For the reference on how the state-approved monopoly interferes with the fair competition and erodes the national wealth, refer to Daron Acemoglu & James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail - The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* (Random House Inc. 2012/Ch'oe Wan-gyu trans, *Kukga-nŭn Wae Silp'ae hanŭnga*, Seoul: Sigongsa Inc., 2012), pp. 270-287.

the procedure of collecting the taxes abolished the chronic malpractice of rejecting taxes offered in local specialties.

As the government intervened in the tax delivery and distribution procedure, thus dismantling the monopoly of taxpaying channel of *sajuin*, the cost to procure the local specialties was sharply reduced to the market prices of Seoul.<sup>48</sup> It is confirmed by the changes in the prices of leopard skin. Along with ginseng, leopard skin was one of the representative specialties Chosŏn offered to China. The prices of the two items always remained high as they were hard to procure and on heavy demands. The prices of these extremely luxurious items went up even higher under the monopolistic tax delivery system of *pangnap*. In 1591, one year before the Imjin War, the price of one sheet of leopard skin equaled to that of hundreds of cotton cloths, about the same as the yearly minimum cost of living for 8-9 households, each of which have 8 family members.<sup>49</sup> But, as the government agencies procured leopard skin at market price, its price sharply fell to the level of those for about 70 rolls of cotton cloths, about one third of the pre-war prices.<sup>50</sup> The price for 1 kŭn (600 grams) of ginseng also sharply fell to the value of 16 rolls of cotton cloth at that time.

As confirmed in the part, "Fiscal Austerity Program", the amount of ginseng and leopard skin offered to the Chinese royal court was drastically cut under the *Ŭlsa kongan* (Tax Revenue List of 1605) to one tenth of the offerings in the pre-war period. The cost to procure them also dropped to less than 30 percent of their earlier prices, with the burden of tax in ginseng and leopard skin sharply lowered to 3-4 percent of the pre-war level. As the tax in local tributes was sharply cut, and the prices of the tax items plunged, the tax on land per kyŏl was also lowered to 13-16 tu of rice.<sup>51</sup>

It is also notable that the "light land tax versus heavy tax in local tributes" (正稅輕·雜役重) phenomenon has transformed into the one which put more emphasis on collection of land tax. Under the austerity program of the government after the war, the land tax accounted for the greatest portion of the tax revenues and was fixed at 16 tu of rice per kyŏl after a few readjustment of the tax rate. In contrast, the tax in local tributes for the extraordinary budget of the government was sharply reduced,

---

<sup>48</sup> *Kwanghae-gun Ilgi*, Jan. 3, 9<sup>th</sup> year of King Kwanghae-gun (1617).

<sup>49</sup> The daily wage of labor was 2 tu of rice (1.2 liter) at that time, and the minimum cost of living for a family with 8-9 for a month was 12 tu of rice (72 liters) (*Kwanghae-gun Ilgi*, Oct. 11, 3<sup>rd</sup> year of King Kwanghae-gun) (1611). Therefore, the minimum cost of living for a family in a year was 144 tu of rice (864 liters). It had the value of 24 rolls of cotton cloth (one roll = 6 tu of rice).

<sup>50</sup> Kim Sŏng-il, "A memorial asking the king to reflect on himself in the face of the national disaster"; *Sŏnjo Silork*, March 17, 34<sup>th</sup> year of King Sŏnjo (1601).

<sup>51</sup> The Uniform Land Tax Law went into gradual effect, depending on taxation conditions of provinces. Therefore, the amounts in tax payment varied with the provinces, with Kyŏnggi-do and Kangwŏn-do paying 6 tu of rice, and Ch'ungch'ŏng-do and Chŏlla-do 13 tu of rice. However, with the lapse of time, the Taedong tax payments from the provinces reached almost same level, being finally set at the national standard of 12 tu of rice in 1660.

as the royal court and central government offices started to maintain their budget balance while the *pangnap* system was put to an end. The rate of tax in local tributes was 13-16 tu of rice during the reign of King Injo. With the cut in tax in local tributes, the taxation system was transformed into the one in which the land tax rate is higher than the tax in local tributes. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the government could maintain the balance between the land tax and taxes in local tributes.

