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Private Armies in the Early Korean Military Tradition (850-1598)

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From 850 to 1598, private armies were a critical feature of Korean history. They buttressed the military government of the Ch'oe in the late 1100s, usurped the Koryo Dynasty to make way for the rise of the Chosen in 1392, and fought the Japanese invasion forces of Toyotomi Hideyoshi during the Imjin War (1592-1598). They came from every facet of Korean society: peasant resistance forces, retainers of noble houses, and even contingents of Buddhist monks. Yet there has not been a great deal of analysis of the conditions that gave rise to private armies, nor whether in each conflict there were unique or similar conditions that lent themselves to the formation of private military forces in Korea during the different periods. Because these armies were not a constant feature of Korean history, the question of why certain eras witnessed the rise of private armies, while others did not, requires a closer examination.

This paper argues that private armies in Korea formed as a response to instabilities in the central government. As evidence, this paper looks at those periods in which private armies arose in Korea and analyzes the conditions (in the central government) during those times. There are three distinct historical scenarios during which private armies arose: when the central government was perceived as weak, when powerful political actors in the Korean state attempted to protect and preserve their existing power structure, and when foreign invasion overwhelmed the central government's ability to respond to these threats. By organizing all the major instances of the formation of private armies into a unified narrative of reaction to government weakness, the paper will demonstrate that the common element in the creation of private armies was an ineffective and unstable central government.

The first portion of the paper will be spent creating a clear definition of private army based on the degree to which a military

force is integrated into the formal power structure. Private armies—unofficial military formations not integrated into the official structure of the central government—will be distinguished from paramilitaries who, though not regular soldiers, are part of the government power structure. In order to illustrate this distinction, case studies from historical and contemporary military forces will be utilized.

DEFINING PRIVATE ARMIES

In order to understand how private armies functioned in early Korean society, it is first important to construct an effective definition of what constitutes a private army. Casual observers often attach a variety of labels to private armies without fully understanding them. Phrases like “mercenary,” “militia,” and “paramilitary” are often used interchangeably. This creates confusion and makes it difficult to assemble various military forces into an organized narrative; terms like “paramilitary” are substituted for both private and public armies both general discourse and specialist literature with little explanation. A review of historical military forces suggests that the best definition of a private army is a military force outside the organizational and command structure of a civil government. This definition effectively separates the term “private armies” from other terms that may be inappropriately applied to these private military organizations.

For an army to be private, it must be divorced from the public sphere financially and structurally. The Peiyang Army of Yuan Shih-k'ai, a Chinese private army, provides a useful example of the distinction between public and private armies. Founded in 1901 by Yuan Shih-k'ai, Governor of China's Chihli province, the Peiyang Army has been put forward as an example of a private army because of Yuan's great control over the army, his direct decision to create the force, and his financing of some of its activities.¹ Yet a closer look at the Peiyang Army reveals that it was in many ways a public force. It was expanded in size with the consent of the Empress Dowager of China, the embodiment of the Chinese Central government, and it was raised largely in response to the threat to China posed by the Russo-Japanese War.²

Throughout its existence, most of the money used to support this force came from the central government in Peking, which continuously bankrolled the expansion of this army.³ The government supported this army because it carried out a legitimate public function: the defense of Northern China against troubles in Manchuria.⁴ While the Peiyang Army has been used as an example of a private army because of Yuan's high degree of personal control over it, by this paper's definition, the Peiyang army is not private army. The clarity supplied by the definition in this example demonstrates its effectiveness. If armies could be classified as private based on the autocratic command of their leader, the term "private army" would become so broad as to be useless: all armies of charismatic commanders with any degree of autonomy would be swept up into the definition. A review of private armies that does fit the definition, the private forces common to the Roman Republic, are instructive of what private armies, defined for the purposes of this paper, look like.

Private armies, disconnected from any formal state control, flourished during the Roman Republic. Roman private armies, like those of Pompey, were raised without the use of state coffers, by private citizens like Pompey⁵ who lacked the kind of formal titles Yuan possessed. These private armies could be small in scale, gladiators and beast-fighters purchased for use against personal opponents in Rome. Or, they could be as impressive as any formal army of the Republic. Crassus, a famous Roman political figure, elegantly captured the motivation behind raising these forces when he stated that any politician should be able to pay for an army from his own resources. Utilizing disgruntled veterans, Roman political actors put together bodies of men with military experience to attack their rivals or defend against attacks.⁶ These non-traditional armies of the Roman Republic were private—commanded by private interests, paid for with private funding, and working toward individual goals. They received no support from the Roman treasury, and certainly were not raised to deal with a threat to the Republic; their purpose was the aggrandizement of the faction or leader who hired them. With this definition in place, it is time to consider how different military forces relate to the definition

of a private army.

