



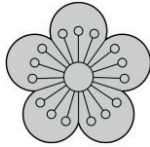
# A Flying Dragon

King Taejo, Founder of Korea's Choson Dynasty

Tony Robinson & Minsun Ji

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Tony Robinson  
Minsun Ji



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*Wishing to entrust him with a  
great task,  
Heaven flexed his bones and  
sinews,  
And let his body suffer  
Wounds and scars.*

*While the stately guards  
stand row after row,  
While you reign in peace and  
give audience,  
Remember, my Lord,  
His piety and constancy.*

*—Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven  
Canto 114*



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## Preface

### *The Hinge of History*

This book is the only English-language biography of Korea's King Taejo—the founding monarch of Korea's 518-year Joseon Dynasty and an immensely consequential figure who rose to power at a critical juncture in East Asian history. When King Taejo was born in 1335 as Yi Seong-gye to a rather obscure family on Korea's northern borderlands, the peninsula was dominated by joint rule of Genghis Khan's world-shaping Mongol empire and the nearly 500-year Korean Goryeo dynasty. As Yi Seong-gye grew from obscure soldier to national general, his life intersected with the collapse of the powerful Mongol Empire in Korea and China, the rise of China's brilliant Ming dynasty, and the fall of Korea's own increasingly corrupt 500-year Goryeo dynasty.

At this watershed East Asian moment, Yi Seong-gye stepped onto the public stage. He became an undefeated military general, launched a dramatic coup d'état against the Goryeo King, and forged a new Korean dynasty (Joseon) in 1392. By the end of his rule, Korea had fought the mighty Mongol Dynasty off the peninsula, held off the Chinese Ming at the Yalu River, defeated massive raids of Japanese pirates along the coastlines, and firmly established the boundaries of an independent and stable new nation. This new nation of Joseon would become Asia's most thoroughly realized Confucian society. Beginning a social transformation of his country, King Taejo held hands with a rising class of ideologically driven Confucian scholars who were intent on remaking the cultural foundations of their country. By the end of Taejo's reign, Joseon was on the path to Confucian transformation, a recognized border with China had emerged, northern tribes were offering tribute to Joseon,\* and Japanese marauding pirates had been

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\*During King Taejo's reign, and beyond, there was frequent conflict between Ming China and Joseon Korea for the loyalty of Jurchen peoples north of the Korean peninsula. In the end, far more Jurchen tribes paid tribute and swore fealty to the Ming Emperor than to the Joseon King, but regular Jurchen tribute also flowed to Joseon. Jurchen elites often visited ascendant Joseon in the years after King Taejo's

## PREFACE

subjugated. Furthermore, a broad range of social reforms improved agricultural production, tax codes, land allocation, and legal procedures, ushering in a Golden Era of Joseon peace, literary accomplishment, and scientific discovery that lasted for decades.

Through military might, charismatic will, and ideological imagination, Yi Seong-gye became medieval Korea's indispensable actor, forging an enduring new order out of the turbulent and corrupted wreckage that characterized late-Goryeo society of his time. This new Joseon dynasty would be ruled by 26 successive descendants of King Taejo's line, taking Korea all the way to 1910, when Joseon was terminated by Japanese colonization. Venerable Korean cantos composed in his honor forty years after his death (*Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*) compare King Taejo to a flying dragon who rose to protect his people and achieve great things. That's an old legend, but what is fact is that Taejo was an immensely consequential figure in East Asian history, one whose legacy continues to shape modern life in Korea and the region. This biography tells how all that came to be.

### *The Eight Diarists: A Note on Sources*

For original source material, the book draws heavily upon the *Annals of King Taejo*, compiled soon after his death and translated into English by Byonghyong Choi (Harvard University Press). King Taejo's *Annals* are part of the much broader *Joseon Wangjo Sillok* (or the *Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty*), which is a diaristic account of the daily life and court activities of all Joseon kings from 1392 to 1863, comprising 1,893 books and 888 volumes. These annals were compiled fastidiously by some of the most accomplished scholars of their day and archived across the centuries in royal record halls. These *Veritable Records* present the text of important memorials and decrees across Joseon history, share details on vital debates of the day, and record the deeds,

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ascension, offering tribute and receiving moral edification, land grants, tools, and court honors in return. See Bohnet, A., *Turning Toward Edification*.

pronouncements, and daily behaviors of the Joseon royals. Beyond these important political matters, the *Joseon Wangjo Sillok* also document more mundane matters like daily weather patterns, meteorological phenomenon, festival celebrations, food preparations, and travelogues of the King and his court.

To place these minute daily details into broader historical context and identify important narrative themes, this biography curates the voluminous day-to-day diary records in the *Annals* to produce a more thematic and accessible narrative of King Taejo's life. Our manuscript supplements the diary materials of the *Annals* with a review of secondary historical research on the subject, and additional primary sources, such as the *Koryosa* (History of Goryeo), the *Sambongjip* (Collected Works of Jeong Dojeon), and the Joseon *Euigwe* (historical records of court special events. Source materials and secondary research in both Korean and English are consulted. Though original materials from King Taejo's era (including the *Joseon Wangjo Sillok*) were written in Mandarin Chinese, this biography draws on either Korean or English translation of those sources, or on Korean and English secondary research materials.

Because this book relies heavily on a curation and contextualization of daily diary materials provided in the *Annals of King Taejo* and the *Koryosa*, this biography is mostly told from the perspective of court historians of the early Joseon Dynasty who compiled both these documents. In a time of turbulent dynastic transition, these court diarists were assumedly supporters of King Taejo's dynastic revolution and were invested in legitimating the new Joseon order. It can be expected that they recorded and interpreted events in ways to celebrate the prowess and virtue of the founding King, and to besmirch the character of Taejo/Joseon opponents. As James Palais summarizes regarding these court records, "the reigning dynasty often demanded that history be used towards its own glorification."<sup>1</sup> For example, it can't be denied that the Joseon diarists' mythologizing accounts of King Taejo's other-worldly military and hunting skills are often more hagiography than history.

Yet, these early Joseon historians were also among the most educated and highly trained scholars of their time, and they worked from some of the most complete and carefully

## PREFACE

maintained archival materials in medieval East Asia. Furthermore, as Palais observes, these historians worked in a literary cultural framework “in which the facts of history had to be left untouched and unreconstructed”: they not only valued a factual recounting of history for its own sake, but also so that their annals would not be seen as simply unbelievable propaganda.<sup>2</sup> Thus, although the court historians faced undeniable pressures to celebrate and legitimate the actions of Joseon kings (especially the founding king), they were also scholars accountable to a literary tradition of true and accurate record-keeping in compiling their annals. In the end, their voluminous *sillok* (trans. “veritable” or “true and complete”), and related records of the *Koryosa*, are unsurpassed as source material for the life of Yi Seong-gye who became King Taejo.

Compiling the *sillok* began with meticulous efforts to document and archive vast materials related to the reign of a Joseon king. Following traditions dating back to Han Chinese stenographers of the 5th and 6th centuries, Korean court historians carefully recorded the genealogies, actions, and words of their kings through the centuries. Though the East Asian tradition traces to Chinese imperial courts, no dynastic records are as complete or as meticulous as those of Joseon Korea. Joseon court historians held official title from the Office of Royal Decrees. Typically, there were eight of them: “The Eight Diarists.” Some diarists would gather administrative records, others would reproduce the texts of various court memorials or decrees, while others would follow the king around, ink brush in hand, to record all his actions. There are cases of historians discretely remaining behind screens during meals to catch what was said or hiding in the bushes during hunts to follow the king incognito—recording every action and statement of their liege.<sup>3</sup>

All records of court discussions, actions of the king, private opinions and communications, administrative edicts, memorandums, testimonials and appeals to the king were stored in the archives. Kings were not allowed to view what was written about them (a rule that was rarely broken), though the royals were aware that their every action and statement was being recorded for posterity, which may have worked to influence some of their activities and words. Upon the death of a king, all the records were gathered up—the day-to-day

recordings of king's activities, together with all the administrative records, memorials, and royal edicts. These official records (called *sacheo*, or "the grasses of history")<sup>4</sup> included daily records of governance, the diaries kept by royal secretaries, the record of royal lectures, government reports from various bureaus, records of interrogation and punishment, diplomatic correspondence, biographical details of deceased court officials, weather and meteorological reports, details on natural disasters, policy suggestions and memorials submitted by court officials, and information on who passed civil or military exams or received official appointments.<sup>5</sup>

Such a gathering of all these "grasses of history" was a vast undertaking. As described in a 1434 State Code describing the compilation of the *sillok*: "All government offices, whether great or small, whether in the capital or in the regions, should copy out clearly those affairs that are worthy of taking heed of among their normal activities, and send those to the main office so that they can serve as the basis of the records; this should be a permanent practice."<sup>6</sup> After all the records were gathered, the diarists met for a strict review process to cull, organize and ensure the accuracy of the records of the king, which were then curated into coherent histories, to be replicated, stored and safeguarded in state repositories called *sago*. These historical records, which today consist of a total of 1,893 volumes (and more than 49 million characters), are the most complete record of any historic dynasty in existence and are on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. The draft materials used to create the final "Veritable Records" of a king—all the original notes of the diarists as well as records of memorials, edicts, or court debates—were then washed away in rivers to ensure no unintended details or alternative perspectives leaked out.<sup>7</sup>

The eight diarists of the realm were carefully selected, highly educated scholars. Their annals were well-regarded for their accuracy and balance, then and still today. "The only thing I am afraid of," reflected the particularly malicious and authoritarian King Yeonsangun (r. 1495–1506), "is historical records."<sup>8</sup> Such royalist concern over what went into the records must have affected the court diarists, who were after all state officials invested in the success of the Joseon dynasty. Though the court diarists were chosen in part for their virtuous



## PREFACE

impartiality and operated with norms of recording affairs “with a straight brush”<sup>9</sup> (i.e., accurately, without fear or favor), they faced political pressures that must have affected some of what made it into *Joseon Sillok*. It helped protect the diarists that the final *sillok* for any given king was only produced after his death. Just as well, the king could not review early drafts of diarist materials; a rule rarely broken. Still, the fact that work on the *Taejo Sillok* began soon after his death meant that archivists operated within a touchy political environment, likely facing royal pressure from the sitting king and other notables to present details from a regime-legitimizing perspective and to leave out opprobrium of King Taejo and his allies.

This very issue of when to produce a king’s final *sillok* divided opinions of early Joseon officials. The court historians argued that a king’s *sillok* should not be produced for several generations after a king’s death, providing enough historical distance to assure objectivity in the final *sillok*. Court Diarist Yi Eung put it this way when discussing the issue with King Taejong (r. 1400–1418) in 1410: “If a contemporary person compiles contemporary events, then who would prepare the writings with a straight brush, and take upon himself the disaster right before his eyes? I know I could not do so.”<sup>10</sup> But King Taejong was eager to have the *sillok* of the founding king (his father, King Taejo) produced very soon after Taejo’s death, and he disagreed with the historian. We need to produce these final records while the memory is fresh, Taejong argued, and while diarists and ministers are still alive who witnessed events and can ensure they are accurately reported. In addition to this high-minded argument, we can assume King Taejong strongly desired the story of the founding King Taejo of Joseon to be told quickly and in a positive light, as the dynasty was still in its early years and in need of political legitimation. As well, King Taejong himself was involved in a bitter and fratricidal rise to power and had self-interest in influencing just how these violent events would be portrayed in the *sillok*. It can be assumed that the diarists were well-aware of King Taejong’s interest in such matters as they compiled the final *sillok* of his father, in the immediate years after his death. Because King Taejong’s argument for *sillok* production immediately following a king’s death (rather than three generations later) won the day and set

precedent throughout Joseon, we can assume a higher degree of self-censorship among court historians than might otherwise be the case.