Taxes on the peasants in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century were composed of the land tax and taxes in local tributes, which totaled 29-32 tu per kyöl (16 tu in land tax + 13-16 tu in taxes in local tributes). In addition, the peasants had to shoulder the burden of extra taxes in the form of labor services, slave tribute (身貢) and taxes in military service. However, the taxes in labors did not entail as much burden as the taxes in local tributes.<sup>52</sup> Total tax on land is presumed not to exceed 31-34 tu of rice per kyöl, at the most. Therefore, the tax rate accounted for 12.9 (31 tu of rice) – 14.1 (34 tu of rice) percent of the total turnover (240 tu of milled rice or 600 tu of unhulled rice) of a land of one kyöl .

On the other hand, some heeds should be paid to the fact is that *Kyemyo yangan* in 1604 (with 530,000 kyöl of land) and *Ulhae yangan* of 1635 (with 754,300 kyöl of land) did not register all the lands being cultivated at that time. The total size of the lands being cultivated around the mid-1630s almost reached the pre-war level (1,5165,500 kyöl). It is confirmed by comparing the arable land size before the war with the total size of the currently arable and wastelands in the three southern provinces which Yu Hyöng-wön obtained from a clerk when the Land Register of 1635 was being compiled. Table 3 shows the comparison of the pre-war arable land size and the size of the land registered in the Land Register of 1635 in three southern provinces.

<Table 3> The comparison of the cultivated land size in three southern provinces in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> Century and that of 1635

	Pre-war number of Kyöl (A)	Number of Kyöl in 1635 (B)			B/A (%)
		Currently Arable lands	Wastelands	Total	
Kyöngsang-do	315,027	193,052	108,052	301,104	95.6
Chölla-do	442,189	191,008	114,298	335,306	75.8
Ch'ungch'öng-do	252,504	131,373	127,088	258,461	102.4
Total	1,009,720	515,433	379,438	894,871	88.6

Source: Yu Hyöng-wön , 'Kukjo chönjebu' (Supplements to National Land Register, 國朝田制附), "Chönjegosöl" (Discussions on Farmland System, 田制攷說), *Pan'gye surok* (*Pan'gye's Occasional*

<sup>52</sup> In case of Sönsan, Kyöngsnag-do, the slave tributes (917.7 rolls of cotton cloth) accounted for 29.8% of total tax in local tributes (3,076.3 rolls of cotton cloth) (Ch'oe Hyön, "Local Tributes" (土貢), *Ilson-ji*).

Notes)

According to Table 3, Land Register of 1635 registered 515,433 kyöl of currently arable lands only, just 50 percent of the pre-war figure of 1,009,720 kyöl in three southern provinces. If the wastelands were added to it, the total size of the lands increased to 894,871 kyöl, reaching 88.6 percent of the pre-war level. However, as the Land Register of 1635 adopted the autonomous survey method, as *Kyemyo yangan* in 1604 did, the total size of the farmlands, including reclaimed ones, was likely far larger than registered. In this respect, the size of cultivated lands in the mid-1630s has almost caught up with the pre-war level. So, the Land Register of 1635 is deemed to be an incomplete one, enlisting just 50 percent of the cultivated lands.

Judging by the total size of real arable lands, the tax rate of 34 tu of rice on one kyöl of land accounted for merely 6.5-7 percent of the total yield of the land. Even if the taxes in local tributes and other charges remaining uncollected were added to the tax, the tax burden on the land would have been less than 10 percent of the total yield.

After all, the taxation system in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century is characterized as the one-tenth tax rate and the balanced taxation between land tax and taxes in local tributes. With the reform of taxation system, the Chosŏn dynasty in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century was approaching the ideal type of the pre-modern Confucian society of East Asia. Yu Hyŏng-wŏn explained about the taxation system of the ideal society of ancient China, Three Dynasties (Sandai, 三代), as follows.