Paramilitary forces, irregular forces controlled by the central government, fall outside the definition of private armies. The term “paramilitary” sweeps in a broad range of forces but can be accurately described as professional supplements or substitutes for the military government armies. Indonesian armies of 1948 provide an excellent illustration of what paramilitary forces are and why they fall outside the scope of private armies. The Indonesian military of 1948 was comprised of a variety of different forces including troops raised in the provinces of Indonesia and troops raised from different ethnic groups and grouped into their own units.⁷ Indonesians referred to these irregular troops as *lasker*, and they were formal parts of the army that were noted on military organization charts, but they were not regular soldiers with formalized training. They included armed battalions of the Indonesian Socialist Youth and forces of political parties like Suharto’s Peta party.⁸ Certainly, these forces often attempted to exert political influence to deflect central government commands, but they were a formal part of the army: when the military was considered for reorganization, they were considered for reorganization. The difference between paramilitary and private forces is thus clear: paramilitary forces are recognized as an arm of the central government and are (at least in theory) under its control, whereas governments do not maintain pretensions to control private armies even if the government formally acknowledges the existence of these forces. For this reason, paramilitaries have a clear position in the public-private army dichotomy.

While there is a clear difference between a private army and a public army, the barrier that separates the two categories is not apparent or permanent. A public army can easily become a private one if it revolts against the central government. The colonial militias of Bahia, Brazil are prime examples of this. The militias and the elites that led them turned against the central colonial government, and militia units formed the backbone of the army that won independence for Bahia from the Portuguese. These militias proved more loyal to the elites who led them than to the colonial government that raised them, and when

revolution came, were accurately identified by historians as private armies: “the militia Regiment of Torre, [was] virtually the private army of the great Pires de Carvalho e Albuquerque clan.”⁹ When the war for independence was successful and a new civil central government was formed, the militias were integrated into this new government and became vital in suppressing revolts against the newly established regime.¹⁰ They were public armies once more.

A case study of Melanesian armed forces serves as an excellent illustration both of the definition of private and public armies, and of a review of the different types of forces described. The Pacific Islands of the Melanesian region (Fiji, Vanuatu, etc.) maintain a variety of different military forces: Fiji and Papua New Guinea maintain regular military armies. Vanuatu on the other hand, maintains a paramilitary Police Field Force. These are not professional military troops as seen on the other islands, but rather more heavily armed police capable of using military tactics; thus, by definition a public paramilitary force.¹¹ A coup in the Solomon Islands in 2000 utilized police forces like these but also a militia force, the Malaitan Eagle force. This militia had been formed to protect the interests of one of the island’s peoples, the Malatians, who had come under attack from another militia force, the Isatabu Freedom Force. Both of these groups would be considered private militias.¹² Papua New Guinea has also seen the use of public mercenary forces, when, in 1997, it contracted the mercenaries companies Sandline International and Executive Outcomes to battle a secessionist movement on the island of Bougainville, creating a public mercenary army.¹³

Broadly speaking, three distinct types of private armies emerged historically in Korea: private armies that supported rebellions against inept governments, private armies that protected existing power structures during periods of central government instability, and private armies that sought to resist foreign invasion. While each of these different types arose to achieve a specific goal, the causal factors in their rise are the same in each case: weaknesses in the central government created a climate in which it was necessary or favorable for private military forces to be available. This trend is apparent from the first

use of widespread private armies in Korea during the eight century. These forces were to support the rebellions that erupted because of the military vacuum created by the collapse of the Silla government.

PRIVATE ARMIES IN REBELLION

The Unified Silla government ruled a united Korea from about 670 until 935, but as Silla's power declined and eventually collapsed, private military forces emerged to fill the power vacuum. Silla began to face internal discord as early as the reign of King Hyegong (r. 765-780). By 767, the Korean aristocracy had become increasingly powerful and was able to counter reforms designed to lessen their power. As the aristocracy grew in strength, the position of the monarch became increasingly tenuous, so much so that in the last 155 years of the Unified Silla kingdom, as many as twenty kings may have held the throne.¹⁴ As the political structure weakened, so did the clan system—which had been crucial to Silla's stability—as well as much of the cultural, social, and political framework that had allowed the Unified Silla to maintain their power. Soon, the effective control of the central government was reduced to the immediate region around the capitol.¹⁵ The dominion of the private armies existed beyond this perimeter.

King Hyegong's reign saw the rise of private armies utilized for rebellion against the state. In 767, a rebel army composed of the private forces of aristocrats and Korean clan chiefs forced Hyegong to repeal a number of reforms that weakened their power.¹⁶ The success of such privatization had repercussions realized in the following century, dealing a serious blow to central government power in Korea. During the early part of the ninth century, Korea began to witness the more widespread use of private armies. Powerful local families called “castle lords” or *songju* controlled population centers with troops based in their personal fortifications. Historical records also register them as “generals” or *changgun* because they used these villages and cities to raise their personal armies. Because of the lack of power of the central magistrates sent to administer these regions, it was possible for local lords commanding these private armies to usurp central government control so as to exploit peasants for taxes and corvee (conscripted)

labor.¹⁷ As the central government continued to deteriorate, local strongmen, (*bojok*) and warlords began to form semi-independent fiefs within what was ostensibly Silla territory.¹⁸ These generals maintained private armies, though at the time of their formation in the latter part of the ninth century, the armies were not yet strong enough to force the central government from their territory.¹⁹ These nascent private armies would play a crucial role to the government's downfall.