One other issue regarding the *Taejo Sillok's* accuracy is that we know King Taejo tried a few different times to review materials as they were being collected—a practice that was almost completely disallowed through subsequent centuries of Joseon. Though the records of the Eight Diarists typically could not be reviewed by a sitting monarch as they were being compiled,\* the founding monarch of a dynasty was a bit different, because there wasn't a clear process of recoding events during his very early days. Or so Yi Seong-gye would argue after he became the founding King. In 1395, King Taejo tried to see the notes of his Eight Diarists regarding the early days of his reign, but the Censorate and several Ministers strongly resisted this proposal, so he backed down.<sup>11</sup> Then again, towards the end of his reign in 1398, the court historians submitted a compilation of their Annals on the final kings of the Goryeo dynasty that Yi had toppled—Kings Gongmin, King U and King Gongyang. King Taejo asked to see a draft of the materials—which covered the period of his own rise to power through a coup d'état—before they were finalized. The historians balked. They argued that their careful and accurate records—*secure from royal intervention*—helped ensure that all kings would behave virtuously, for fear of the judgement of history. Here's how one diarist put it:

*To reflect quietly, every state in antiquity employed its own historiographers and had them truthfully record the words and conduct of the king as well as the rights and wrongs of the*

---

\*There was one notable exception to this rule. In 1498, the tyrannical King Yeonsangun forced open the diarists' records and found material that was critical of his actions. His anger led to the *Sahwa* ("the scholar's calamity") or the *First Literati Purge* of 1498. Six people were executed due to what was written in the records. In subsequent years, King Yeonsangun was deposed by a rival political faction for his violence and licentiousness and measures were taken to better protect future *sillok* records from being reviewed by sitting kings.

## PREFACE

*subjects and their performance without reserve. Therefore, the kings and subjects **secretly** handed down the history of their times to posterity and dared not act wrongfully because they were always mindful of the orders and commands they issued and the ways in which they spoke and behaved. So there was a deep purpose in having historiographers in the state.<sup>12</sup> (emphasis added)*

Agreed, said King Taejo. But still, I would like to see what you are writing about me ahead of time. Shocked, the historians respectfully wondered why in the world the King would want to do that. *“Though we are not sure, you make us wonder if you want to admonish posterity by examining rights and wrongs in the records. If not, do you intend to correct the mistakes by reviewing what is in the records? Or do you want to review it so that nothing important is left out?”*

The historians assured the King that they had many experts to take care of such concerns, and to double-check the facts. Nothing would be left out, and everything would be fair and impartial. Please do not demand to see your own records, they implored, for you are setting an example to all the subsequent kings. *“If your Majesty once sees the draft of history of your reign, your successors will certainly find an excuse for reading the draft of history of their reigns, saying ‘My father read it and so did my grandfather.’ If this practice of reading or revising the draft of history is thus justified and handed down, how can a historiographer dare to grab a brush and write history as he witnesses it?”*

The court historian went on in this way for some time, finally prostrating himself before the King and imploring Taejo to *please* not demand to see the draft records. But King Taejo’s will would not be turned. He demanded to see the drafts. He insisted he wouldn’t demand inappropriate changes. He explained that he simply wanted to be sure that some obscure early events and discussions from the start of his dynasty were correctly recorded. So the drafts were turned over to the king for review.<sup>13</sup>

Though the *Taejo Sillok* reports this discussion, it does not report on how much was or was not edited by King Taejo.\* But the fact that the details of this vigorous debate with King Taejo over access to the records made it into the final *Sillok* speaks favorably to the values and courage of the Diarists, even as they faced countervailing royalist pressures. So too does what happened next. The summary of the vigorous debate between the King and his scribes is immediately followed in the *sillok* by one other unpleasant incident. It seems a servant of Prince Hoean (one of King Taejo's sons) had visited the house of a local shipbuilding official and had made inappropriate advances on a female servant there. When King Taejo heard about it, he ordered the servant beheaded that very day. This grim story of a quick royal beheading follows immediately on the heels of several diarists debating with the king about whether he could see their records and suggesting his motives might be disreputable. It speaks to the principles of the Eight Diarists that they were willing to stick their necks out, even at a time of easy beheadings: that's how to write with what the diarists called a "straight brush"!

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\* Though King Taejo was able to review a small number of his own records before they were finalized, this practice did not become the norm. Rather, the principle that Kings could not look at their own records as they were being compiled was quite scrupulously adhered to for most of the rest of the 500-year Joseon dynasty.



Figure 1. King Taejo Family Tree

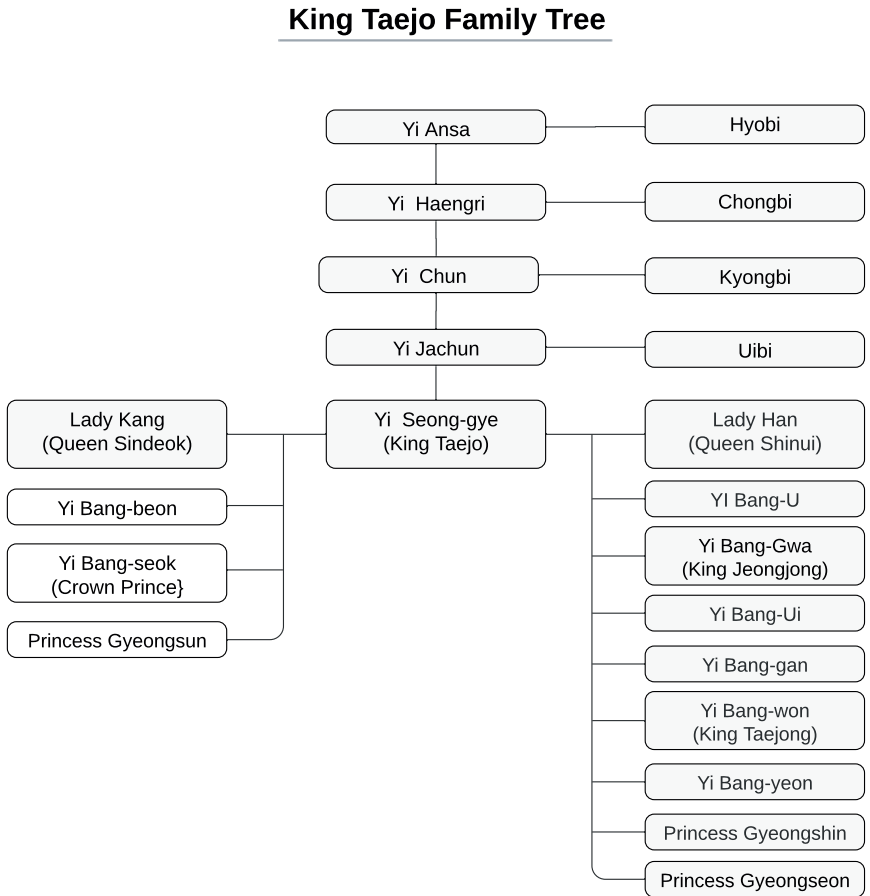
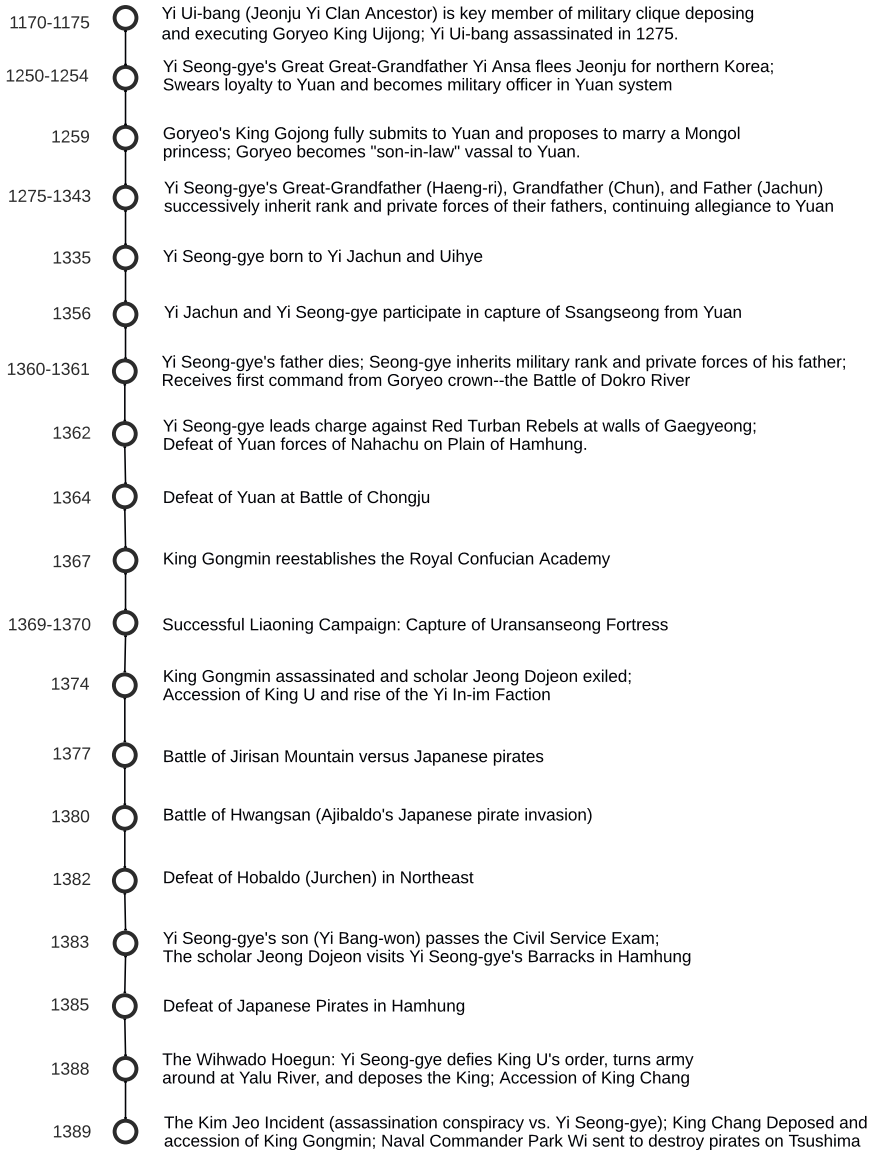


