

# Culture Notes

## *The Turtle Ship*

by Helena Ku Rhee

Illustrated by Colleen Kong-Savage

Shen's Books, 2018

Fiction, set in Korea

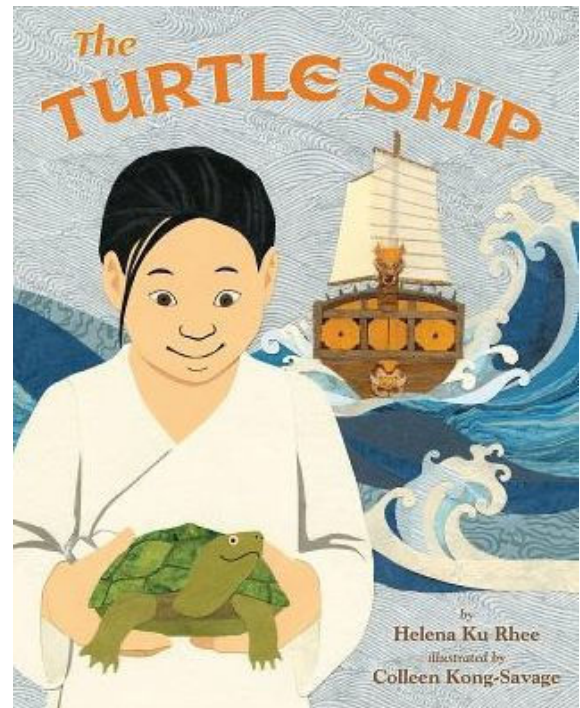
2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

### Genre: Historical Fiction

*The Turtle Ship* is a creative interpretation of historical events and figures. The historical figure Admiral Yi Sun-sin (1545–1598) (pronounced: ee SOON-shin) is credited with inventing and designing the first "turtle ships" (*Gobuksan* or *Geobukseon*; pronounced: kaw-BOOK-suhn). In the 1590s, they proved instrumental in defending the country against invasions from Japan.

At that time, the Korean nobility (*yangban*; pronounced: yahng-bahn) was in turmoil due to rivalries and political intrigue. The family of Admiral Yi Sun-sin was also *yangban*, but Admiral Yi's father and grandfather tended to avoid politics. Yi Sun-sin was known as a dedicated soldier who worked tirelessly to turn his great ideas into successful defense strategies to protect the Korean kingdom from invasion.

In contrast, the book's protagonist, also named Sun-sin, lives by the sea in a fishing village (*eochoon*; pronounced: AW-chohn). The villagers are humble folk whose social reality is far removed from the aristocracy.



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### Illustrations

*The Turtle Ship* tells an original story inspired by historical figures from the 1500s. The illustrations for *The Turtle Ship* are similarly inspired by history. For example, the shape of the waves in the illustrations resemble the famous woodblock print *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (c. 1830–1831) by the Japanese print designer Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). This work is also known as *The Great Wave* or simply *The Wave*.



An illustration of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* by Hokusai. Source: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. "Under the Wave off Kanagawa (*Kanagawa oki nami ura*), or *The Great Wave*, from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (*Fugaku sanjūrokkei*)."

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39799>.

An illustration of the *Battle of Myeongnyang* depicted in *The Turtle Ships*. Source: *Directory of Illustration*. "The *Turtle Ship* picture book (sea battle)."

[https://www.directoryofillustration.com/illustration\\_image\\_details.aspx?AID=12666&IID=243445](https://www.directoryofillustration.com/illustration_image_details.aspx?AID=12666&IID=243445).





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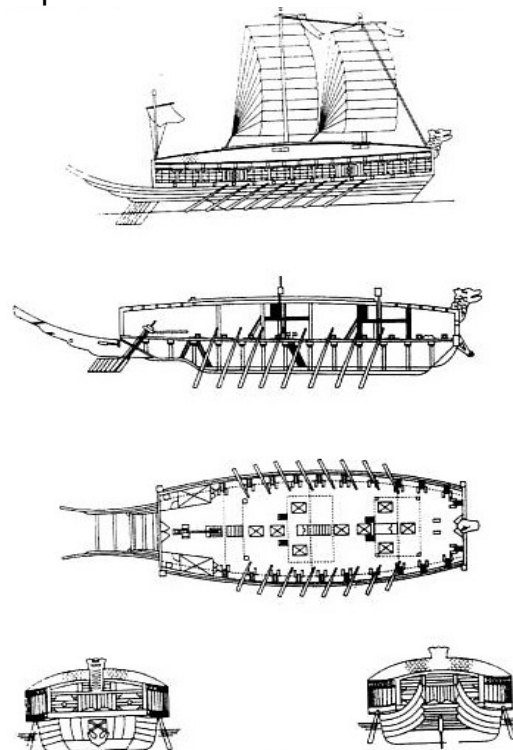
### History of Korean Shipbuilding