With Silla unable to combat the proliferation of private armies, it was perhaps inevitable that these forces would eventually multiply and grow stronger. By the late 800s, heavy taxes from local lords had contributed to the formation of new private armies in the form of large bandit groups throughout the kingdom.²⁰ Drawing from the ranks of peasants and slaves that the central government could no longer control, these brigands grew into significant armed forces. With bandits destabilizing the country, warlords banded together for defensive purposes, joining together their smaller private armies to create a formidable force.²¹ In 892, a private rebel army turned public when it defeated the central government's attempts to prevent it from forming the Kingdom of Later Paekche. This phenomenon was repeated in 901 with the formation of the Kingdom of Later Korguyo, which, in its later incarnation of the Kingdom of Koryo, finally overthrew the Silla in 936. The inadequate administration of the central Unified Silla government provided the initial power vacuum that private armies would fill with a vengeance.

Myoch'ong's 1135 revolt serves as another example of how the government's political frailty triggered the creation of private armies (of revolt). Nine years before Myoch'ong raised an army of revolution, the Koryo government had faced another revolt against the throne. At the time of rebellion, the government was bitterly divided between two political factions arguing for different responses to the external threat of the Nurchen Tartars: the monk Myoch'ong headed a faction supporting the movement of the capital to the more defensible P'yongyang, while old noble families residing with the King wished to retain the old capital.²² This call for movement was itself a sign of weakness. It has been postulated that while Myoch'ong's motives for



Fall of Ch'ongju to the Righteous Army of Cho Hon and the warrior monks under Yonggyu, "Shrine of the Seven Hundred." Source: Stephen R. Turnbull, *The Samurai Invasion of Korea: 1592 - 98*. Oxford: Osprey Publ., 2008.

moving were pure, the political faction backing him may have been using the move as a basis for the seizure of power.²³ When it became clear that the king would not move the capital as Myoch'ong desired, Myoch'ong used P'yongyang's well resources to launch a revolt against the king.²⁴

While factional struggle had sufficiently debilitated the government to lead to the rise of a private army, the creation of (the army itself) proved a unifying factor. Myoch'ong called the army he raised "the Heavenly-Sent Force of Loyalty and Righteousness" and attempted to use his new army to resolve the issue of the capital move by force.²⁵ However, the chaos caused by the use of a private army allowed the faction in support of retaining the capital in its previous location to mobilize the forces of the central government in their defense. Supporters of the move were promptly executed, and a government army marched on P'yongyang.²⁶ Accounts of the army's success in the field vary, with some historians suggesting the rebels were crushed in as little as one month²⁷, while others believe the army held out for as much as a year.²⁸ Regardless, the defeat of Myoch'ong's rebellion demonstrated that while the weakness and division of the central government led to the formation of private armies, the unification and strength of that same government could put an end to them.

Private armies of rebellion also arose from the defection of forces previously loyal to the government as the famous rebellion of the *Sambyolch'o* against the Koryo-Mongol government demonstrates. As a paramilitary police division of the Ch'oe-controlled Koryo government (1198-1258), the *Sambyolch'o* or "Three Elite Patrols" were a national paramilitary force entrusted with police functions.²⁹ These soldiers, originally tasked with suppressing violent youth gangs throughout the military, were a thoroughly public force supported and paid for by the state treasury.³⁰ When the Mongols invaded Korea in six massive incursions from 1231-1359,³¹ the *Sambyolch'o* led the Ch'oe government's resistance to the Mongol invasion. Utilizing ambushes and harrying strikes, the *Sambyolch'o* was the primary Ch'oe response to the Mongol invasion; they served as a private army dedicated to resisting the Mongol advance. When the Ch'oe shadow dictatorship fell in 1258

and the reinstated king surrendered to the Mongols, the *Sambyolch'o* turned on the central government and initiated a revolt.³² The turmoil within the central government together with the capitulation of the king to the Mongols opened the door to a political overthrow

Starved and depleted by Mongol invasion, the Ch'oe-run Koryo government was in a delicate state. By the time the Ch'oe were facing the fifth Mongol invasion, it was already crippled from previous attacks: the state treasury was empty, and famine was so dire that the government and private granaries had to distribute grain to the public twice in a single year.³³ Nor did the government's troubles end when it capitulated to the Mongols. The new king, Wongjong, was nearly dethroned in 1269 and had to be restored to power by the Mongols—the first time in Korean history that a Korean king was saved by a foreign power.³⁴ But for the intervention of the Mongols, the *Sambyolch'o* rebellion might have proven successful.

Once in revolt, the *Sambyolch'o* behaved as a private army of rebellion, striking out at a variety of different government targets. Initially, they blocked all access between the central government-controlled island of Kanghwa where the government had fled during the Mongol invasion and the mainland,³⁵ possibly in an attempt to derail the government's return to the mainland and collaboration with the Mongols.³⁶ When this failed, the *Sambyolch'o* dragooned the remaining inhabitants of Kanghwa into a forced migration to support their base of operations at the southern end of the Korean Peninsula. From this base, they quickly seized control of thirty islands in the area and forced the Mongols to divert crucial resources to dealing with this large-scale rebellion. After an initial offensive ground to a halt, a combined Mongol-Koryo force was formed that dislodged the *Sambyolch'o* from their main base at Chindo, driving them to the island of Cheju, and then to final defeat in 1273. The *Sambyolch'o* held off the Mongol armies for four years.³⁷ While this rebellion against the central government proved to be a failure, private armies of rebellion would rise again during times of government weakness, and they would play a key role in the formation of the last Korean dynasty.