Figure 2. Major Events in Story of King Taejo

**Major Events in Story of King Taejo (1170-1389)**



## Major Events in Story of King Taejo (1390-1408)

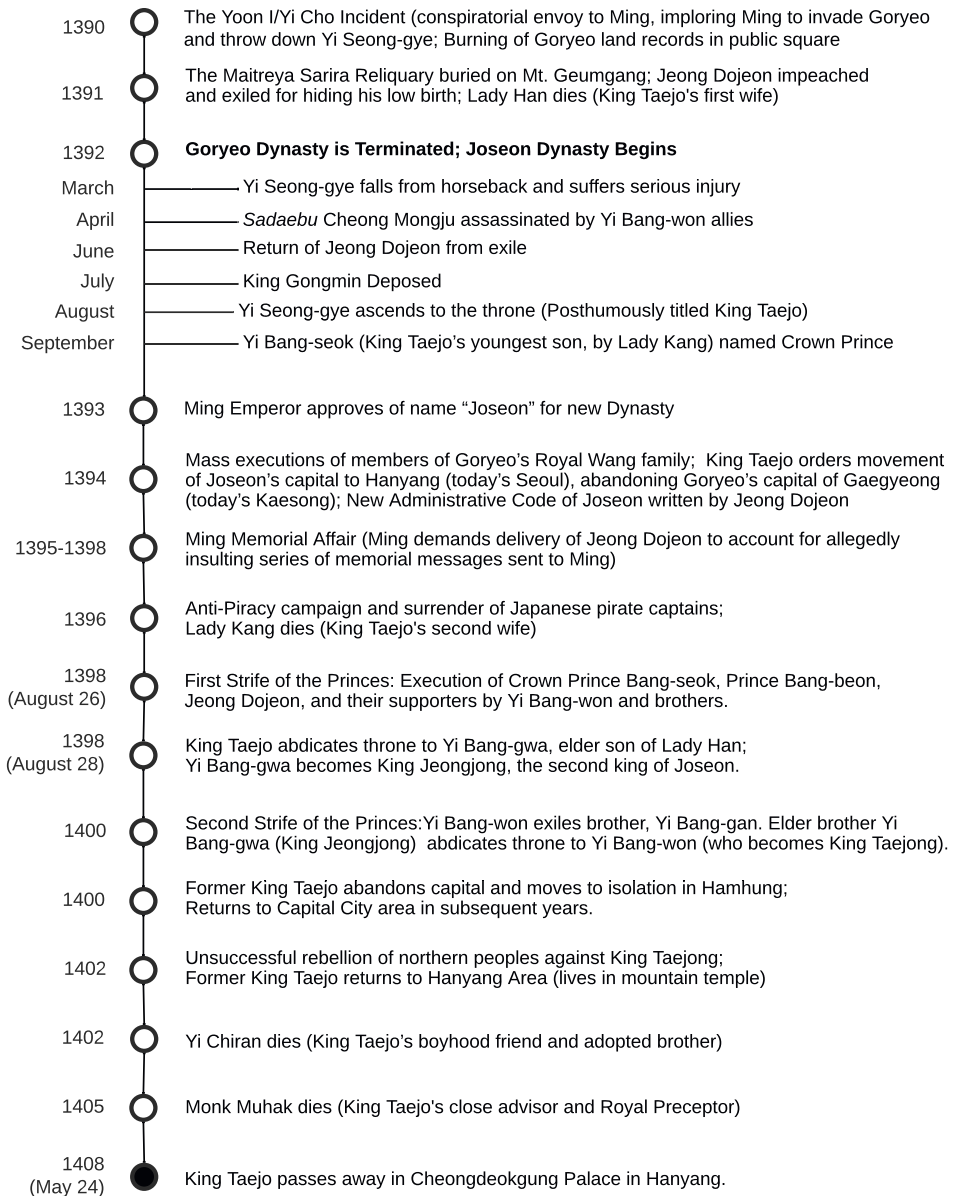




Figure 3. 14th Century Goryeo

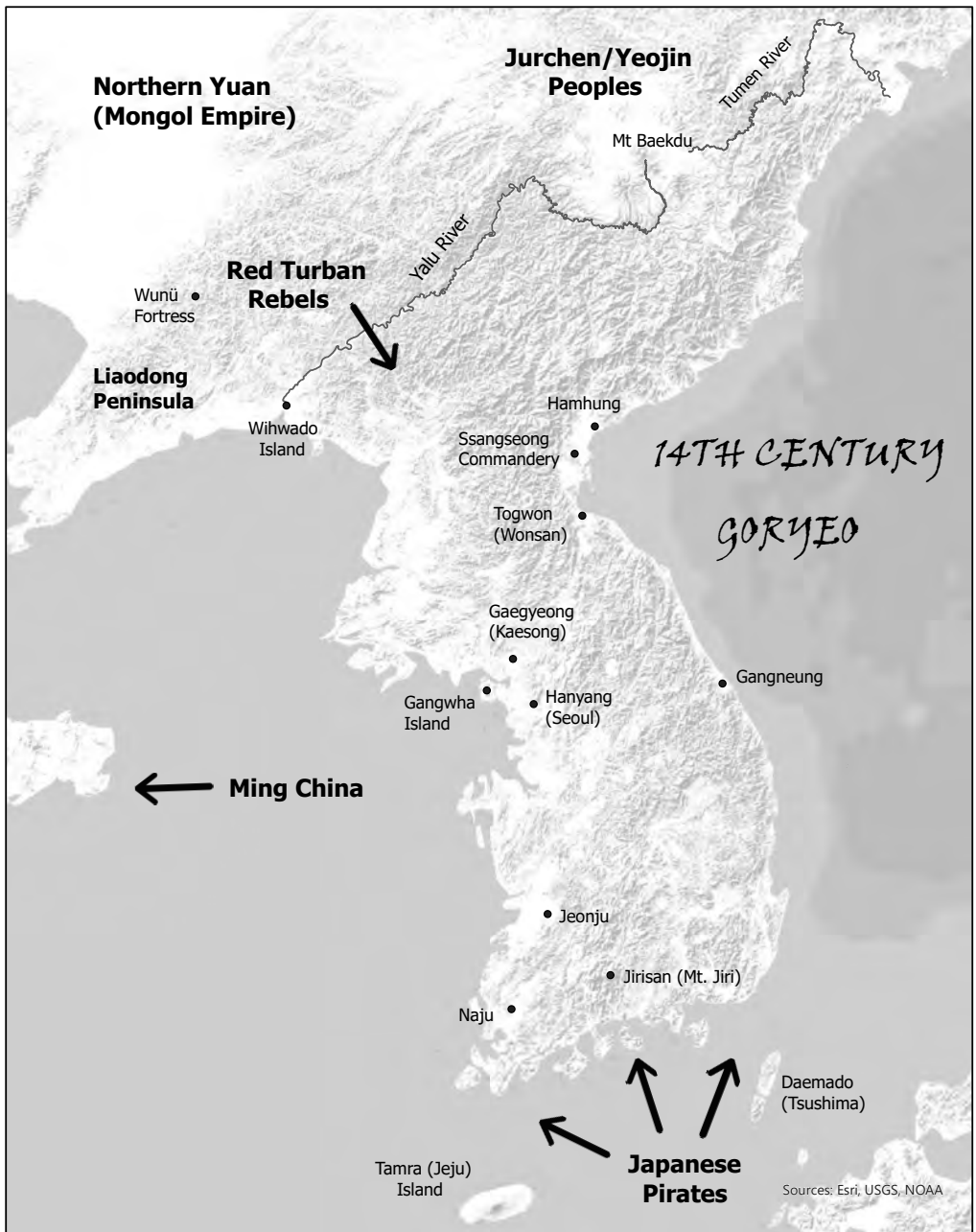


Figure 4. The Path of the Jeonju Yi Clan

## The Path of the Jeonju Yi Clan: From Jeonju to Gaegyeong

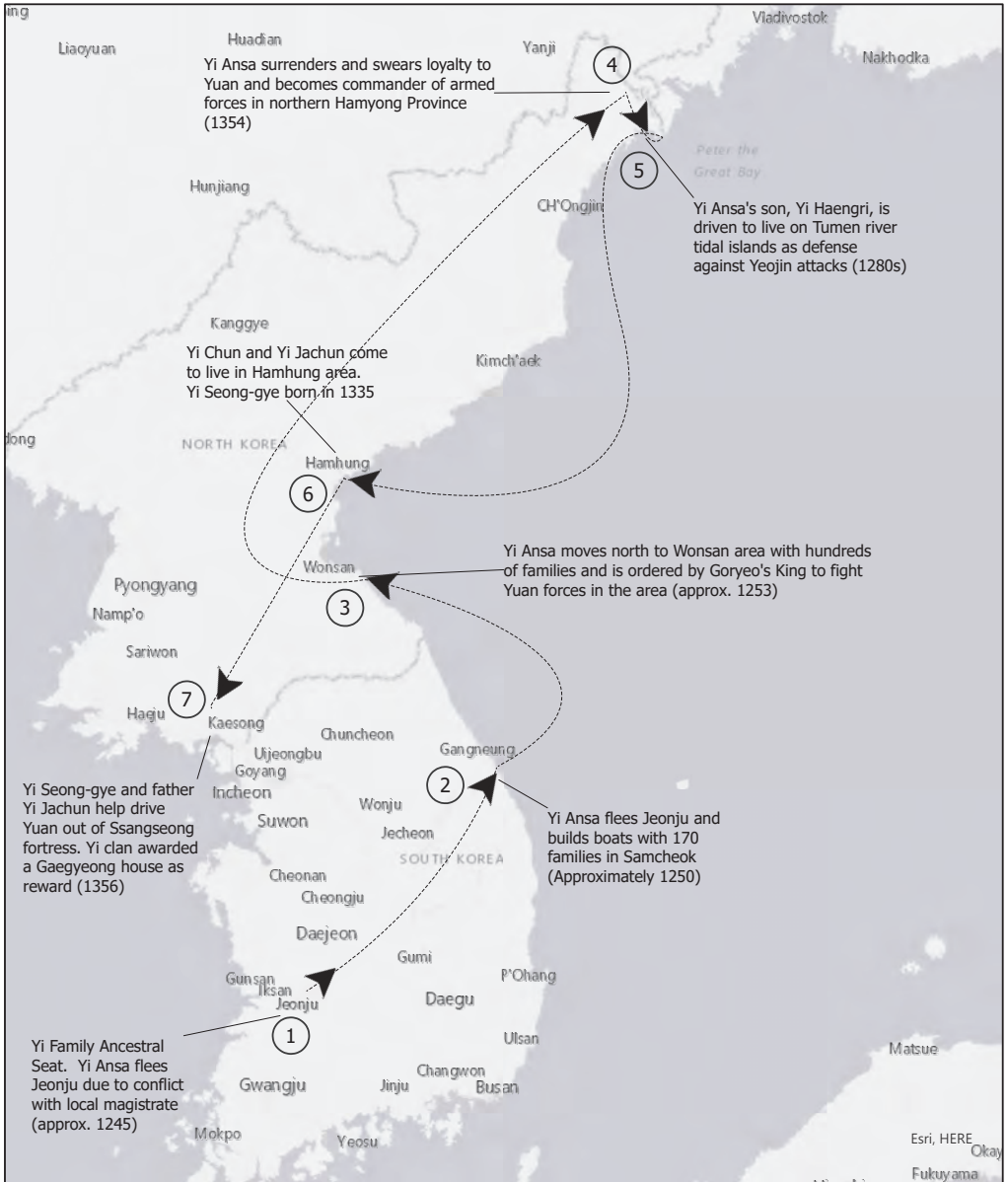


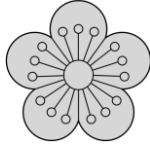
Figure 5. Yi Seong-gye's Major Conflicts in the North



Figure 6. Yi Seong-gye's Activities in the South







## **THE BOY IN THE BORDERLANDS**

“People could tell he was intelligent as soon as he was born. He had an imposing face like that of a king, as majestic and divine as a dragon. His wisdom and courage surpassed everyone. As he spent his early years between Hwaryeong and Hamju, the people in the north engaged in trading hawks often said, ‘I wish I could catch a hawk as outstanding as Yi Seong-gye is.’”

