

# REBEL MILITARY STRATEGY IN THE MUSILLAN REBELLION OF 1728

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## Introduction

On the fifteenth day of the third month of 1728, rebels led by Yi Injwa seized Ch'öngju, marking the start of the Musillan rebellion (also known as Yi Injwa's rebellion). The rebels controlled areas of Ch'ungh'öng, Kyöngsang and Kyönggi provinces for more than a week. However, after these serious losses, government forces rapidly annihilated the rebel threat.

The Musillan rebellion had its roots in the bitter Noron-Soron factional conflict that surrounded the rule and death of Kyöngjong (r. 1720–24) and the succession of Yöngjo (r. 1724–76).<sup>1</sup> Factional conflict led to frequent changes of bureaucracy, and after taking power, Yöngjo replaced a Soron bureaucracy with the Noron, and then restored the Soron in 1727.<sup>2</sup> Plotting had begun prior to the restoration of the Soron, and this meant there was a fratricidal element to the rebellion, as hardline Soron rebels fought with moderate Soron officials, and a rebel fifth-column in office plotted to mobilise state resources against the crown. This combination of factors characterises the Musillan rebellion: the fratricidal element, the fifth-column, the combination of rapid rebel success and defeat, the armed rebellion in a period when rebellions were rare.

Most researchers have focussed on the 'why' of the Musillan rebellion: Why it occurred, why it failed, 'why' it is (un)important in late Chosön history. Scholars read in-built failure into the rebellion explaining that while elite rebels may have been motivated by grievances like political or regional discrimination, they were incompetent military amateurs, with an 'incoherent' strategy.<sup>3</sup> In addition, scholars claim their pro-Kyöngjong ideology ignored the "needs of the *minjung*,"<sup>4</sup> thus, despite occurring during a period of economic change, structural change and famine, their rebellion was an "immature" stage in development.<sup>5</sup>

This analysis raises two questions about the Musillan rebellion. Firstly, the incompetence argument explains rebel annihilation on the battlefield, but how can we account for rebel successes? For example: rebels seized around fourteen towns including P'yöngt'aek and Chinwi (both in Kyönggi province);<sup>6</sup> soon afterwards, magistrates from Ch'öng'an, Chinch'ön, Hoe'in (all in Ch'ungh'öng province) fled

because of rebel intimidation.<sup>7</sup> Events like these continued until the end of the month. Secondly, assuming there was discrimination and structural change, why were Musillan-type rebellions not more frequent in this period? I believe the explanation for the modest rebel successes and the stand-alone character of the Musillan rebellion lies with the ‘how’ of the rebellion, or the organisational features (recruitment of elites to a rebel organisation, mobilisation of non-elites to a rebel army, military capacity and strategy of the rebel side). This paper discusses the results of my investigation into rebel military strategy based on an analysis of *sillok* records between the third and seventh months, focussing on rebel confessions, and official reports.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, the researcher is faced firstly by rebel testimony that contains contradictory information about both the proposed military strategy and actual rebel movements; and secondly, by the difficulty of assessing rebel successes in a failed rebellion. To overcome these problems, I have relied on evidence of consistent strategic behaviour as well as explicitly stated strategy; and I have looked at how rebels attempted to implement the proposed strategy using existing resources, and how the rebels coped with contingency.

## **The rebel military plan and strategic principles**

A cursory examination of the actual rebel movements appears to confirm the incompetence argument of many scholars. For example, *sillok* accounts indicate a shambolic movement of rebels away from the capital, a motley collection of rebel troops, little evidence of effective rebel military engagement, and an indiscriminate seizure of towns. Even the original plan failed at an early stage.

### *(A) The rebel plan*

The plan proposed creating a diversion so that rebel fifth-columnist generals like Yi Sasōng, the P’yōng’an military Commander-in-chief, could attack the court. Rebels would create a ‘disturbance’ in a strategic location near the capital. Fifth-columnist generals would then mobilise their government troops in the name of the king to crush the disturbances, but in fact these troops would be diverted to the capital, join with regular rebel troops and seize control of the court.<sup>9</sup>

This rebel plan was scuppered because of betrayal prior to the takeover of Ch’ōngju, and fifth-columnist generals were arrested.<sup>10</sup> Unaware of the betrayal, the remaining rebel leaders stuck to their side of the original plan, and adhered to several strategic principles that resulted in some territorial gains.