By the end of the Koryo dynasty, the central government faced a

plethora of internal and external problems that provided fertile ground for the development of private armies. One of the main problems the principle government faced was the continuing raids by external enemies. In 1359 and 1361, a Han Chinese rebel group, the Red Turbans, launched large-scale raids into Korea. The second invasion of 1361 succeeded in capturing the Korean capital. The king was forced to flee the city, and those buildings that survived the Mongol onslaught crumbled during the Red Turban invasion.³⁸ Equally troublesome was a resurgence in raids by the Japanese *Wako*, or pirates. These seaborne raiders struck at villages along the Koryo coastline and had an impact greatly disproportionate to their numbers and armaments, driving peasants away from the fertile costal territories. The random nature of their raids also crippled maritime trade and prevented local taxes from reaching the capital, placing the aristocracy in danger of economic collapse.³⁹ But additional factors besides external raids undermined the central government.

Corrupt governance was a key element in the disintegration of the Koryo dynasty. By the reign of King Kongmin (r. 1351-1374), Koryo power was concentrated in the hands of a set of powerful families who used the government for personal aggrandizement. *Koryo Sa*, a contemporary record of the time notes that in searching for a new advisor, Kongmin believed “that the aristocratic officials and great families were linked in personal cliques, mutually protecting each other...Since these three groups were unsuitable for employment the king had to obtain a man of independence who had abandoned the secular world and use him extensively to correct the abuses of the past.”⁴⁰ Kongmin chose the monk Sin Ton, who began an extensive campaign of land reform while ousting many aristocrats from their positions. While this led the general population to adore and even revere Sin Ton as a saint, it drew the ire of the great families and both Sin Ton and Kongmin were soon killed.⁴¹ As devastating to the stability of the government as the external raids and internal corruption were, it was the political upheaval of another country that put into place the mechanism by which private armies would found a new dynasty.

A new political order rose in China during the waning days of

Koryo: the Yuan dynasty was slowly collapsing and the Ming Dynasty ascended. In 1368, Chu Yuan-chang founded the new Ming dynasty and continued to battle with the remnants of the Yuan dynasty, requesting the aid of the Koryo. This broke the court into two factions, one supporting the Mongol Yuan dynasty, and the other supporting the Chinese Ming dynasty.⁴² When the king instituted a pro-Mongol policy, he was deposed by two powerful generals, Ch'oe Yong, and Yi Song-gye. The new court decided on a strike at the territorial expansion of the Ming in the North and appointed Ch'oe Yong to lead the expedition with Yi Song-gye as one of his deputies.⁴³ It was in this chaotic environment that Yi Song-gye and his private army launched their rebellion.

Yi Song-gye had been cultivating his private army since his early military campaigns. When the Koryo marched against the Red Turbans in 1362, 2,000 of the 200,000 soldiers were Yi Song-gye's private troops. Korean military officials serving as Inspecting Marshals (*Wonsu*) maintained their own recruits and troop rosters (*p'aegi*) and Yi Song-gye in his capacity as a *Wonsu* assiduously cultivated his forces until he was the most powerful political actor.⁴⁴ Furthermore, he disagreed with the planned attack on the Ming and when ordered to march on them in 1388, subverted his fellow deputy, Cho Min-Su, and entered into rebellion.⁴⁵ Marching his rebel army away from the Yalu River at the border of China and Korea, he deposed Ch'oe Yong and the reigning king, U, in a near bloodless coup. A few puppet kings followed until 1392 when Yi Song-gye disposed of all pretenses and made himself king, marking the beginning of the Chosen dynasty.⁴⁶ The private army of rebellion had ushered in a new order.

The later actions of Yi Song-gye demonstrate that private armies were important actors in early Korean history, not a constant feature. Strong Korean central governments would actively work to reduce the presence of private armies throughout the kingdom. King T'aejong (r. 1400-1418), one of Yi's successors ordered the abolition of private armies and armed retainers⁴⁷ and by 1400 AD, this was carried through. Private armies were either abolished entirely or merged into the burgeoning national army.⁴⁸ This army was an entirely public force

organized under the auspices of the national command. Later, this public military control was strengthened when King Sejo (r. 1455-1468) established a series of large military garrisons and arms production centers in every province.⁴⁹ While private armies would arise later in response to weaknesses in the Chosen government, during this period, the government was sufficiently strong to occasion no need for private military forces, and the government made a point to disband any potential private armed force.