— *The Taejo Sillok*



## The Hinge of History



*Back in the 1300s, when the Korean peninsula lay under Mongol domination, Yi Jachun was a soldier of the north. He lived near sacred Mount Baekdu, the tallest mountain in Korea, topped by a heavenly crater lake. On this peak a divine Bear-spirit had long ago given birth to Dangun, progenitor and first divine ruler of the Korean people. Thousands of years later, Yi Jachun enjoyed exploring this great mountain and prayed to its spirit.*

*One day, Yi Jachun was hiking the mountain and had some drinks. He fell into a deep sleep and the spirit of Mt. Baekdu came to him in a dream. "If you pray hard, you will have a good luck and a great son," the spirit promised.*

*Upon awakening, Yi Jachun prayed to Mt. Baekdu every day for one hundred days. Then came another dream. A spirit came down from the mountain and offered Yi Jachun a golden ruler. "Please take care that this ruler is used to straighten affairs in your Eastern Country," said the spirit.*

*Around this same time, Yi Jachun's wife told of a strange event. While doing laundry at the river, a silky red Koi had suddenly leapt out of the water and disappeared into her stomach.*

*Ten months later, the baby Yi Seong-gye was born on October 11, 1335.\**




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\* This story is among the voluminous folklore and legendry that have grown up around King Taejo, who was born with the name of Yi Seong-gye. Many chapters in this book will open with a bit of folklore relevant to the subject matter of that chapter. This folklore conveys some of the atmosphere in which Yi Seong-gye moved and was understood. These legends are always presented in italics at the beginning of chapters. For source material on this Mt. Baekdu legend, see Lee, H., "Yi Seong-gyeui Jeonseunggwa Uimi Yeongu" ["Analysis of the Meaning of Myths about Yi Seong-gye"], pp. 30-33.



## THE BOY IN THE BORDERLANDS

Perhaps the most influential Korean personality over the last thousand years was born in the wild and grew up in obscurity. This was Yi Seong-gye (1335–1408), who would become the founding King of Korea's 500-year Joseon dynasty, but who was born far from the halls of power in the rugged northern borderland between Korean and Jurchen\* lands. Far north on the Korean peninsula, the young Yi Seong-gye was an unknown soldier, living amid obscure tribespeople. He roamed largely ungoverned territories populated by diverse Mongol, Jurchen, Han Chinese, and ethnic Korean clans. An excellent young archer, Yi Seong-gye devotedly crafted oversized arrows of his own design, whittling air slots into them so that they whistled whenever he shot them through the air. With his whistling arrows, he happily hunted pheasant, marten, roe deer, boars, and tiger among the tall pampas grass where northern Korean mountains met the Eurasian steppes.<sup>1</sup>

Growing up in loosely governed Goryeo<sup>†</sup> borderlands where the Yalu<sup>‡</sup> and Temur rivers divide the northern Korean peninsula from the Asian landmass, Yi Seong-gye (who would be renamed King Taejo after founding the Joseon dynasty) lived at the hinge of history, witnessing the rise and fall of powerful kingdoms on every border. The leaders of Genghis and Kublai Khan's sprawling Mongol empire had just been pushed out of their Yuan Dynasty winter capital in Daidu

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\* Jurchen peoples were concentrated in lands north of the Korean peninsula, across the Yalu and Tumen Rivers (in the modern northeastern Chinese provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang). They were renamed as "Manchu" in 1635 by Hong Taiji (aka, Emperor Taizong of the Qing Dynasty), in an effort to repudiate the Jurchen's earlier history of subjugation to Ming. Jurchen lands thereafter gained the exonym of Manchuria.

† "Goryeo" is the name of the ancient dynasty that ruled the Korean peninsula from 918 to 1392—the same dynasty that King Taejo of this biography threw down in 1392. Its capital was Gaegyeong (today's Kaeseong), on the west coast about 50 kilometers north of today's Seoul and several hundred kilometers southwest of Yi Seong-gye's hometown. The modern name of Korea is derived from the Goryeo dynasty.

‡ Also called the Amnok River, especially in Korean sources.

(Beijing), fleeing before the rebel forces of Han China's rising Ming Dynasty. Both the declining Mongol and the rising Ming constantly appealed to Goryeo for help, while Goryeo had its own goals to shake off Mongol dominance and expand its national borders amid the surrounding chaos.<sup>2</sup> At this watershed East Asian moment, Yi Seong-gye stepped onto the public stage.

As warrior and King, Yi Seong-gye rose to lead affairs that would shape the outcome of Korea's relations with Chinese, Mongol, Jurchen, and Japanese forces for centuries to come. He fought off the mighty Mongol empire, held off the Chinese Ming, and defeated massive raids of Japanese warlords and pirates, fostering two hundred years of peace with Japan that lasted until the Imjin War of 1592–1598. In so doing, Yi Seong-gye helped establish Korea's national borders with China, Mongolia, and Japan—boundaries that remain to this day.

By the end of his long life (1335–1408), this obscure hunter of the north had toppled the 474-year Goryeo dynasty and launched his own 518-year Joseon Dynasty, ruled by 26 descendants of his line. King Taejo's Joseon Dynasty would take Korea from 1392 to the dawn of modern times in 1910, when Japanese forces occupied Korea and terminated Taejo's epochal dynastic line.

Through military might, charismatic will, and ideological imagination, King Taejo became the indispensable luminary of his time, forging an enduring new order out of the turbulent and corrupted wreckage that characterized late-Goryeo society. Taking on Goryeo's corruption, King Taejo set Korea on a path to becoming Asia's most thoroughly realized Confucian polity, laying down the foundation for Korea's brilliant flowering of science, art and literature that followed the founding of the Joseon Dynasty. The shepherd of the north began life as a minor player on the fringe of things but rose up to become a "Flying Dragon"\* who put his hands on the wheel of history and changed the destiny of his country.

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\* Yi Seong-gye, who would become King Taejo, is described as a "Flying Dragon" in *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (*Yongbieocheonga*) the first document ever printed in Korea's Hangul script. This document was produced during the reign of King Sejong

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Korea's "rebirth" in the era of Taejo was the most unlikely of achievements. In fact, in Yi Seong-gye's time, it looked very much like his Goryeo nation was beset by hopeless challenges, doomed to decline and destruction. Before his rise as King, Yi Seong-gye's era featured thoroughly corrupt and failing Goryeo authority, massive foreign invasions, constant pirating raids, and persistent famine and epidemics. Inept and oppressive elites dominated Goryeo politics. Zealous scholars and end-times religious sects lamented the failure of Goryeo and pled for a millenarian savior. But for decades of decline, no savior came.

Instead, in Goryeo's end years, court elites plotted war against Ming China itself as a strategy to capture by-gone land and glory. It was likely a doomed effort, but in 1388, court elites amid a collapsing Goryeo society drafted plans for a disastrous war against the powerful Ming. Korea's royal family was spirited away into stone fortresses, while farmers were ordered out of their houses, conscripted into an ill-equipped army, and sent to invade China. The troubled general ordered to lead this invasion was Yi Seong-gye, sent against his will with an unprepared and inadequate army, and directed to cross the Yalu River and attack Chinese forces in the spring of 1388. As ordered by his king, General Yi marched off to doom, leaving the wreckage of his failing nation behind.

Amid a pouring rain at the Yalu River, there came a critical moment when Yi Seong-gye stood on the riverbank, looking gloomily into the Jurchen and Chinese lands beyond

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(Joseon's fourth king, and the grandson of King Taejo). *Songs of the Dragons* celebrates the ancestral heritage and founding acts of the "six flying dragons" of Joseon. The six dragons are Yi Seong-gye, his four paternal ancestors, and his son Yi Bang-won who became King Taejong. "Flying to Heaven" refers to the rise of the Joseon dynasty in accordance with the Mandate of Heaven. In these Cantos, the history of the Yi family is presented as the divine history of a country, blessed by six "dragons" who secure its borders from foreign powers and who demonstrate superior moral virtue in their behaviors so as to edify the people (See *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, translated by Hoyt, J.; Choi, M., "Yongbieochungae Natanan Yeonalseonchoui Yongtojeonjenggwa Byeongeong" ["A Study on the Territorial Wars and Northern Border in Yongbieocheonga"].

that he was ordered to attack. Yi was a loyal general of the Goryeo dynasty, ordered by an increasingly licentious and war-hungry king to cross the swollen river into China and fight an unwinnable campaign. At the critical moment, Yi Seong-gye put his hands on the wheel of history, turned his army away from hopeless war with the Ming, and made choices to create rather than destroy value. He marched back to Goryeo's capital, took over the throne, established a new dynasty, and began to remake Korean politics and society.

Yi Seong-gye was an influential ruler who defeated dozens of military enemies, defined the borders of his nation, and reshaped the cultural foundations of a people. The *Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty (Joseon Wangjo Sillok)* recall him as a "Grand Progenitor, Strong, Dedicated, Humane, Destiny-Opening, Holy, Cultivated, and Divinely Martial Great King."<sup>3</sup> And yet the name Yi Seong-gye (or King Taejo) remains largely unknown beyond the region and his story is untold in English-language biographies. To tell King Taejo's story, this biography will narrate legendary tales, moments of military daring, serpentine court intrigues, and the chronicle of an inspired ideological revolution led by Joseon's priests of soul known as the Confucian *sadaebu* (scholar-officials).

King Taejo's biography provides insights on a critical juncture of Korean and East Asian history, but is also a compelling human story, showcasing how an intriguing personality struggled to create value in his life. Amid a succession of inept and corrupt leaders of his era (including child kings, unscrupulous court puppeteers, and violently licentious royals) King Taejo stands out as incorruptible, conscientious, even humble. Beset by endlessly chattering Confucian scholars, Taejo was famed for listening more than he talked and patiently attending lengthy lecturers by the Confucian Remonstrators. Following a failed parade of timorous military commanders, Taejo became known for exemplary courage, fighting often at the forefront of his troops. Amongst ruthlessly power-hungry court elites, Taejo spent his final days isolated in humble Buddhist prayers.

Taejo lived in public as a paladin, but in private he became broken. Though Taejo threw down one failed kingdom and forged an epoch-defining dynasty of his own, desolation

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haunted him in the end. His eldest son turned away from his father's royal dreams, becoming a despairing drunkard, accusing Taejo of treachery against Goryeo. Three of his older sons conspired in a fratricidal "Strife of the Princes," murdering his two youngest boys as competitors to the throne. Soon thereafter, two sons battled anew over the crown; one ended up banished from the capital forever. One of Taejo's daughters lost her husband to the fratricidal strife. She fell into grief, shorn her hair, and become an isolated Buddhist monk. King Taejo's most esteemed friends—two exalted scholars—were both murdered in their prime by members of his own family. Taejo lived to be 72 years old and watched most of his closest friends die before him, including his adopted blood brother from the northern borderlands. Both his wives passed before he did.