“As the Neo-Confucian scholar Lü Zu-qian (呂祖謙) of the Southern Song dynasty expounded on the taxation policy of King Yu (禹), the kings (of the Three Dynasties) collected no other taxes than the tithe. They would also procure the local tributes within the limit of the revenues from the tithe.”<sup>53</sup>

The taxation policy of the Chosŏn dynasty in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century was close to the ideal type of the Three Dynasties in ancient China, as represented by the citation above. As the taxation system thus took a sound shape, the peasants were freed from the heavy tax burdens of the pre-war period. As opposed to the peasants of the 16<sup>th</sup> century reeling under the burden of taxes, the peasants of the 17<sup>th</sup> century emerged as freer and autonomous subjects with less tax burden.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Yu Hyŏng-wŏn, 'Kyŏngbi' (Expenses, 經費), "Chŏnje hurok" (Postscripts on Farmland Policy, 田制後錄) 1st part, *Pan'gye surok* (*Pan'gye's Occasional Notes*, 磻溪隱錄).

<sup>54</sup> The ratio of taxes against turnover in the Japanese society in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century was about 40 percent. But it was gradually reduced and fell below 30 percent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, the tax rates of Chosŏn in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were around 21-25 percent. (Yi Hŏn-ch'ang, "Chosŏn Hugi Sahoe-wa Ilbon Sahoe-ŭi Sangp'um Yut'ong-ŭi Pigyo Yŏn'gu - Chŏn'gŭndae Chaejŏng-gwa Sijang Hyŏngsŏng-ŭi Kwallyŏnsŏng-ŭl

As confirmed in the "Compilation of Government Budget" part above, the government budget during the reign of King Injo was about 230,000 sŏm of rice, a 15 percent increase over that (200,000 sŏm of rice) in the period before the Imjin War of 1592. However, the total tax rates on the peasants sharply fell to less than 10 percent of their turnover, about one third (30-40 percent) of that in the pre-war period. Even though the government budget size slightly grew, the taxes on the peasants were remarkably reduced. The government's audacious measure of reform in the taxation system was the decisive factor behind such a surprising result. As the taxation system took a sound shape, the taxes collected from the peasants were no longer missing in the procedure of tax remittance. Thus, the Chosŏn government could secure firmer financial basis even with the lower tax rates than before the war.

The dynasty rebuilding program, based on extreme fiscal austerity measures, tax cut policies and radical reform of the taxation system, made greater success than expected amid the royal court's initiative to set the example of austerity and the frugality campaign among the ruling elites. The Imjin War of 1592 provided the momentum for the audacious reform which would have been unthinkable in the pre-war period. After sustaining a serious impact from the war, the Chosŏn government made desperate efforts to rebuild the dynasty and eventually succeeded in accomplishing the reform to the extent of completely reconstructing the dynasty. The life or death efforts of the post-war government were the very driving force that helped the Chosŏn dynasty surviving for 300 more years.

## V. Resurgence

The scourge of the Imjin War was the single biggest calamity inflicted upon the Chosŏn dynasty its 500-year-old history, taking the lives of a third of the total population and displacing another one third. The pre-war population totaling more than 10 million plunged to 6,670,000.<sup>55</sup> The government officials lamented the sharp drop in population, saying, "People are all dead and gone. Not a shadow of people is seen," or "the population appears to be one tenth of what it used to be."<sup>56</sup> However, the

---

Chungsim-ŭro" (A Comparative Study on Distributions of Products in Late Chosŏn Society and Japanese Modern Society – Focused on Correlations Between Pre-Modern National Finance and Formation of Market, *Chaejŏng jŏngchaek nonjip* (The Journal of Korean Public Policy) 1, 1999, pp. 61-64). The tax rates of the Chosŏn dynasty in the early and mid-17<sup>th</sup> century was lower than that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and far lower than that of Japan in the same period. All through the pre-modern East Asian dynasties, the tax burden of Chosŏn in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century could be viewed as exceptionally light one.