PRIVATE ARMIES PROTECTING CENTRAL POWER

While private armies might be used to usurp the existing political order, they could just as easily be used by Korea's political elites, those already integrated into the power structure, to protect and strengthen their status and positions when the political elites felt the central government incapable of or unwilling to protect their interests. A small but important example of this trend during the Koryo period was the private armies of Buddhist temples. Buddhist temples, though centers of religious activity, were also concentrations of great wealth and political power. The Koryo king granted these temples both slaves and land, as did other royal family members and aristocrats seeking to obtain blessings and happiness from Buddha. These donations accumulated until temples were powerful landlords who organized their own industries to produce weapons for the private armies they developed to protect their interests.⁵⁰ These private armies of combat-trained monks were used when the central government was unable to protect the temples' interests. This could occur when aristocratic infighting created enough instability that the temples felt the need to support a candidate to protect their interests. But it could also happen when the central government needed assistance protecting Korea, and by extension temple property, from outside invasion. This materialized on a number of occasions: an army of warrior monks called the Subdue Demons Corps was mobilized to fight off the Jurchen invasions of Korea⁵¹, and the monk Kim Yun-hu was responsible for forcing the Mongols to withdraw in 1232 after killing their commander Sartaq at the battle of Ch'oin-song.⁵² It was under Yi-Cha-gyom in the twelfth

century however, that these private armies were used more frequently.

Yi Cha-gyom was a member of the powerful Yi clan during a period of central government power. At this time, the Koryo dynasty was threatened by the Kin Empire of the Nurchen Tartars. Using highly mobile cavalry, the Nurchen tribes began attacking Koryo troops in 1109. These attacks split the Koryo court into opposing factions, some suggesting accommodation with the Kin Empire, others demanding a military confrontation.⁵³ A power struggle also existed between Koryo's aristocratic families: the Kim clan, which had previously enjoyed a monopoly on power, was facing deteriorating influences as Yi-Cha-gyom's Yi clan rose to monopolize power from 1046-1122 in part by supplying queens to seven different kings. To compound issues, the monarchy of Koryo, the heart of the central government, was in a dramatically enervated state: Yi Cha-gyom had engineered the removal of one king in 1122 and replaced him with the king's grandson.⁵⁴ Yi was able to do this largely because of the increasing prominence of private armies of the great clans, which were used to protect and advance the families' interests.

It was in the time of Yi Cha-gyom that private armies became key means by which the great families of Korea, key political actors, protected their interests. Yi pioneered the formation of private armies. With the backing of the military hero Ch'ok Chun-gyong and his forces, Yi began driving political opponents from office and increasing the Yi clan land holdings until they held the dominant position of power in the Koryo dynasty. At this point, however, Yi Cha-gyom's ambition grew too great, and he attempted open rebellion against the king, transitioning his private army of protection to one of rebellion. His attempt failed⁵⁵, but a trend had been set. After Yi Cha-gyom's use of private armies to usurp power, great families began to use their private armies not just for protection but also to strengthen their positions by collecting "taxes" from peasants, either with the cooperation of government officials or in defiance of them. The success of these private armies increased their use, and they became a defining feature of the period of instability from 1170 onward, with their origins in the era of Yi Cha-gyom.⁵⁶ These private armies, called *sabyong*,⁵⁷ were not

in open revolt against the government, and did not attempt to replace the existing political order with a new power structure. But they did allow the political elite of these families to be selective in determining which government orders to obey. While Yi Cha-gyom would pioneer the art of the private army as a tool for of political power, the Ch'oe house would be the most effective practitioner of this art.

Among the great families of mid-Koryo Korea, the Ch'oe stand out for their use of the private army to protect and enhance their political power, effectively operating as a shadow government during a time of central government weakness. In 1170, a coup deposed King Uijong and sent him into exile. This was the catalyst for revolts throughout the country when the private armies described above took hold of the nation.⁵⁸ Rebellion spread even to the capital when in 1198 a slave named Manjok attempted to rise up against the recent coup of Ch'oe Chu'unghon. The *Koryo Sa* records his intentions:

We will start from the hallways of Hungguk Monastery and go to the polo grounds. Once all are assembled and start to beat drums and yell, the eunuchs in the palace will certainly respond. The public slaves will take control of the palace by force, and we will stage an uprising inside the capitol, first killing Ch'oe Ch'unghon and others. If each slave will kill his master and burn the slave registers, there will be no people of humble status in the country, and we can all become nobles, generals, and ministers.⁵⁹

The rebellion was crushed, but this kind of instability at the heart of the central government was indicative of the weakness present when Ch'oe Ch'unghon took tacit power and replaced King Myongjong with the king's brother Sinjong in 1196.⁶⁰ As the new power behind the throne, the Ch'oe would continue to use their private armies to safeguard their position as the power behind the Koryo throne.

The Ch'oe and other powerful families used their private armies during this period to protect themselves and stabilize their positions. They did not, however, attempt to eliminate the central government: they did not renounce the monarchy, and they accepted the established government system; but the might of Ch'oe private armies assured that Ch'oe

dignitaries were “consulted” by state officials in important government matters.⁶¹ This co-existence with the state is corroborated by the continued presence of dynastic state troops of the central government, whose numbers made them an important asset in protecting the rest of Korea, in addition to lessening the security and patrol demands of the private armies of the Ch’oe. These forces existed at the whim of the Ch’oe, who effectively controlled all government policy, but were public troops supported by central government revenue.⁶² With the forces of the central government still in place, the Ch’oe could concentrate on the organization and development of their own private armies.