In his final years, Taejo turned away from the crown he had won, dispirited with all the tragedy and death he had witnessed. He sought solace in the chanted sutras of darkened Buddhist temples. In his end days, he wished often to be buried back home, under northern borderland grasses. But the lonely king never did make it back home and was buried instead near the busy capital city he founded: Hanseong (today's Seoul). Yi Seong-gye had given his long and spirited life, and most of his family, to the new nation. In the end, his body too was claimed by Joseon.

Though the dynasty Taejo created would not suffer the founder's body to leave the capital and be buried up north, there was an accommodation. After he passed, the homesick king was buried under a mound of rugged northern pampas grass, transported all the way to the southern capital from Taejo's northern hometown haunts. At the very end of things, the founding king often wanted to return to happier days in those old northern hunting fields. That never happened, but King Taejo at least ended up buried under some of that hometown grass. And those fields of tall pampa grass are where this story begins.

## On the Mongol Frontier: The Plains of Hamhung



*The Lord of Heaven (Hwanin) had a son, Hwanung, who wished to live in the mountains and valleys of earth. So Hwanung was allowed to descend to Baekdu Mountain with 3,000 followers, living where the high peaks divide the Yalu and Tumen rivers. There, Hwanung and his minsters of clouds, rains and wind taught humans the ways of farming and medicine, laws and morality, art and literature.*

*It came to pass that a tiger and a bear beseeched Hwanung that they might become human. Hwanung told them to live in a cave for 100 days, eating only garlic and mugwort, and then he would allow them to become human. The tiger could not endure the test and left the cave after only twenty days. But the bear remained in the cave, was transformed into a woman, and had a child with Hwanung. This child of God and Bear was named Dangun, who later became king of the humans. He called his kingdom "Joseon" and built the city of Pyongyang. Dangun died at the age of 1,908 and became a mountain spirit.*

*The people of the Korean peninsula came to honor their descent from the great bear mother and Dangun who lived in the northern mountains, but so too did Mongol and Jurchen peoples carry totems of the divine bear. Korean, Mongol, and Jurchen nomadic peoples all across these lands mixed and lived close together and all paid worship to Heaven's Lake atop towering Mt. Baekdu, the highest mountain in all the region.<sup>1</sup>*



Yi Seong-gye was born in 1335 into northern Korean borderlands where the Yalu and Tumen rivers divide Korea's peninsula from today's China and Russia. In Yi's days, these lands were filled with diverse, nomadic peoples who had only

the slightest connections to the royal politics of distant courts in China, Mongolia, or southern Korea (then known as Goryeo). The isolation of the area was largely driven by its unforgiving terrain of high mountains and steep gorges, including the tallest mountain on the peninsula, Mt. Baekdu. All the peninsula's mountains over 2,000 meters high are located in the north, gathered in a dense network of crisscrossing ranges. The earth is crumpled into peak after peak of steep mountains and torturously twisted valleys in rugged lands, making settled life and central authority a challenge to maintain.

Though rugged peaks dominate the terrain, most northerners lived where they could find plains and lowlands among the mountains. Northern river basins such as the Yalu provided living space, as did scarce open areas like the plains of Hamhung—flat and fertile lands, squeezed in coastal corridors before the high mountains plunged suddenly into the Eastern Sea.<sup>2</sup>

These plains of Hamhung, high on Korea's northeastern coast, were Yi Seong-gye's home turf. The Goryeo poet Gwon Geun described the area as peppered with isolated "frontier towns": "the road stretches endlessly through plains where cranes fly overhead."<sup>3</sup> This was excellent territory for hunting and horsemanship—with vast grassy fields giving way to steep mountain valleys full of boar, deer, and tiger. When he talked about his home territory in later years, Yi Seong-gye would sometimes call it empty, stony, and infertile.<sup>4</sup> But he didn't mind because he loved hunting its expansive fields of tall pampas grass, with plumes of misty feathers turning purple in late summer and silvery white in the fall. Pampas grass grows all over the Korean peninsula, but Yi Seong-gye always said he liked the grasses of the Hamhung plains most of all.<sup>5</sup> The air was more free in the remote and rugged north, far from the reach of the Goryeo capital to the south.

Living this far north, Yi Seong-gye grew up in territories formally claimed by Korea's Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), but the reality is that his people lived quite beyond the reach of Goryeo law and loyalty. In fact, the Goryeo capital was headquartered far to the southwest in Gaegyeong (today's Kaeseong, near Seoul) and Yi Seong-gye and his people were typically considered untrustworthy barbarians to the urbane

Goryeo court that claimed these northern lands, even though the court royals had very little real presence on the ground. Korean provinces lying south of Pyongyang (to the West) or Hamhung (to the East) were deep enough in the peninsula to be dominated by ethnic Koreans, and had significant political, social and cultural ties to traditional Korean sources of authority, like the royal courts of ancient Silla or the current Goryeo kingdoms, both headquartered in southern Korean territories. But northern peninsular lands were different. These northeast Korean lands, near where the Yalu and Tumen rivers divided the peninsula from Jurchen (later known as Manchurian) and Siberian lands, had a long history of multi-ethnic composition. These marginal territories were far from Goryeo commerce centers and transit networks and were never as fully integrated into Goryeo society as lands further south, closer to the capital of Gaegyeong on the west coast.

The northern culture of nomadic hunting, herding and decentralized authority among diverse peoples differed from the more settled economy of rice paddy agriculture, artisanal merchants, advanced schools, and urbane etiquette that increasingly characterized late-Goryeo society in the southlands.<sup>6</sup> In the north, there were smaller towns, fewer schools or artists' bureaus, and limited outlets for advanced artisanry. Rather, "they moved from one place to another, where they could find water and grass without building a town or fortress, as was their long-kept custom. They hunted animals to live."<sup>7</sup> The Jurchen\* people, for example, lived with wild horses and migrating livestock and accumulated beast hides as a show of wealth. They conducted raiding parties on other tribespeople to steal wives, slaves and livestock. Compared to southern peoples, even those northerners who lived in established towns and didn't follow the herds still had

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\* Jurchen are also known as Yeojin and were concentrated in lands north of the Korean peninsula, across the Yalu and Tumen Rivers (in the modern northeastern Chinese provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang). They were renamed as "Manchu" in 1635 by Hong Taiji (aka, Emperor Taizong of the Qing Dynasty), in an effort to repudiate the Jurchen's earlier history of subjugation to Ming China.



a higher reliance on hunting, horsemanship, and archery than on academic talents, merchant trading or settled agriculture.<sup>8</sup>

These northeastern frontier lands of Yi Seong-gye's youth were late-comers to unified Korea. They had once belonged to the Balhae kingdom, a multi-ethnic polity made up of a mix of northern semi-nomadic peoples (Jurchen, Khitan, and Mohe, among others), descendants from Goguryeo (an ancient Korean kingdom), and even refugees fleeing Tang China.<sup>9</sup> The result was a diverse and dynamic northern region, claimed by Goryeo, but beyond the full reach of its law and cultural influence, populated by peoples of unpredictable loyalty.

From one point of view, this social mix didn't bode well. Kyung Moon Hwang describes how the area was filled with a diverse, restless population, and "a glut of low-level social elements that sealed the north's fate as the country's backwater."<sup>10</sup> But on the other hand, this same social mix gave the north a spirit of dissent and an air of freedom beyond the reach of the suffocating elites of strictly stratified central Goryeo. There were fewer strutting aristocrats and their pretensions. Instead, people lived in a socially dynamic "mass of commoners, out of which northern Koreans wove a unique social fabric."<sup>11</sup>

The diverse peoples of these borderlands were often considered "barbaric" by the southerners—deficient in Goryeo etiquette—and never considered as fully "Goryeoan" as people further south. When Xu Jing from Song China visited Goryeo in 1123, he was impressed with the "gentle" nature of the southern people of the capital region. "The men are very proper, and women follow faithfulness correctly. Vessels with feet are used for eating and drinking, and people give way to others when on the road." But the "uncouth northern savages" were different, Xu Jing observed. They are barbarians who "press their hair flat against the head, whose hands and feet are rough, whose pigtails are wrapped in a large hood, where father and son sleep together, and relatives use the same coffin."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the highlanders always suffered discrimination, even as these areas were absorbed into a unified Korean peninsula following Goryeo's founding in 918.<sup>13</sup> Central Goryeo officials typically disdained the rugged manners and limited education of northerners—calling them

“stupid,” “easily deceived” or “foolish and naïve”<sup>14</sup>—but they also feared their military skills and suspect loyalties. Fueling this popular vision were frequent reports of military conflicts all along the border, and several episodes of rebellion dating back to the incorporation of Balhae into Goryeo. While the southern capital was filled with court officials, merchants, and scholars, all donnish and glib, the northern territories were famous for powerful mounted warriors and skilled archers, experienced in hunting for survival and raids on competing clans. The area was thought to be filled with fierce, fighting men of beastly martial vigor, and it loomed large in the imagination of Goryeo elites.<sup>15</sup>

Fueling these martial visions of northern Goryeo was the fact that these were the days of Genghis and Kublai Khan’s fierce Mongol empire, and these northern territories were the beginning of the Mongol frontier in Goryeo. This was the territory where the Mongol presence on the peninsula was most pronounced and where Mongol military forces maintained stone fortresses and close relations with Goryeo locals. Mongol power in Goryeo radiated southward from the northern lands of Yi Seong-gye’s clan.