Korean seafaring and navigation date back thousands of years. The *Geobukseon* or turtle ship was successfully used to defend Korea in naval battles with Japan in the sixteenth century. The turtle ship was a great new idea in shipbuilding and a major accomplishment in both Korean maritime and world naval history. The ship itself was ironclad to repel attacks from above. Spikes lined the hull, and the bow of the vessel was carved to resemble the head of a dragon. The dragon could be used to fire canon or "spew flames and smoke to confound enemy ships."



A depiction of one of the heavily armored *Geobukseon* (Turtle ship). Source: Korean Rare Book Collection, Asian Division.

<https://blogs.loc.gov/international-collections/2020/12/now-online-korean-rare-book-digital-collection/>.



A drawing of plans for the *Geobukseon*. Source: The Deadliest Blogger: Military History Page.

"Great Warship of History: Korean Turtle Ship." <https://deadliestblogpage.wordpress.com/2017/07/23/great-warships-of-history-korean-turtle-ship/>.

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### Turtles as Symbols

In Korean culture, turtles are symbols of longevity and loyalty. Turtles, along with dragons, have a special status in Korean mythology, and both have inspired works of art and design.



*A life-size reconstruction of a Geobukseon located in Gangguan Harbor. Source: This Is Korea Tours. "Geobukseon (Turtle Ship)."*

<https://thisiskoreatours.com/project/gangguan-port-turtle-ship-geobukseon/>



*A Dragon-turtle celadon ceramic ware. Source: World History Encyclopedia. "Dragon-turtle Celadon."*

<https://www.worldhistory.org/image/5967/dragon-turtle-celadon/>



*The tomb of King Silla Taejong Muyeol (National Treasure No. 25), which is the oldest of the surviving tombs, built in 661.*

<https://korea.tabi.kr/qyeongju/9485#:~:text=In%20front%20of%20the%20tomb,son%20of%20King%20Taejong%20Muyeol>

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### Admiral Yi Sun-sin

As mentioned, the family of the real Admiral Yi Sun-sin was *yangban*. Yi Sun-sin was known as a dedicated soldier who worked tirelessly to turn his great ideas into successful defense strategies to protect the Korean kingdom from invasion.



A statue of Admiral Yi Sun-sin located in Gwanghwamun, Seoul. Source: Korea JoongAng Daily. "Why move Yi Sun-Shin?"

<https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2019/01/23/fountain/Why-move-Yi-Sunshin/3058600.html>.



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### Korean Clothing: *Hanbok*

*Hanbok* (pronounced: HAHN-bohg) is a general term for Korean clothing. *Hanbok* come in many varieties, and as in all fashion, *hanbok* styles change over time and vary by region. While *hanbok* are featured in museum exhibits, folk villages, and historical dramas, people continue to wear *hanbok* for ceremonies and in everyday life.



Commonly seen *hanbok* styles from the late Joseon era (1392–1897).

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

"Korean clothing-Hanbok-Joseon period-02.jpg."

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korean\\_clothing-Hanbok-Joseon\\_period-02.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korean_clothing-Hanbok-Joseon_period-02.jpg).

A woman's *hanbok* consists of a short jacket (*jeogori*; pronounced: CHAW-GOH-lee) worn over a long, flowing skirt (*chima*; pronounced: CHEE-mah); this outfit has many variations and accessories. Men's *hanbok* styles consist of a long jacket worn over pants (*baji*; pronounced: PAH-chee). Hats worn by men show their age and social status. More elaborate hats are worn by people with greater status or age. *Hanbok* are still worn in everyday life today.

In *The Turtle Ship*, Sun-sin and his family live in a fishing village. They dress in plain *hanbok*, with plain white for Sun-sin, and white or drab colors for Sun-sin's father and the other men in the village. Sun-sin's mother, in contrast to the royal women and the ladies of the court, wears no adornments with her *hanbok*.

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The clothing of the poor fishing villagers and of the common folk at court is contrasted with the ceremonial dress of court officers, nobles, and the king.

Korea long history includes many cultural variations over time, across regions, and throughout world politics. In the era depicted in *The Turtle Ship*, the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897) (pronounced: choh-SUHN), various hairstyles were popular.

Both boys and girls would wear their hair long and in braids. Girls would tie the ends of their braids with a sash.