Private Ch’oe armies took a number of different forms. While the *sabyong* of powerful families were common in this period, a number of other factions comprised the Ch’oe forces. Many of the Ch’oe forces were called retainers or *mungaek*. These were armed followers, developed during the 1170 coup when military leaders surrounded themselves with small groups of security. Ch’oe Ch’unghon expanded on this until his group of “personal retainers” numbered in the thousands.⁶³ Other Ch’oe leaders raised their own forces of personal retainers. *Koryo Sa* documents a struggle that arose between the Ch’oe brothers Ch’ungsu and Ch’ungon who engaged their retainers in what could more properly be described as a small war:

General O Sukpi, Chun Chonsim, Pak Chongbu, and other said ‘We are your retainers because you have great potential to sway the world. Now if you, on the contrary, become a coward like this, it will mean the extermination of us and our clans.’...Ch’ungsu agreed to this. At dawn he led more than one thousand followers and camped at the crossroads... Coordinating their troop formations they [Ch’unghon’s forces] attacked the front and the rear. Armed with the great horned bows from the royal arsenal, archers fired arrows so they fell like rain.⁶⁴

While private Ch’oe forces did occasionally skirmish with one another like this, the armies spent most of their time protecting the political position of the Ch’oe.

Personal and national protection and tax collection were the primary functions of private military forces like the Ch'oe's during this period. Large numbers of Ch'oe soldiers were assigned to protect Ch'oe private palaces and escort Ch'oe dignitaries; the army from which the Ch'oe drew for this purpose soon grew from 3,000 soldiers to more than ten times this size.⁶⁵ On a more minor scale, *Koryo Sa* tells of how an official used his own private army for protection: "In fear, Kyong Taesung gathered a suicide corps of some one hundred and ten people. Stationing them at his home to deal with any incident, he called them the Personal Security Force."⁶⁶ Ch'oe armies also mobilized for national protection. If the central government fell, so would their political power. Thus, Ch'oe troops sometimes fought alongside government soldiers who, as *Korya Sa* tells, were in clear need of the assistance: "At this time they were about to send troops to defend against the Khitans. The bravest soldiers were all Ch'oe Ch'unghon's and U's retainers. Those in the government army were all thin and weak and useless."⁶⁷ These mobilizations of private Ch'oe armies to protect Ch'oe political interests were most apparent during the Ch'oe struggle with the Mongols.

During the war against the Mongols, Ch'oe forces fought the Mongols vigorously, though they did so to protect the Ch'oe power structure, not the central government. As the Mongols closed in on the capital in 1231, Ch'oe troops put up a more effective resistance than the government troops not only because they were better trained, but also because the capital was where their homes were, the royal troops had less connection to the city. Additionally, the Ch'oe were fearful that if the Mongols managed to defeat them, the Mongols would retain the king as a puppet but drive the Ch'oe from power, just as the Ch'oe had done in 1198.⁶⁸ But when the choice came whether to actually defend the capital or to withdraw, the Ch'oe actions were a clear reminder that these were *private* armies raised to protect *Ch'oe* political positions: Ch'oe U called his well-trained private troops to protect him as he withdrew, leaving boys and weak government troops to defend the capital.⁶⁹ While this was a dramatic example of how Ch'oe private armies always acted for Ch'oe, more mundane examples

of their support of Ch'oe political power exist.

Tax collection and land acquisition were second functions of the private armies of both the Ch'oe and their contemporaries. Prominent generals and landholders used their retainers to seize land and taxes from the peasants. The Ch'oe were particularly skilled at this—all revenue from the entire Chunju region of Korea was diverted to them. This safeguarded their power by funding both their private army and official salaries the weakened central government could not pay.⁷⁰ Forgotten in this land grab were the peasants who suffered immensely under the abuses of the private armies not only of the Ch'oe, but also of other landlords who could be equally or even more cruel and avaricious than the Ch'oe armies. *Koryo Sa* documents one such case of abuse:

Kim Injun set up numerous estates and had his retainer Mun Songju control those in Cholla and retainer Chi Chun control those in Ch'ungch'ong. They competed in extorting wealth by giving peasants one peck of rice seed for planting, for which they collected one bushel of rice at harvest. All his sons imitating this, competed in assembling hoodlums and relied on their power to seize people's property without restraint. The grievances against them were rampant.⁷¹

Private armies such as these solidified the Ch'oe political position by guaranteeing them resources and providing the protection needed to defeat armed challenge. Using private armies for this purpose would persist after the demise of the Koryo and into the Yi dynasty.

The year 1395 proved to turbulent for the T'aejo king of the Yi dynasty. The Ming emperor Ming T'ai Tzu was notoriously sensitive about the wording of a diplomatic missive sent to him and demanded that its writer, Chong To Chon, be handed over to the Ming Court. Chong had been a central figure in the T'aejo government and his departure so infuriated the court that they considered war against the Ming, putting troops on alert. The death of Ming T'ai Tzu in 1398 broke the diplomatic impasse, but considerable chaos was created.⁷² Adding to this tension was a growing feud about which royal heir would succeed the throne. Yi Pang Won, the monarch's fifth son,

had his sights on the throne, but found his brothers stood in the way.⁷³ This became especially true when one of Won's half brothers, Pang sok, was named crown prince instead of him. A sudden bout of illness in King T'aejo provided Pang Won with the final element of central government weakness he needed to act.⁷⁴ Private armies would once again protect the interests of an established political actor.