Though the Mongols did not rule Goryeo directly—allowing the nation to continue as a semi-independent vassal state paying tribute to the Yuan empire—the Kings, Queens, and other top elites of Goryeo society had all been subject to Yuan approval and oversight since 1269. In that year, the Goryeo heir-apparent (later King Chungnyeol, r. 1274–1308) requested the Mongol emperor to approve his marriage to a Mongol princess, thus establishing a pattern tying the Goryeo court closely to their Mongol suzerain.<sup>16</sup>

Goryeo’s leaders had little choice but to submit to the Mongols in this way. When the powerful Mongol army first arrived in triumph on the Korean peninsula in 1219, Ögedei Khan’s generals demanded Goryeo vassalage and tribute of clothes, furs, horses, and virgins. These demands were denied by Goryeo’s king, though his army was the weaker. Decades of Mongolian invasions and fierce Goryeo resistance followed, starting with the first Mongol invasion of 1231. During these years, the Goryeo court (based in the capital city of Gaegyeong) was so endangered that it fled several times to the Han River

estuary island of Ganghwa. Though the island was just a few hundred yards from the shoreline, it was defensible amid the high and unpredictable tides, and the Mongols were not a naval power. The Goryeo court held out as a government in exile for almost thirty years on their small island. They built a new palace, together with diminutive administrative buildings and sleeping quarters for the royal court and its attendants and carried on their dynastic rule for decades from their island quarters.<sup>17</sup>

With the court in exile, the rest of the Korean peninsula was abandoned to the attacks of the Mongols in several repeated invasions, “ravaging and plundering to their hearts’ content.”<sup>18</sup> The invasions after 1253 were the most destructive, as Mongols spread across the countryside to burn villages and starve Ganghwa island and its miniaturized royal court into submission. Thousands of Koreans died, and more than 200,000 were taken prisoner—many of them women and children who were distributed to Mongolian soldiers.<sup>19</sup> Goryeo’s historians reported that the chariots of the gods of death constantly passed each other amid fields covered with “skeletons under the sun.” Everywhere, prisoners were taken, “fathers and sons could not look after each other and wives and children could not protect each other.” People everywhere were anxious and trembling, “and the whole city cries sadly.”<sup>20</sup> In the northern borderlands, anxious locals began to turn against Goryeo elites and allied with the ascendant Yuan forces, sometimes even killing Goryeo provincial officials.<sup>21</sup>

Overwhelmed by these shock tactics, the Goryeo court finally agreed to a peace treaty making their country a vassal to the Mongol empire in 1259 and the Mongol invasions ended. Internal struggles over the peace agreement continued to divide the Goryeo court which remained on Ganghwa island until 1270, when the royals finally returned to their Gaegyeong capital. At that same time, King Chungnyeol offered to marry a Mongol princess as a sign of Korea’s final and complete submission. The last remnants of Korean resistance succumbed on Tamna (Jeju) Island off the southern tip of the peninsula in 1273. All of Korea at last came under Mongol oversight.<sup>22</sup>

Around this same time, in 1271, the Mongols declared themselves the Yuan dynasty under the leadership of Kublai Khan and established their winter capital at Daidu (present day Beijing). By this time, the Mongols had conquered all of China as well as Korea. Their empire stretched from the Asian Pacific coast to eastern Europe, from northern Siberia to subtropical areas of China—the largest land empire the world had ever known.

So it was that in the northern borderlands, Yi Seong-gye grew up under two banners: the flag of the Goryeo dynasty which claimed these lands as part of a unified Korean peninsula, and the flag of the Mongol Empire—a yellow crescent moon on a field of blue. These yellow crescent Mongol banners flew amid fields of horse-hair *tugs*—tall poles with circular curtains of horse or yak tail hair of varying colors: white for peace, and black for riding to war.<sup>23</sup> In Yi Seong-gye's day, all the Korean peninsula lived under the horse-hair *tugs*, but Yuan influence was especially strong in the northern lands where Yi lived, as local tribespeople had deeper cultural connections to Mongol traditions. In addition, the Khans established local commanderies to keep an eye on the Koreans, with an especially strong presence across the northern border areas. Behind their stone fortress walls, Mongol overseers and their local warlord allies governed areas like Goryeo's Ssangseong prefecture, where Yi matured.<sup>24</sup>

As Mongol influence fanned down the peninsula, so too did many Koreans leave their southern homelands for travel, consort, and residence in Yuan territory—especially in the Liaodong province between China's Daidu and the Yalu River border with Goryeo. The Mongol empire brought new trading opportunities, stretching from central Goryeo, running across northern territories, and heading west across China's Liaodong province towards Daidu (Beijing), Mongolia, or points beyond.<sup>25</sup> In addition to voluntary Korean emigrants into Mongol territories, Yuan overseers forcibly relocated tens of thousands of Koreans from northern Goryeo lands across the Yalu river into their own Liaodong territory, to increase grain production and grow Yuan tax revenues.<sup>26</sup> Goryeo's northern Hamyong province near the Yalu River, where Yi Seong-gye was raised, became increasingly popular for Goryeo residents.

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It was a location where people could escape Goryeo taxation, legal punishments, or forced labor projects and instead make a new start in fluid northern territories, perhaps benefitting from a closer connection to the powerful Yuan.

To migrate north was to leave much of Goryeo behind and to flirt with new possibilities.<sup>27</sup> Yi's clan was one of those enterprising Goryeo families that had moved north to find new opportunities and ended up collaborating with powerful Mongol overseers in the area, even serving as military officers in the Yuan system.<sup>28</sup> Led to these liminal borderlands by their ancestor Yi Ansa, a pugnacious woodsman with "an ambition to rule the world,"<sup>29</sup> the obscure clan of Yi Seong-gye would find their place, uniting ambition with opportunity, and producing the future warrior and king who would finally drive the Mongols out of Korea.

### On the Descent of Yi Seong-gye



*Yi Ansa was a submerged dragon and was the Great-Great Grandfather of Yi Seong-gye. Even his childhood friends could see the spirit of a dragon inside. There was a tree in his village called the "General Tree," named for a powerful general of years past. The descendants of the great general always venerated his spirit at this tree, and everyone knew its power. When he was little, Yi Ansa and the village children liked to play war games around the "General Tree." Whenever they played, Yi Ansa would sit under the tree like a great leader, and the children would come and bow down to him. It was always like that for the submerged dragon.*

*One time when he was older, it came to pass that Yi Ansa was hiking the mountains with some friends. A hungry tiger came upon them, and they hid in a cave, but the tiger would not leave the front of the cave. "The tiger can't eat all of us," his friends said, "so let's see which one of us he wants to eat, and that person will have to be sacrificed." The friends agreed to throw their clothes out to the tiger, to see which person's clothes the tiger would bite. When they did this, the tiger only chewed on Yi Ansa's clothes, so Yi Ansa had no choice but to leave the cave to save his friends.*

*Yi Ansa bravely left the cave to confront the tiger. As soon as he came out, the tiger grew afraid and fled into the woods. Just then, the cave where Yi's friends were hiding collapsed, and his friends were killed. But Yi Ansa survived to be a brave man and achieve great things.<sup>1</sup>*



By the time Yi Seong-gye was born in 1335, it had been a long journey of the Yi clan from their previous home in southern lands, where they had moved closely among Goryeo royals. But now they were a mostly forgotten and even disgraced family,

living in the wild, collaborating with Mongol overseers who lodged in their stone fortresses across the north. By the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, Yi Seong-gye's family had become one of tens of thousands moving far north following the Yuan invasions, seeking a new start in the rugged borderlands.<sup>2</sup> They were once among the most powerful elites in southern Goryeo politics, but had become a fallen family. How did it come to this?

*Royal Roots and a Fall from Grace:  
Yi Seong-gye's Ancient Ancestors*

There are records\* indicating that Yi Seong-gye had family connections to Silla's King Muyeol himself, who was the first ruler to almost unite the Korean peninsula completely under Silla dynasty† rule back in 661 (his son, King Munmu, finished the job in 668). King Muyeol's princess granddaughter allegedly married a Minister of Works named Yi Han, a native of southwestern Korean territory near Jeonju city.‡ These two

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\* Records of Yi Seong-gye's descent are sparse and unverifiable. Most evidence of the future king's heritage is provided in the annals of his own reign (*The Taejo Sillok*), which was produced by court historians who had an aim to elevate and celebrate his heritage as one tool of dynastic legitimation. So the most ancient details of Yi's descent, such as his possible familial connection to Silla's King Muyeol, should be considered with skepticism. The details of Yi's four immediate progenitors are supported by additional sources so seem more reliable. In this biography, we retell the tale of Yi Seong-gye's descent as it appears in *The Taejo Sillok*.

† Silla was the name of first kingdom that united most of the Korean peninsula and ruled from its southeastern capital of Gyeongju. The Silla kingdom lasted from 57 BCE–935, exercising unified rule over most of the peninsula from 668–892. From 892–936, the Korean peninsula was divided into competing kingdoms in a period called "The Later Three Kingdoms." This era of division was ended when Goryeo defeated the competing kingdoms of Silla and Later Baekje and reunified the peninsula under Goryeo dynasty rule in 936.

‡ Jeonju was a medium sized town in the heart of Goryeo's largely rural agricultural and ginseng region. It lies 200 kilometers due south of today's Seoul, in North Jeolla province.

supposedly migrated over Gyeongju's southwestern mountains into Korea's more centrally located Jeonju city, where they become the progenitors of the Jeonju Yi clan from which Yi Seong-gye descended.

The Yi clan had some local success in their Jeonju region in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and became known as a family "with a history of ambition and force,"<sup>3</sup> living a wild life in the mountain countryside near Jeonju. The family patriarchs weren't always the most refined, but they became undeniably notorious.

One 12<sup>th</sup> century Jeonju Yi ancestor, Yi Ui-bang, became a powerful military officer, active in his era's bitter battles between military and civilian officials. Between 1167 and 1170, there were several incidents where powerful civilian officials and scholars ran into serious conflicts with aged military generals. One reason is that during this time, Goryeo's King Uijong (r. 1146–1170) became so enthralled with Buddhism and Daoism that he began to neglect and undermine the status of military officials. The *Koryosa* (History of Goryeo) is filled with entries describing how the monarch always liked to drink and have poetry composition competitions with the scholars and poets, having boating parties all day long, and constantly required military officials to escort his long literary drinking parties. "The monarch did not know when to stop creating rhyming catchwords with many of the scholars," the *Koryosa* notes. While court officials "drink alcohol and get drunk and eat food until they are full," Lieutenant General Jeong Jung-bo and other commanders became angry, tired, and hungry as they stood on guard: "they began to have second thoughts."<sup>4</sup>

Rumors even spread that at one of these poetry & drinking events, a young civilian aristocrat burned an elderly general's beard with a candle in the middle of a banquet, making fun of him and the entire military.<sup>5</sup> Though the incident may never have occurred, the charge speaks to the growing tension between Goryeo's warrior and civilian elites. In another case, civilian leaders reportedly staged a duel between a strong young soldier and an aged general, humiliating the old general when he was beat down by the young upstart. On August 30, 1170, the disrespect became too



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much for Yi Ui-bang and other young military officers, who joined together to stage a coup d'état, overthrowing the Goryeo King (Uijong) and his civilian supporters.<sup>6</sup> They replaced King Uijong with a puppet king of the military faction (King Myeongjong), beginning a 100-year period of military rule of Goryeo that only ended with Goryeo's submission to Yuan vassalage in 1270.<sup>7</sup>

This Jeonju Yi clan ancestor, Yi Ui-bang, served in this new regime as one of a few powerful and vicious military rulers of Goryeo. With other military men, he began to kill innocent family members of all his enemies, hanging their heads in the streets, tearing down their houses and stealing their possessions.<sup>8</sup> He ruthlessly pillaged the scholastic academies and Buddhist temples around Jeonju and ended up fighting several internecine battles against Goryeo's various private armies in order to stay in power.<sup>9</sup> When the deposed King Uijong mounted a comeback attempt, Yi Ui-bang was directly involved in executing the fallen king of Goryeo and installing a Goryeo king more to his liking. This Yi ancestor became notorious for fighting with local scholars and gentry, whom he found arrogant and asinine. Several times, he robbed their concubines and threatened their daughters with assault. He ill-advisedly pushed his own daughter as a candidate for marriage into the royal family, earning disdain from some of his military allies.<sup>10</sup> In one drunken brawl with a local influential, Ui-bang fell and stabbed himself horribly in the chest.