<sup>55</sup> Tony Michell estimated that the population decreased by 2 million due to the Imjin War. However, the death toll of the war is presumed to be one third of the total population at the most conservative estimate. Therefore, it might be reasonable to estimate the Chosŏn population at 6,670,000.

<sup>56</sup> *Sŏnjo Silrok*, Aug. 13, 34th year of King Sŏnjo (1601); Oct. 19, 34th year of King Sŏnjo (1601).

peasants could gradually recover stability of their lives as the government maintained the "policy not to interfere with civil affairs" sticking to the 'Rest with People' principle. With huge cuts in taxes and less labor services, they were able to fully engage in farming. In addition, anyone with labor force was given a chance to cultivate the land abandoned during the war, and the government provided them with seeds, plow oxen and tax exemption, as well. After 10 years of the efforts, the dynasty could get over with the social instability and economic damages caused by the war.<sup>57</sup>

Amid the social stability and economic growth, the population of Chosŏn, which was declining throughout the 16th century, began to grow. In case of Japan, the annual growth rates of the population were about 0.58-0.65 percent during the period, called 'the third wave of population growth,' from the 14<sup>th</sup> century till the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Right after the opening of the Tokugawa Shogunate in the 17th century, in particular, the growth rate soared to 0.78 percent, marking the 'age of population revolution.'<sup>58</sup> In comparison, the annual population growth in China during the reign of Emperors Kangxi and Yongzheng(1661-1735) of the Qing dynasty averaged at 1.1 percent.<sup>59</sup> So, it is presumed that the Chosŏn dynasty in the 17th century, with most of its socioeconomic malaise resolved, must have seen a population growth similar to those of Japan and China in that period. Accordingly, this article has the premise that the Chosŏn dynasty sustained a population growth rate of 0.75 percent over the seven decades from 1598, when the Imjin War ended, until the outbreak of *Kyŏngsin Taegigŭn*, the great famine of 1670-1671, caused by the disastrous 'little ice age', which reduced the population by 11-14 percent.<sup>60</sup> Given this rate of growth, Chosŏn's population is thought to have reached 11.4 million in 1670.

The steady population increase for the 70 years was followed by the intensive method of farming as well as a quick spread of advanced agricultural technology to underdeveloped regions. It is testified by the fact that the rice-transplanting method (移秧法), available only in mid- and northern Kyŏngsang-do areas before the Japanese invasion, was employed across northernmost regions of Hwanghae-do and P'yŏngan-do provinces in the early 18th century, just 100 years after the war.<sup>61</sup> As

---

<sup>57</sup> The *yangban* class in Hamyang, Kyŏngsang-do, which sustained the heaviest damages from the second Japanese offensive in 1597, started to recover their economic vitality around 1610. (Kim Sung-woo, *Chosŏn Chungki Kukga-wa Sajok*, pp.418-421).

<sup>58</sup> Kito Hiroshi (鬼頭宏), *Jinkokara Yomu Nihonrekisi* (The Japanese History Read in Terms of Population), Kodansha (講談社), 2006/Ch'oe Hye-ju·Son Pyŏng-gyu trans, *In'guro Ingnŭn Ilbonsa*, Seoul: ōmunhaksa Press, 2009. pp. 82-92.

<sup>59</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* 1, pp. 126-129.

<sup>60</sup> Kim Sung-woo, "17segi-ŭi Wigi-wa Sukjong-dae Sahoasang" (The crisis of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and Social Aspects During the Reign of King Sukjong), *Yoksawa Hyŏnsil* 25, 1997, pp. 15-39.