Pang Won moved decisively with his forces to protect his political position. Using a private army he had amassed, he struck against both of his half brothers and eliminated both of them, as well as the returned Chong To Chon, whom the king had entrusted with the education of the crown prince. Having removed these threats to his position, Pang Won was able to oversee the placement of the eldest of the Yi brothers, Pang Kwa, to the monarchy.⁷⁵ It is important to note that Pang Won did not use his army to put himself on the throne, but simply to protect his status against an unsuitable (in his view) king. In fact, unlike the Koryo dynasty, all the private armies clashing in support of succession struggles were supporting family claimants to the throne, not outsiders. Indeed, these were the ultimate "political insiders," connected by ties of blood to the monarchy.⁷⁶ They did not seek to rebel and create a new government but simply to assume a higher position within the current government. It is also worth noting that when the succession struggles were over and the central army had regained its power, the private armies were disbanded; they could exist only with a weak central government.⁷⁷ But private armies were not always in competition with the government: when outside forces threatened a weak Korea, private armies sprung up to support the embattled central government.

PRIVATE ARMIES VERSUS FOREIGN INVADERS

The Mongol invasion met stout resistance, but the Ch'oe government faced endless waves of reinforcements that eventually broke the central government's power to resist, leading private armies to attempt to fill the resulting security gap. Even before the Mongol invasion, the Koryo had been experiencing increasing issues with border raiders, as Mongol letters to the central government reveal: "In the Year of the

Rat when the Black Khitan invaded, you were not able to properly get rid of them. We sent two people, Jala and Qacin. They came leading the army, took the Black Khitan and killed them all. You they did not kill. We came, for if we had not dealt with the Black Khitan, you would not have been soon [in doing it]. Isn't it so?"⁷⁸ Using the pretext of an emissary murdered in 1219, the Mongols severed relations with the Koryo, and in 1231, they invaded. Under attack, Koryo and Ch'oe quietly accepted Mongol rule, integrating themselves into the Mongol tribute system.⁷⁹ This system diluted the authority of the central government, whose king now had to accept Mongol advisors and consorts who stirred trouble in the court. Tax burdens also became increasingly severe as commoners were crushed under a conflicting mass of landlord, central government, and Mongol taxes.⁸⁰ When these taxes became too onerous, the central government attempted revolt, only to abandon the mainland entirely in 1232 to fight the Mongol occupation from Kanghwa Island. The population of mainland Korea was left to fend for itself.⁸¹ Without support from the central government, private armies rose as the people of Korea attempted to fight the invaders.

The Mongol occupation drove the formation of numerous private armies seeking to defeat the invaders. The role of the Buddhist and Ch'oe private armies has already been discussed, but they were not the only groups to strike against the invaders. These private armies arose from a number of different sources: bandits in hiding on Mt. Kwanak turned themselves in and began a struggle against the Mongols; peasants retreated to costal islands and mountain fortresses and fought on; and under Chi Kwang-su a slave army defended the town of Ch'unju, fighting to the end despite the fact that all the aristocratic officials fled.⁸² *Koryo Sa* takes particular note of this struggle, which combined the private army of slaves with the private army of the Ch'oe: "When the Mongol troops arrived, Chongju and Hongik, along with the *yangban* (aristocrat officials), abandoned the town. The slave army and the Mixed Special Patrol Troops combined their strength and repulsed the Mongols."⁸³ Private armies acting in the absence of the central government would be a prominent feature in attempts to



A Japanese patrol is ambushed and pelted with stones and arrows. Source: Stephen R. Turnbull, *The Samurai Invasion of Korea: 1592 - 98*. Oxford: Osprey Publ., 2008. 48.

combat another constant danger to Korea, the *Wako*.

Wako, pirate raiders, were a perennial problem for Korea, surfacing whenever a weakness was detected in the central government. The first *Wako* raids occurred in 1223 AD, and they would continue intermittently for three centuries after that,⁸⁴ though other pirates that had not borne the formal title of *Wako* existed before this. While the Koreans attributed all these raids to Japanese pirates, *Wako* were actually a variety of peoples who engaged in part-time piracy. This non-professional nature did not make them any less deadly: their raids forced peasants inland and caused the best coastal farmland to fall into disuse while interrupting the flow of coastal taxes to the government.⁸⁵ They might also be sponsored by “sea lords,” local dignitaries who might support their activities in order to profit from them,⁸⁶ especially when impotent Korean governments were forced to pay the *Wako* off to avoid their raids.⁸⁷ This would be a continual problem for Korea but would become especially acute during the Mongol occupation.