Yi's ambition and erratic violence earned him dangerous enemies. In 1175, assassins from a competing military faction killed the feisty Yi pugilist, and the Yi clan was forced out of their wild mountain ways and down into a more sedate life in Jeonju city.<sup>11</sup> But the family Yi was still filled with bold spirits, and Jeonju just wouldn't be big enough to hold them in the end.

*The Great-Great-Grandfather:  
Yi Ansa and the Consequential Courtesan Quarrel*

Yi Seong-gye's Great-Great-Grandfather, Yi Ansa, came to lead the Jeonju Yi clan in those years after coming down from the mountain countryside. Born somewhere around 1200, Yi Ansa led a family of some notoriety. Several hundred local families had pledged allegiance to his clan. Yi Ansa had some power and was always looking for an angle to get more. Legend says that he once received a prophecy that if he buried his father on a certain mountain, with a generous gold offering, then his descendant would become a king. Though he had no gold to sacrifice to his father's coffin, Yi Ansa found a clever way to fulfill the prophecy. He claimed the auspicious mountain burial site for his father and interpreted "gold" to include a sacrifice of rice, harvested from nearby fields of rice stalks, waving golden in the sun.<sup>12</sup> The legends say that Yi Ansa's clever offering of "golden" rice thus prepared the way for royal progeny to follow.

Unfortunately, the ambitious Great-Great-Grandfather Yi fell into a dispute with an officer of the central Goryeo court, involving a local *kisaeng* (a courtesan providing artistic entertainment and conversation to Goryeo elites). A local magistrate was called in. To avoid arrest, Great-Great-Grandfather Ansa fled his ancestral home, with 170 households following him into the wild. Now a fugitive, Yi Ansa moved north and established a new base for his clan on the eastern coast, a bit north of today's Seoul, in Gangwon province.

His clan had some success. He built fifteen ships to drive off marauding Japanese pirates and to gather fish. He took over a local mountain fortress for his clan's defense during this dangerous time of Mongol invasions (around 1250-1255). Unfortunately, the same military official with whom he had the courtesan quarrel in Jeonju was suddenly appointed commander of the district where Yi Ansa was now living. To avoid renewed ugliness over an old situation, Yi had to uproot the 170 households of the Yi clan once again, and relocated to points even further north, becoming a wild man in the wild.<sup>13</sup>

Yi Ansa took to the East Ocean on boats he had built, and sailed a distance to Togwon (Wonsan), just across the

peninsula from today's Pyongyang. He was joined by hundreds of households that had followed him out of Jeonju, as well as by several other area families who "greatly admired him" and came to join this new northern force.<sup>14</sup>

In fleeing to the northern borderlands, Yi Ansa's clan joined a world far more diverse and less politically settled than the Goryeo lands down south. The fact was that the northern hunters and herders during these times were often joined by a spicy dash of military deserters, runaway enslaved persons, criminals, and other malcontents from southern Goryeo. Fleeing north, migrants sought to avoid Goryeo legal punishment, taxation, impressment into the army, or *corvée* labor projects of the crown. While Goryeo's social elite increasingly flocked to the royal capital in Gaegyeong, all manner of disaffected persons commonly fled to northern lands, where they were somewhat beyond the reach of the law. In the rugged north, these displaced and disgruntled elements of central Goryeo joined a diverse ethnic mix of Mongol, Jurchen, Khitan, Uighur, Russian Evenk—and even Turkish, Japanese, and Chinese peoples—all seeking opportunities beyond the reach of central powers.<sup>15</sup>

At different times, Goryeo policy actually encouraged some of this northern migration, hoping to populate this unruly territory with peoples who had stronger ties to southern Goryeo. Legal penalties on criminals were sometimes waived for those moving north, taxes were reduced, land ownership, honorary titles, and even wives, were at times granted by the Goryeo government. Enslaved persons were occasionally granted manumission by moving north. It was all part of a strategically encouraged northern advance of the southern Goryeo population up through the towns of Wonsan and Hamhung and all the way to the Tumen River basin (today's northeastern border with China and Russia).<sup>16</sup>

Yi Ansa's clan was among those migrants, and by travelling so far north, Yi Ansa's old legal quarrels down in Jeonju seem to have been forgotten. Besides, Goryeo leaders now had need of his family's fierce military prowess in their struggles against Mongol invaders. Around 1253, Goryeo officials appointed the fugitive Yi as a military commander in the roughneck frontier area. To regain his good name, he was

given orders to defend the area against the mighty Mongol army of the Yuan dynasty, which was ravaging the whole peninsula in those days before Goryeo was conquered.<sup>17</sup>

By this time, Goryeo had been battling Mongol invasions for 25 years, and had been getting the worst of it. Things were so bad that the entire Goryeo court had moved the capital to Ganghwa island in 1232, where they continued to conduct royal business in full finery for decades, even while the Mongols ravaged the mainland, sometimes “leaving not a single chicken or dog alive.”<sup>18</sup> While the royals ordered luckless commanders like Yi to do battle with the Mongols (and ordered the execution of those who complained about abandoning the mainland),<sup>19</sup> they themselves enjoyed much better conditions in their royal retreats. As described by the *Koryosa Choryo*, “they set up wine and music at dawn. At this time the nation was in sadness, but they played, hunted, feasted, and partied.”<sup>20</sup> Mongol invaders ravaged the countryside, corpses looked at each other on the roads, “the dead could not be counted,”<sup>21</sup> the public granaries were empty, children were abandoned in the woods, and the old capital “was finally in ruins,”<sup>22</sup> but the wine poured endlessly at Gangwha’s island banquets.

King Gojong (r. 1213–1259) and his court were rumored to hold lavish banquets and sometimes party all night, even as the invasions continued, and commoners suffered mass starvation.<sup>23</sup> The *Koryosa Choryo* reports one occasion where Gojong ordered all his court to “clap your hands to aid my happiness.” Bowing to the king, “The senior officials clapped their hands enthusiastically and sweat poured down their bodies. They went until dawn.”<sup>24</sup> Though such damning historical accounts were produced after the fall of the Goryeo dynasty, with a likely aim to criticize the royals of the deposed regime as useless decadents, real social discontent is not hard to imagine in a situation wherein Goryeo’s royals did in fact retreat to an island palace and its festivals, while ordering commoners and their generals to fight off the Mongols on the mainland.

In this situation, Yi Ansa probably didn’t feel much support from the Goryeo court in exile that had ordered him to climb down the mouth of the tiger and battle the impressive

Mongol army up in the north. So when the Mongol Prince Sanji (based at the Ssangseong fortress near the northern base of the Yi family) sent emissaries in 1255 suggesting that Yi Ansa should surrender his forces and swear allegiance to the Yuan, Yi consulted the better part of valor and agreed.<sup>25</sup> He led over 1000 households to the tents of the Yuan encampment—likely posting their white horsehair *tugs* of peace—and swore to friendship with Mongol forces and fealty to the Yuan dynasty. Exceptionally pleased, the Yuan Prince Sanji ordered a celebration banquet.

The Mongols were famous for these “colors banquets,” which featured prodigious food and drink, colorful decorations, and lively entertainment. The banquets could be boisterous and bawdy—but there was an important political aspect to this decadence as well: over cups of wine and plates of bounty, inter-clan bonds were formed, consensus forged, and alliances cemented.<sup>26</sup> During the banquet festivities, Yuan Prince Sanji pressed a jeweled chalice as a gift into Yi’s chest. “How can your people know the great friendship between us?” Sanji asked. “This jade chalice is just a small token of my warm affection for you.” Yi Ansa pledged his loyalty, and as an exchange gift, “gave a daughter of his kinsman to Sanji.”<sup>27</sup>

Yi Ansa left the colors banquet a reliable supporter of the Mongol Yuan. Other northern Goryeo leaders also surrendered to Yuan in these days, such as Cho Hwi and Tak Cheong, who later showed up in leadership posts in Goryeo-based Yuan fortresses.<sup>28</sup> Yuan overseers soon established a commandery at Ssangseong fortress in 1258, describing the northern river valley area as “Goryeo’s rear entrance,” and leaving a military detachment to watch over these strategic lands and points north. Former Goryeo commander Cho Hwi was established as the local overseer of the Ssangseong fortress, serving his Yuan superiors in a role passed down to his descendants for the next one hundred years of Mongol oversight and Goryean collaboration.<sup>29</sup>

In the years following establishment of the Ssangseong commandery, Yi Ansa would rise in Mongol estimation. He was given rank in the Mongol system as overseer of five lesser chiliarchs (a military rank—“commander of 1000 men”) with 5000 local households under his command.<sup>30</sup> With his new

rank, Yi would continue to travel north, finally arriving in North Hamgyong province in the northeast reaches of the peninsula, where he built a fortress along the postal relay route near the frontier with Russia and the Jurchen tribes. There he built a stone enclosure on an island, turning it into a green pasture for horses.<sup>31</sup> The forces under his lead respected their fierce commander, who grew in wealth and stature. “They treated him with courtesy and hospitality, always slaughtering their cattle and holding a banquet in his honor over several days.”<sup>32</sup>

*The Great-Grandfather:  
Japanese Invader and Gentleman for Managing Affairs*

Yi Ansa passed away in 1275. His son, Yi Haeng-ri, inherited his father’s rank and honors, serving as an officer in the Mongol regime that had fully conquered Korea by 1270. As military chiliarch, Yi Haeng-ri was pressed into service during the Mongol’s 1281 ill-fated invasion of Japan. From the throne in Daidu, the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan ordered the conquest of Japan to inflate his globe-spanning empire, seven years earlier in 1274. Though the Yuan mounted two large invasion fleets, two separate typhoons (the famed “kamikaze” or “divine wind”) devastated both fleets, drowned tens of thousands of invading soldiers, and helped Japan drive off the Mongol invasions, both in 1274 and in 1281.<sup>33</sup>

Though somewhere between 60-90% of all those who set out to invade Japan in 1281 were lost,<sup>34</sup> Yi Haeng-ri survived, and to good purpose. He used the opportunities of traveling up and down the Korean peninsula to gain audience with Goryeo’s King Chungnyeol (r. 1274-1308) and beg forgiveness for his family having such close association with Yuan officials, who after all were an occupying force on the peninsula.

“The reason my late father ran away to the north was to escape from the mouth of a ferocious tiger,” Haeng-ri implored, telling Goryeo’s King Chungnyeol of the unfortunate conflicts over the Jeonju courtesan. “He never intended to betray Your Majesty. I beseech you to forgive him.”<sup>35</sup> King Chungnyeol must have understood this situation, as he himself ruled only by cooperating with the Mongols and his ruling

family was deeply inter-braided with the Chinggisids. He replied that he knew that Haeng-ri was descended from a highly achieved family and could not possibly have forgotten his roots, even while serving the Yuan. "Your good manners and conduct bear witness to your sincerity," Chungnyeol noted.<sup>36</sup>

Though the Yi family's military prowess and good manners were much welcomed in the Goryeo court, Haeng-ri was under Yuan command to return north to his post on the frontier, which he did. There Yi Haeng-ri struggled against the intrigues of Jurchen tribesmen just across the frontier, who were always eyeing the riches of Goryeo lands across the river. These northern tribesmen were always plotting how to "get rid of him and divide his property among [them] with the help of people residing deeply hidden somewhere."<sup>37</sup> Invasions by Jurchen warriors even led Yi Haeng-ri and his people to flee down the Tumen River into undeveloped tidal islands around 1290. In this remote tidal area between today's North Korea and Russia, the Yi clan had to live in dirt dugouts and fell trees to build new communities and boats for their defense.