<sup>61</sup> Kim Sung-woo, *Chosŏn Sidae Kyŏngsangdo-ŭi Kwŏllyŏk Chungsim-ŭi idong: Yŏngnam nongbŏp-gwa*

a result, the government acknowledged a population increase in the mid-17th century, 50 years after the war. It is proved by the officials' such affirmative remarks as "the population, and the grown size of villages and cultivated farmlands in the southern provinces are no smaller these days than those before the Imjin War," or "the population sharply increased, and all the fields were fully cultivated."<sup>62</sup>

Amid the evident population growth hard to deny, the government got down to a census project, the only post-war recovery project which remains yet to be accomplished. A nationwide census was one of the major projects called for by the government officials since the end of the war. Nevertheless, the project faced strong resistance from those with vested rights such as the bureaucrats and *yangban* class, who retained a large pool of labor force of slaves and serfs. Two attempts to conduct a full-scale census, one in the early reign of King Kwanghae-gun (r. 1608-1623) and the other in the early reign of King Injo (r. 1623-1649), eventually went down the drain. As a consequence, the government went no further for the 50 years after the end of the war than just tallying the number of the minimum populace for operating the government. Table 4 represents the dynasty's census results from the late 1630s to 1670s, when the census was conducted regularly every 3 years.

<Table 4> Census Results of the Chosŏn dynasty in the 17<sup>th</sup> century

	Households	Pop. (A)	Estimated Population		Remarks
			Actual Population (B)	A / B(%)	Remarks
1639 (17 <sup>th</sup> year, Injo)	441,827	1,521,165	9,003,558	16.9	
1642 (20 <sup>th</sup> year, Injo)	481,660	1,649,012	9,208,435	17.9	
1645 (23 <sup>rd</sup> year, Injo)	555,911	1,738,888	9,417,973	18.5	
1648 (26 <sup>th</sup> year, Injo)	533,720	1,793,701	9,632,279	18.6	
1651 (2 <sup>nd</sup> year, Hyojong)	580,539	1,860,484	9,851,462	18.9	
1654 (5 <sup>th</sup> year, Hyojong)	628,603	2,047,261	10,075,632	20.3	
1657 (8 <sup>th</sup> year, Hyojong)	668,737	2,201,098	10,304,904	21.4	
1660 (1 <sup>st</sup> year, Hyŏnjong)	758,417	2,479,658	10,539,392	22.6	Five Households in Block Unit Act in Effect
1663 (4 <sup>th</sup> year, Hyŏnjong)	809,365	2,851,192	10,779,216	26.5	
1666 (7 <sup>th</sup> year, Hyŏnjong)	1,108,351	4,107,156	11,024,498	37.3	
1669 (10 <sup>th</sup> year, Hyŏnjong)	1,342,274	5,164,524	11,275,361	45.8	
1672 (13 <sup>th</sup> year, Hyŏnjong)	1,176,917	4,695,611	10,394,341	45.2	Great Famine of 1670-1671 broke out.
1675 (1 <sup>st</sup> year, Sukjong)	1,250,298	4,725,704	10,630,865	44.5	

Source: Pak Il-wŏn, 'Nationwide Census Result' (京外戶口總數), "Introduction" (外篇), *T'akji-ji* (Records of the Ministry of Taxation, 度支志), 1788.

Remarks: The household statistics in 1669 and 1672 are based on the *Annals of King Hyŏnjong*.

---

*Han'gukhyŏng Chiyŏk kaebal* (Transition of Regional Hegemony in Kyŏngsang-do During Chosŏn Dynasty: Yŏngnam Farming Method and Regional Development in Korea), Seoul: Taehaksa Press, 2012. pp. 85-90.

<sup>62</sup> *Sŭngjongwŏn ilgi* (Daily Records of Royal Secretariat) July 26, 4<sup>th</sup> year of King Hyojong (1653); *Hyojong Silrok*, Nov. 13, 9<sup>th</sup> year of King Hyojong (1658).