When they married, women would tie their hair into a single centered knot near the nape of the neck. This knot could be adorned with an ornament such as a hairpin called a *binyeo* (pronounced: PEE-nyaw). A *binyeo* could be made of various materials (for example, wood, metal, or jade) and carved into different shapes (for example, a dragon or phoenix) or with text.

Men would wear their hair in a single knot on top of the head. Gentlemen would wear a hat, called a *gat* (pronounced: kaht), covering the topknot. Hats were elaborate and were used to signal rank, class, and occupation.



*A woman and man wearing hanbok. Source: All About the Beautiful Korea. "The Traditional Costume of South Korea – Hanbok."*

[http://koreadaebak123.blogspot.com/2016/09/the-traditional-costume-of-south-korea\\_26.html](http://koreadaebak123.blogspot.com/2016/09/the-traditional-costume-of-south-korea_26.html)

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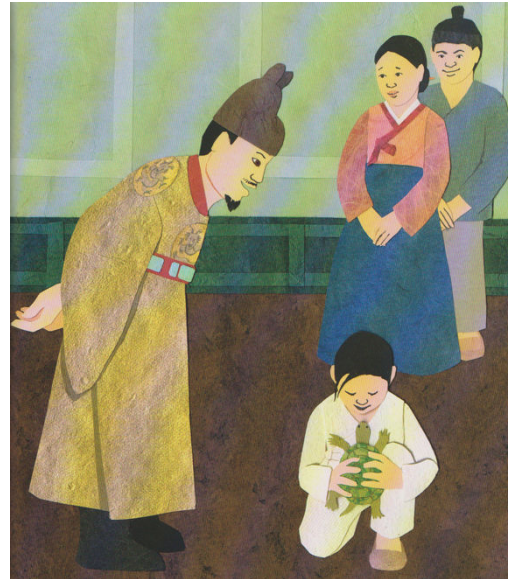
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### Social Class and Inequality

The court nobles in *The Turtle Ship* don't listen to Sun-sin because he comes from a family of commoners. But the wise king understands the merit in Sun-sin's idea.



*Illustrations of the court nobles laughing at Sun-sin and the king listening to Sun-sin. Source: The Turtle Ship. Helena Ku Rhee. Illustrated by Colleen Kong-Savage.*

In pre-modern Korea, there were four social classes: royals and nobles, townspeople and merchants, commoners, and slaves or indentured servants. Strictly determined relationships dictated the interactions among royalty, aristocracy, townsfolk, villagers, and peasants. Thus, clothing, gestures, and even speech were used to mark social class so that people could know how to interact.



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An illustration of Sun-sin with his turtle and his parents going to the palace for the contest. Source: *The Turtle Ship*. Helena Ku Rhee. Illustrated by Colleen Kong-Savage.



A reenactment of the royal wedding ceremony of King Gojong and Queen Mi at Unhyeongung Palace. Source: Trippose. "King Gojong and Queen Min's Royal Wedding Ceremony." <https://en.trippose.com/festival/king-gojong-and-queen-min-s-royal-wedding-ceremony>.

The character Sun-sin is the son of commoners from a poor fishing village, but he had a wonderful idea that he turned into an extraordinary invention. Many cultures have stories about people who rise above societal expectations through hard work and ability. Do you have an idea for something to improve society? Could you work hard to turn your idea into a reality?

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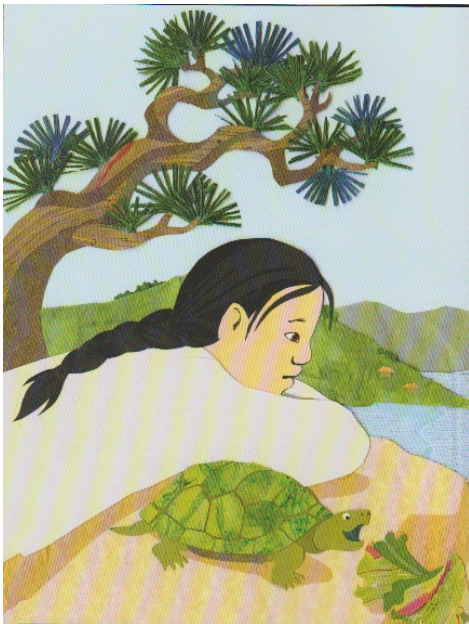
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*Illustrations of little Sun-sin and adult Sun-sin with his turtle. Source: The Turtle Ship. Helena Ku Rhee. Illustrated by Colleen Kong-Savage.*

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