*(B) Strategic Principles, 1: Head north to the capital*

The shambolic route taken by rebel groups in four provinces—often in circles, or away from the capital, suggests there was neither rhyme nor reason to the rebel strategy. An analysis of the actual rebel movements shows the rebels adhered to a basic principle of heading north to seize the capital and challenge government power. The problem was that this principle was dependent upon rebels fulfilling two logistical requirements. Firstly, leaders had to organise a mass gathering of rebels from six different provinces.<sup>11</sup> Rebel leaders organised this in three stages, namely local mobilisations, provincial (regional) assembly, and a mass link-up at a strategic point.<sup>12</sup> For example, rebels mobilised all over Kyōnggi province, then assembled around Yangsōng<sup>13</sup> before seizing Ch'ōngju on the fifteenth, where they waited for the arrival of rebels from Kyōngsang and Chōlla provinces. Secondly, the rebels needed to seize a strategically positioned town, and felt Ch'ōngju was appropriate for a link-up of all rebel troops.<sup>14</sup>

When it became apparent that the Kyōngsang and Chōlla rebels would never arrive, the remaining rebel armies reverted to their strategic principle, left Ch'ōngju and headed north towards the capital, only to be defeated by government troops near Ansōng and Chuksan (both in Kyōnggi province) on the twenty-fourth.

*2: Make government troops responsible for most fighting*

From the very start the mobilisation plan was beset with problems. According to the plan, there were supposed to be several different types of soldier. There would be 'regular' rebel troops consisting of non-elites (offered short-term material and financial incentives for their participation), and slaves forced by their masters into the rebellion.<sup>15</sup> In addition, fifth-columnist generals would fool their own government troops into attacking the crown (mobilisation by duping). Rebels also planned to commandeer government troops from Ch'ōngju (defectors). However, leaders struggled to mobilise a sufficient number of regular troops, and those they found were 'rabble-like.'<sup>16</sup> Rebel leaders also clashed over whose troops would form the vanguard of the rebellion, with Yi Sasōng insisting his fifth-columnist-led army could win the rebellion, no matter the quantity and quality of regular troops.<sup>17</sup> Finally, with the betrayal of the fifth-columnists, the mobilisation by duping plan failed.<sup>18</sup>

Despite these problems, the remaining rebel leadership managed to mobilise a significant number of rebel troops thanks to large-scale defections of government troops in rebel-occupied territory. Evidence of this can be seen in the ten-fold increase in the number of rebel troops after the seizure of Ch'ōngju.<sup>19</sup> After the takeover of Ch'ōngju, rebel leaders actively sought the defection of government troops by sending out appeals to nearby settlements for military support, and by using threats and short-term incentives.<sup>20</sup> Thus, in response to a problematic situation, rebel generals found an effective and pragmatic way of mobilising troops.

### *3: Psychological warfare and trickery over military violence*

Reports indicate that most seizures of government territory occurred with little or no violence. Rebels managed to challenge the government by waging a psychological warfare campaign that became the only truly effective weapon in the rebel armoury. From the outset, rebel leaders like Yi Yu'ik understood the importance of psychological warfare:

If we spread words like this around then we should be able to spread suspicion in people's hearts, and the more we spread these words then the more everyone will think that this is natural. As for the achievement of this affair, it depends solely on people's hearts.<sup>21</sup>

The rebels spread rumours and written propaganda in the form of posters,<sup>22</sup> appeals and threatening letters to intimidate opponents, capture resources, create panic and spread sympathy for their side. Seditious posters implied Kyŏngjong had been murdered by an 'illegitimate' usurper, Yŏngjo. Rebel generals used appeals to intimidate government officials into surrendering their towns, troops, supplies and weapons, for example in Kŏch'ang and Chuksan.<sup>23</sup> Thus, government control often fell with little or no bloodshed, just intimidation, propaganda and rumour-mongering about rebel action.