According to Table 4, the census was able to register less than 20 percent of the actual population even during the reign of King Injo in late 1640s. This was largely due to the strong resistance of the bureaucrats and ruling *Yangban* class to the census. During the reign of King Hyojong (r. 1649-1659), Injo's successor, the registered population barely covered 20 percent of the actual population. After *Ogajakt'ong-bŏp* (Five Households in Block Unit Act, 五家作統法) was enforced in 1660 (1<sup>st</sup> year of King Hyŏnjong), however, the census was conducted more forcibly,<sup>63</sup> and the *Pyŏng'ŏ hojŏk*, or Household Register of 1666 (7<sup>th</sup> year of King Hyŏnjong), succeeded in registering 37.3 percent of the actual population. It ended up with registering 299,000 households and 1.256 million people in addition to the figures 3 years before. Three years later in 1669, the census went more far-fetched, with 45.8% of the actual population tallied. The trend continued after 1670s, when about 1.4 million lost their lives during the *Kyŏngsin* Great Famine. It is confirmed by the household registers of 1672 and 1675, after the Great Famine, which registered 44.5-45.2 percent of the actual population.

The Household Register of 1666 is deemed as a milestone of the post-war census projects, as it testifies to the change in the position of the government to tally the population in more earnest and forcible way. In the end, the Chosŏn dynasty could reestablish itself after securing more complete form of land register and census list as late as in the late 17th century, 70 years after the war. Until then, the dynasty has remained in a quasi-state of war or a state of emergency. It means that it took as long as seven decades for the country in a quasi-state of war to reestablish itself as a 'normal state.' The strong principle of 'Rest with People' was the decisive factor that enforced the dynasty to remain in a state of emergency for an abnormally long time.

Thus, the *Yŏmin Hyusik* policy stayed firm for a long time as the standard for all the major public policies of the dynasty. However, in the mid- and late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the government came at a crossroads, with the policy outliving its desired effects. Productivity growth in the agricultural sector almost reached its peak and the population pressure kept on eroding the economic prosperity. Moreover, a large part of the fruits from the post-war recovery programs was funneled into the hands of the royal family, bureaucrats and the ruling *yangban* class, as the economic aids under the recovery program were set aside mostly for them. On the other side of the apparent economic prosperity was the social phenomenon of collapse of the peasantry. And the dynasty started to see a growing social pressure calling for new wine to be put into a new wine skin.

## VI. The birth of Sage King: An Invented myth

War must have an evil side, in that it destroys and brings down everything. At the same time, it also

---

<sup>63</sup> *Hyojong Silrok*, March 18, 10<sup>th</sup> year of King Hyojong (1659); *Hyŏnjong Silrok* (Annals of King Hyŏnjong), June 24, 1<sup>st</sup> year of King Hyŏnjong (1660).

has an angelic character in that it offers a chance to start the whole society anew and paves the way to prosperity. From a long-term view on the historical evolution, war is often seen to provide an opportunity for a society to be reborn by preventing the scourge of the four knights of the Apocalypse, namely, famine, war, plague and death.<sup>64</sup>

Still, there should be prerequisites for turning the tragedy of war into a blessing. They are thorough and sincere reflection on history, intensive efforts of the ruling class to reform the society and their willingness to make concessions to demands of those governed. Otherwise, it is never easy to overcome the calamities from war. Relentless conflicts and extreme strife the African nations suffered during the civil wars between the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries bear testimony to this.<sup>65</sup>

The historical case of the Chosŏn dynasty of the 17<sup>th</sup> century could be recorded as a story of success, given the fact that it recovered from the damages of seven year's international war in a relatively short span of time and reinvigorated the economic and social vitality. Compared with the dismal shape of the dynasty on the brink of collapse in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was a dramatic turn of events. It was the Imjin War that brought the decisive momentum of the changes, and the exhaustive self-reflection and ardent efforts for reform on the part of the king and those in power made the dramatic changes possible. The key factor to the success of the dynasty in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was nothing other than the 'war effect.'

The 'war effect' was maximized by the government's minimal intervention policy, i.e. *Yumin Xiuxi* principle. The war recovery policy, introduced by Emperors Wendi and Jingdi of the Western Han dynasty of China, also opened the prosperous reign of King Sŏnjo and Injo of Chosŏn Dynasty in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The policy deserves attentions in that it brought about the same results of social stability and economic prosperity in both cases of China and Korea, notwithstanding the staggering gap of two millennia, and historical and cultural differences between the two countries.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Refer to Peter Turchin, *War and Peace and War*, pp 361-364, 378-386 on the Four Knights of Apocalypse before the war; famine, war, plagues and death.