Official incompetence and Mongol regulations combined to make the *Wako* raids during the fourteenth century particularly devastating and spurred the rise of private armies to protect Korean territory. By 1350, *Wako* raids were becoming especially debilitating because Korea, used to the protection of the Mongols, found that the Mongol Yuan dynasty was desperately attempting to suppress rebellions in China and could send only a few weapons and no troops. Additionally, Mongol edicts in 1278 and 1337 forbade the Koreans from building warships and from keeping weapons, respectively. These provisions crippled the Koreans’ ability to stave off the *Wako*.⁸⁸ In addition to its military shortcomings, the Koryo central government was crippled by the tribute requirements placed on it by the Mongols. The power and prerogatives of the king were circumscribed, draining the authority of the central government.⁸⁹ Without the protection of the central government, it fell to Yi Song-gye to defend his territories from the *Wako*. Yi’s private army would eventually rebel against the central government, but during the 1380s, his private army, initially formed to fight the Red Turban bandits, would be effectively turned on the

Wako.⁹⁰ While Yi would disband private armies when he took power, they would return to play a vital role in repulsing another foreign invader every bit as dangerous as the Mongols and the *Wako*; the 1592 invasion of Japanese leader Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

Much like the Mongol invasions, the Japanese invasion quickly crippled the forces of the central Korean government, assaulting Korea's shores with overwhelming force. On May 23, 1592, acting under orders from Japanese *Taiko*, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Konishi Yukinaga and So Yoshitoshi landed at Pusan with 700 ships, the vanguard of the most formidable invasion force in the world.⁹¹ Highly professional from years of civil war and equipped with state of the art muskets and artillery, the invasion army of Hideyoshi was the largest and best armed in the world. With 158,800 men in the initial expeditionary force, it dwarfed the Spanish Armada's 30,000 men. With advanced arquebuses, it was far more sophisticated than the poorly armed Ming army, the only force that could come close to matching it in size.⁹² It is questionable how many nations could have effectively resisted this onslaught but Korea faced particular difficulties. By the sixteenth century, Korea's military was sub-par and quickly collapsed in the face of Japanese attacks. Following one battle, the Koreans reported of the Japanese, "The enemy we faced today could be called immortal soldiers. Normal men can't stand up to them in battle."⁹³ Korean forces were driven back and the king, Sonjo, was forced to flee city after city until he and his court were a mere 150 miles from the Chinese border, and contemplating abandoning Korea for China altogether. With the forces of the central government in retreat, it fell to the people of Korea to resist the invasion, and as during the time of the Mongols, private armies responded.

As in the Mongol invasion, private armies assisting the central government in repulsing the Japanese came from a variety of sources and were led by a panoply of colorful characters. These private forces were called *uibyong*, or righteous armies, and many were raised by local aristocrats or landowners who had the wealth necessary to outfit these forces.⁹⁴ These were the armies of men like Kwak Chae-u, also called "Heaven Descending Red Coat General" for the red garments he wore,

dyed with the first menstrual blood of girls. Raising an army of one thousand soldiers paid for out of his own money, Kwak led his army on raids against the Japanese throughout Kyongsang province. His private army was far more dedicated to the war against the Japanese than were the government soldiers that sometimes accompanied him. During their siege of Kumsan, when the Japanese opened fire, the government soldiers broke and ran even as Kwak's men held, thus costing him the battle.⁹⁵ While Kwak's exploits were particularly famous, his story, that of an upper-class aristocrat raising a personal force to fight the Japanese, was repeated throughout many Korean provinces. These forces eventually crippled Japan's ability to effectively exploit and occupy Korea. Additionally, Buddhist monks joined the battle against the Japanese. No longer the political force they had been during the Koryo dynasty, there were no temple-based private armies, but eight thousand monks rose to answer the monk Hyujong's impassioned call to arms:

“Hold high your banners, all you monk-soldiers of the eight provinces! Who among you have not been given birth by the land...Abandoning a just cause and swerving from the right path in order merely to survive in hiding-how can this be the proper way?”⁹⁶

These private forces would be a constant thorn in the side of the Japanese, crippling occupational governments and cutting supply lines, providing Korea and China with the precious time they needed to build their strength and gather the government forces necessary to repulse the Japanese. The private armies of resistance gave Korea its freedom.

CONCLUSION

This paper does not, and could not provide a canonical list of the private armies that existed during Korea's long history. What this paper has tried to do is provide a framework for understanding the conditions under which private armies in Korea arose, and a methodology for organizing these armies into a coherent narrative by giving a clear definition of private armies and creating a typology that allows for their organization. To this end examples have been provided of a diverse

array private armies throughout early Korean history, and it has been demonstrated that central government weakness was the catalyst in each of these cases for the creation of these private armies. A perfect example are the forces bearing the name *uibyeong* resurfaced in the late 1800s and early 1900s when the Japanese again attempted to invade and occupy Korea. These forces reemerged hundreds of years after the examples provided here but arose in response to central government weakness to Japanese invasion. This suggests that these private armies had not only political and military effects on Korean history, but also an impact on the national imagination and consciousness.

From this starting point there are a super-abundance of avenues for future research on this topic. There are many more private armies in Korean history against which the robustness of this theory can be tested. Just as importantly, the definition of private army itself can be examined and refined. All of this will serve to better illuminate the catalysts for the creation of private armies and define the pivotal role these forces played in Korean history.

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