In addition to their use of propaganda and intimidation, the rebels used trickery and subterfuge to make territorial and material gains. For example, the rebels infiltrated and seized Ch'ŏngju by disguising themselves as a funeral cortege. Rebels also forged or stole government documents to mobilise resources for their side. For example, rebel leader Chŏng Seyun made counterfeit edicts ordering Iksan, Yŏsan, Kobu, Pu'an (all north Ch'ŏlla province) government troops to crush rebels, but in fact these troops would be mobilized for the rebels.<sup>24</sup> By deliberately pursuing a strategy of psychological warfare and trickery over violence, rebel leaders were using their best resources. Many rebel leaders were involved in isolated political factions, and would have been skilled in polemic, intimidation, and propaganda. Other leaders had inside contacts, and an inside knowledge of the workings of the military system that they could use to their advantage.

### *4: Maximise control of government resources*

The random scattering of seized towns looks as if rebels were engaged in plunder for plunder's sake. In fact, the main aim in seizing towns far from the capital was neither for plunder, nor to set up an alternative rebel government: the purpose was to maximise control of government resources to prepare for an attack on the court. These were resources rebels had failed to mobilise in the pre-rebellion period.<sup>25</sup> Thus, appeals like the one sent to the Kŏch'ang magistrate were partly complaints about the state of the nation and partly appeals for support, troops, and supplies:

This is an affair of the nation, magistrates of provincial villages should ... give us the troops and horses and various weapons of your village, and then within the next few days we will rush north because of the national crisis.<sup>26</sup>

There was also a more pragmatic reason for the acquisition of government supplies. The rebels required more troops and arms to intimidate more government positions into surrender, and also more booty, grain and provisions to supply an expanded army whose continued loyalty depended partly on short-term incentive, and partly on a sense of association with the dominant side in the rebellion. This explains why the communal rebel feast is a constant feature of the rebellion.<sup>27</sup> Captured government booty bought the loyalty of some troops, and provided a display of material power—that by supplying meat and alcohol, the rebels were the true holders of power.

## Conclusion

While many of the Musillan rebel strategic principles might seem common-sense and self-evident (the seizure of the capital and government resources, intimidation before confrontation), other tactics might seem incongruous to our notion of a rebellion (more feasting than collective violence; the mobilisation of troops who believed they were loyal to the king). Yet this unusual combination of common-sense principles and less conventional tactics characterises the actual strategy of the Musillan rebels. Followed by rebels in different regions, this was a strategy that resulted in unusual territorial losses for the eighteenth-century Chosŏn court.

Can these strategic principles and tactics explain the Musillan's stand-alone character, and both rebel success and military annihilation?

To answer these questions, we need to consider also the presence of fifth-columnist rebels in court. The rebel plan was only made possible by a political environment that restored the Soron to power and provided an opportunity the rebels could exploit, an opportunity perhaps never again offered on such a scale to other dissenters in the eighteenth century. The entire plan was dependent upon fifth-columnists mobilising state resources against the crown. The presence of rebel generals controlling powerful resources provided the 'potential' military strength that drove on the rebel plan, despite last minute doubts.

Fundamental flaws in this plan explain the military disasters of the rebels. Fifth-columnist generals were susceptible to betrayal, and despite rebel assumptions to the contrary, neither government nor regular rebel troops were easily duped by their rebel generals. Because of poor communications, the other rebel generals stuck to the doomed plan and used their common-sense application of general strategic principles, as well as their political skills and cunning, to achieve some limited successes in the Musillan rebellion.