<sup>65</sup> The cases of Sierra Leone, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe are the examples. Refer to Daron Acemoglu & James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, pp. 524-528, 479-491, 503-519, 524-534, for the extreme internal conflicts and economic debacle of these African countries.

<sup>66</sup> The 'Rest with People' policy did not make historically positive effects all the time. Behind the economic prosperity were the sacrifices of general populace and the monopoly of the wealth and power by the local gentry who later evolved into the aristocrats. It was the *Yumin Xiuxi* policy in the early Western Han dynasty that turned the 600 years of the Wei-Jin dynasties (220-317) and Sui-Tang dynasties (581-907) into the 'Age of aristocracy' The Korean society trod similar path to the Chinese one. Amid the economic prosperity maintained until the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the social polarization worsened to a serious level, followed by the downfall of the peasant populace. The socio-economically negative effects, coupled with the damages from the little ice age in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, drove the Chosŏn society of into total disarray in the period from the late 17<sup>th</sup> till the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. However,

In that respect, ‘the reign of King Sŏnjo and Injo,’ one of the most peaceful and prosperous era in the Korean history, should be arguably seen as emulating "the reign of Emperors Wendi and Jingdi" of the Western Han dynasty. The bureaucrats of the Chosŏn dynasty in the mid- and late 17<sup>th</sup> century, among others, evaluated the era as such. A memorial to the king by Pak Hong-u, a former magistrate, in 1661, is a clear testimony of the greatest respect the bureaucrats had for King Sŏnjo.

“The late King Sŏnjo never had exuberant palaces built, upheld the virtue of thrift and always wore old and worn-out clothes. The King once handed one of his old clothes down to his eighth son, prince Ŭich'ang, ... and people who looked at the clothes shed tears, saying, ‘his virtue was such that not a single year saw poor harvest throughout his 40 years of reign.’ ... The king’s virtue was such that the heaven was touched and the people willingly obeyed him.”<sup>67</sup>

In the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, King Sŏnjo began to earn the reputation as a great monarch who overcame the unprecedented disaster caused by the Imjin War and brought the dynasty onto the path to renaissance. The image stands in stark contrast to criticisms leveled at him in the period leading up to the Japanese invasion. In 1592, when the war was impending, the king, in his early 40s, indulged himself with his concubines and extravagant lifestyle, and was thus regarded as a mediocre ruler at best, responsible for a series of ill-advised policies. Granting monopolies to the royal family and engrossing himself in amassing wealth, he brought the dynasty to the brink of collapse. He went on to flee from the capital in secret issuing no royal edict of self-accusation and even cowardly sought refuge in China despite strong opposition of the officials.

However, the war thoroughly transformed him. He turned frugal and practical and steadfastly supported sweeping reform measures, proposed by reform-minded officials. Thanks to his concessions to the voices for reform, the government was able to implement reform almost to the extent of reconstructing the dynasty. The driving force behind the Chosŏn dynasty for the next 300 years was the reform efforts made by the king and the bureaucrats. With these endeavors turning out to be a great success, the Chosŏn society was quickly stabilized and the economy grew by leaps and bounds. As a result, he came to be regarded as a great monarch who restored the dynasty and eventually, a sage king. Since the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, the bureaucrats even compared his reign to the Rule of Emperors Wendi and Jingdi, the heyday of the Han dynasty of China. Thus, a myth of another sage king was invented, and he was remembered as such in the history of the dynasty.

---

the negative effect of The ‘Rest with People’ policy remains beyond the scope of discussion in this article.

<sup>67</sup> *Sŭngjŏngwŏn Ilgi* (Daily Records of Royal Secretariat) June 21, 3<sup>rd</sup> year of King Hyŏnjong (1652), "a memorial of a former magistrate, Pak Hong-u (朴弘蟻)".