## Notes

- 1 Haboush 1988, 140.
- 2 Ibid., 135.
- 3 O Kap'gyun 1977, 88 & Cho Ch'anyong 2003, 59.
- 4 Kōch'anggunsap'yōnch'an wiwōnhoe 1997, 578.
- 5 Yi Chongbōm 2003, 287–9.
- 6 *Yōngjo sillok* 04/03/22 (year/month/day) (imshin) volume 16: folio 21b, p. 24.
- 7 *Yōngjo sillok* 04/03/26 (pyōngja) 16: 31b–33a, p.29–30.
- 8 From the outbreak of the rebellion to the celebration of the suppression.
- 9 *Yōngjo sillok* 04/04/22 (imin)17: 26b–28a, pp. 47–48.
- 10 Used as an assurance to encourage the recruitment of elite rebels, the fifth-columnist generals were vulnerable to betrayal.
- 11 Mainly from Kyōnggi, Kyōngsang, Ch'ungch'ōng and Chōlla provinces.
- 12 For example, when Yi Injwa seized Ch'ōngju, he sent out appeals notifying regional rebel leaders. *Yōngjo sillok* 04/05/24 (kapsul) 18: 18a, p. 61. Some rebels confessed that other locations were originally chosen for a general link up, for example, Sosa. *Yōngjo sillok* 04/05/13 (kyehye) 18: 12b, p. 58.
- 13 *Yōngjo sillok* 04/04/01 (shinsa)17:1b, p. 35.
- 14 Chang Hūm claimed rebels would wait for the Kyōngsang and Chōlla province troops and then march on the capital. *Yōngjo sillok* 04/03/17 (chōngmyo) 16: 11b–12a p. 19.
- 15 Plus a gang of bandits called the Nongnimdang.
- 16 *Yōngjo sillok* 04/03/25 (ūlhye) 16: 27b–29a, pp. 27–28.
- 17 *Yōngjo sillok* 04/04/11 (shinmyo) 17: 14b, p. 41.
- 18 The only example of mobilisation by duping—by Pak P'ilhyōn in Chōlla province—was an unqualified disaster, when government troops grew suspicious of the true intentions of Pak, and fled en masse.
- 19 Mainly government troop defections. Yi Chōngbōm 1997, 201. Ch'ōngju government troops subsequently led rebels during engagements. *Yōngjo sillok* 04/03/24 (musul) 16: 26b, p. 26.
- 20 For example rebel Min Wōnbo used incentives and threats to mobilise government troops. *Yōngjo sillok* 04/05/10 (kyōngshin) 18:10b–11a, p.57.
- 21 *Yōngjo sillok* 04/04/29 (kiyu) 17: 34b–35b, pp. 51–52.
- 22 The posters probably implied Kyōngjong had been murdered by an 'illegitimate' usurper, Yōngjo. Haboush 1988, 136.
- 23 *Yōngjo sillok* 04/03/27 (chōngch'uk) 16: 35a–36b p. 31. *Yōngjo sillok* 04/03/27 (chōngch'uk) 16: 37a, p. 32.
- 24 *Yōngjo sillok* 04/03/26 (pyōngja) 16: 33a–b, p. 30.
- 25 Chōng Seyun complained about fundraising. *Yōngjo sillok* 04/04/13 (kyesa) 17:17a, p. 43.
- 26 *Yōngjo sillok* 04/03/27 (chōngch'uk) 16: 35a–36b, p. 31.
- 27 Like the feast organised by Cho Tōkkyu in *Yōngjo sillok* 04/04/12 (imjin) 17: 16a.

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## Character Glossary

Ansŏng 安城	Musillan rebellion 戊申亂
Ch'ŏng'an 淸安	Nongnimdang 綠林黨
Ch'ŏngju 淸州	Noron 老論
Chinch'ŏn 鎭川	P'yŏng'an military Commander-in-chief 平安兵使
Chinwi 振威	P'yŏngt'aek 平澤
Cho Tŏkkyu 趙德奎	Pak P'ilhyŏn 朴顯
Chŏng Seyun 鄭世胤	Seditious posters 掛書
Chuksan 竹山	Pu'an 扶安
Chuksan 竹山	Soron 少論
Hardline Soron 峻少	Sosa 素沙
Hoe'in 懷仁	Yangsŏng 陽城
Iksan 益山	Yi Injwa's rebellion 李麟佐亂
Kobu 古阜	Yi Sasŏng 李思晟
Kŏch'ang 居昌	Yi Yu'ik 李有翼
Kyŏngjong 景宗	<i>Yŏngjo sillok</i> 英祖 實錄
Min Wŏnbo 閔元普	Yŏngjo 英祖
Moderate Soron 緩少	Yŏsan 礪山