During these troubled days on the frontier, the *Taejo Sillok* reports that Yi Haeng-ri and his wife, Lady Choe (the daughter of an influential Yuan officer), both experienced a dreamy prophecy of a propitious descendant after praying in a mountain cave. Soon thereafter, Yi and Choe had the child Yi Chun. This boy was Yi Seong-gye's grandfather.

Subsequently, in the year 1300, the Yuan emperor promoted Yi Haeng-ri to the honorary title of "Gentleman for Managing Affairs," with a post as Mongol Overseer responsible for all the Goryeo soldiers and civilians in the Ssangseong area. The Yi clan had gained a respectable position of military power in their small corner of the Mongol empire. Soon after becoming "Gentleman for Managing Affairs," Great-Grandfather Yi Haeng-ri passed away. By royal decree his title and authority passed down to his son, Yi Chun.

*The Grandfather:  
Yi Chun and the Dream of the White Dragon*

Like his father before him, Yi Chun was successful at his military post, impressing his Yuan superiors in his command

over lands in the northern areas of the Korean peninsula. Yi Chun's wife was Lady Pak, the daughter of a local commander. Together they had two sons, the younger of whom was Yi Jachun, who would become the father of Yi Seong-gye.

In later days, the *Taejo Sillok* would report multiple portents and prophecies accompanying Yi Chun's siring of the father of Yi Seong-gye, the King to come. For example, the legends say that Yi Chun was involved in a strange incident of felling two magpies with one arrow, followed by the sudden appearance of a snake carrying both magpies off into another tree.\* One of Yi Chun's dreams included a white dragon prophesizing that "You will have much to celebrate in the future, thanks to your offspring."<sup>38</sup>

When Yi Chun passed in 1343, there were intrigues, conflicts, and fratricides involving half-brothers from Yi Chun's second wife. But in the end, Yi Jachun—the father of Yi Seong-gye—was decreed the rightful heir of Yi Chun's honors and rank as commander of thousands of men.

*The Father:  
Yi Jachun and Seong-gye's Root of Life*

We come now to Yi Seong-gye's father, Yi Jachun, whose career took both him and his son to the very heart of Goryeo-Yuan power struggles and laid the foundation for Yi Seong-gye's ascent to the throne. By the time he inherited his father's military position in 1343, Yi Jachun was a father himself. On October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1335, Yi Seong-gye was born in the northern Yeongheung prefecture to Jachun's consort, Lady Ui, the daughter of an aristocratic family of the northern area.

When baby Seong-gye was delivered, his parents carefully preserved his umbilical cord—which they called *Tae* and believed carried a force of life. Drawing on traditions of

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\* We can assume poetic license in the *Sillok* reporting these portents. After all, the *Sillok* were created many years after these alleged dreams, and after Taejo had become king. The King and those compiling his Veritable Records would have an eye out for any possible way to legitimate the founding of a new dynasty—tales of such feats and dreams would fit the bill.



Taoist/shamanist animism, many Goryeoans believed in a life force (“*ki*”) moving in all natural things—mountains, streams, trees and the earth itself. The umbilical *Tae* had *ki*—indeed it was the root of life—and Yi’s parents were committed to burying this umbilical *ki* in a propitious location, so as to secure the best future for their child.<sup>39</sup> Baby Yi Seong-gye’s umbilical cord was carefully cut with a bamboo knife, washed clean, and stored in ceramic ware. Commander Yi sealed the cord within the pot and buried it near their home in the north.

As young Seong-gye grew up in the east coast provincial capital of Hamhung,\* about 200 kilometers northeast of Seogyang (today’s Pyongyang), the hopeful parents must have been pleased to see him become an exceptionally talented young archer and hunter, well able to uphold the traditions of his lineage. As Seong-gye grew and travelled about the northern territories, he became a skilled horseman and had several different steeds that he specially trained for different uses and occasions.<sup>40</sup> An avid hunter, he crafted his own strong bows and heavy arrows. It was typical to use oak and mulberry wood in the bow, and ox horn sinew for the string, creating a powerful bow able to send arrows a long distance. Glue made from yellow croaker fish held the bow together and attached the string to the body. Bows could not be well made in the summer, as the stickiness of the croaker glue was reduced in hot and humid weather.<sup>41</sup> Yi would remember this important lesson in future summer military campaigns.

Yi Seong-gye made his arrow shafts of bush clover, used long white crane feathers for fletching, and crafted large nocks of reindeer horn. He carved slots into the shaft so that his arrows would whistle as they flew through the air. His arrows were thick and required a large bow of unusual strength to fire true. While Seong-gye was still very young, the *Taejo Sillok* reports that his father Yi Jachun once happened upon one of his large arrows lying in the field and remarked that no one could have the power to use such an arrow accurately. Seong-gye just laughed and proved his father wrong. According to the legends, a roe deer leaped out of the woods at just that

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\* Then called Hamju.

moment, and Seong-gye shot it down with one of his heavy arrows. Then another deer leaped out and he did the same. Supposedly this happened seven times in a row, and Yi Seong-gye shot down each deer, as his father laughed and laughed.<sup>42</sup> Though the future king's court historians seem likely to have exaggerated the story, the general portrait of Yi as a superlative archer is confirmed across many reports.

In Yi's hometown, he hunted lands that were further from the Goryeo capital of Gaegyeong than from the Yalu River,<sup>\*</sup> the traditional border separating the Korean peninsula from Liaodong lands stretching between the Yalu and Daidu (now Beijing). As he roamed the northern territories, hunting, raising horses, and serving with his military father, Yi Seong-gye gained a local reputation. He was known as a fantastic hunter and the best archer in his region. He loved falconry and locals came to call him "Songolmae" ("the Falcon") for his elegant skills.<sup>43</sup> Trainers would watch "The Falcon" in the field and talk of how they wished to catch a real hawk as outstanding as the young Yi Seong-gye.<sup>44</sup>

In later days, as he gained national fame, people would recall legendary (if implausible) feats from Seong-gye's childhood. There was a time Yi shot five magpies in the head with one arrow, people said. Once, another story went, he pierced two deer with a single arrow. Another time he supposedly shot arrows into twenty successive martens jumping from a thicket, without missing a single time. "Not a single animal managed to escape him," wrote court historians. Jurchen warriors were reported to have watched his archery and said to him "no one in the world will match your skill."<sup>45</sup>

One winter day, young Seong-gye was hunting and a large leopard hiding in the reeds suddenly jumped out to attack. It was a deadly situation, and Seong-gye had to flee on horse across a frozen pond. The court historians recorded how "The ice at that time was not solid enough even for a man to walk on it; nevertheless, he crossed it on horseback. As the hooves of his horse hit the ice, the ice cracked and water shot up, but he managed to keep ahead of the breaking ice without falling into

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\* Also called the Amnok River, especially in Korean sources.

the water.”<sup>46</sup> Though such after-the-fact stories about a future dynasty-founding king are surely exaggerated, they speak to Yi Seong-gye’s martial roots and to his real record of significant military successes as an undefeated warrior. Yi was a foreboding personality, around whom legends blossomed.

But for all their local prestige, Yi Seong-gye and his military father were mostly unknown among Goryeo elite, based in the distant capital of Gaegyeong, 650 li\* (325 kilometers) to the southwest. The family Yi, after all, were an entirely parochial clan, with a northern power base near the Yuan Ssangseong fortress to which Yi Ansa had pledged his service one hundred years ago. During those hundred years, the Yuan overseers greatly benefitted from their Goryeo outpost, harvesting grain for their troops, collecting mined gold as taxation, and keeping the royal court in Gaegyeong under watchful eye. They also enjoyed close relations with strong local clans like the Yi family.

There was nothing the conquered Goryeo court could do about the situation back in 1258, when northern commanders surrendered to the Yuan while Goryeo royals huddled on their Ganghwa island redoubt. This whole northeastern area (Dongbukmyeon), from Hamhung to the Tumen River, was filled with independent Jurchen peoples and garrisoned Mongol troops, so Goryeo court desires to fully absorb these lands amounted to little but a distant dream during Seong-gye’s youth.

But things were changing by the mid-1300s when Yi Seong-gye became a young man. In these days, the Yuan empire was on its back foot, increasingly beset by a domestic rebellion, as China’s Red Turban rebels (who would become the founders of the Ming dynasty) spread across the land. Facing domestic upheaval, Yuan forces were spread thin and vulnerable. Meanwhile, Goryeoans kept moving inexorably north, becoming increasingly dominant in the Ssangseong area.<sup>47</sup> Hundreds of li south, in the Goryeo capital, King Gongmin (r. 1351–1374) thought carefully about the migration

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\* “Li” is a traditional Chinese unit of distance. Its length has varied over time, but now has a standardized length of one-half a kilometer.

of all these Goryeoans. He was eager to recapture some of their taxes for state needs and intrigued by how they might change the political balance of power in the north. Perhaps the time had come to reclaim old Goryeo lands in the northern territories.

As a precursor to bigger things to come, Gongmin had tried in 1355 to conduct a census of people in the Ssangseong area, but this only provoked disruption and small acts of rebellion among those seeking to escape Goryeo tax collectors. Still, these were ostensibly Goryeoan lands, and King Gongmin had a right to count and tax his people (indeed, the Yuan court insisted that he conduct such censuses)<sup>48</sup>—he just needed a local force to execute his growing will. The Yi clan, who had long ago surrendered to the Yuan under very different circumstances, might fit the bill. During the one hundred years following Yi Ansa's surrender, the Yi clan had grown in stature, marrying into the powerful Cho Hwi clan which managed the Yuan Ssangseong fortress. The Yi clan also had their own private troops with primary loyalty to the Yi head of family—Yi Jachun, young Seong-gye's father.<sup>49</sup> King Gongmin therefore called upon Yi Jachun in 1355, beseeching him to mobilize his private armed forces (*gabyeolcho*) to help enforce the Goryeo king's will in northern parts, putting down episodic rebellions, advancing the census, and reasserting Goryeo authority to tax the people up north.<sup>50</sup>

In his efforts to pacify the locals and submit them to a census, Yi Jachun was aided by his twenty-year-old son, Yi Seong-gye, who had never yet even been to Gaegyeong and certainly didn't imagine the fundamental changes that were soon to sweep over his country. As a young military officer of Goryeo, but in vassalage to Mongol conquerors, Yi grew up like his father. He learned to balance the competing realms of Goryeo and Yuan, and probably didn't expect the situation would change any time soon. The Mongol Yuan governed the largest empire on earth and had done so for nearly a hundred years. The local Goryeo kings had governed the Korea peninsula for 500 years, and did so still, though with Mongol oversight. As far as politics goes, these two dynasties were alpha and omega on the Korean peninsula—there was no other way.

But by the time Yi Seong-gye was sixty years old, both dynasties would vanish from Korea, and Yi himself would play an important role in those world-historic transformations. For Yi, these changes began in late 1355, when he was just twenty-one years-old and his father was called to Gaegyeong for a personal audience with the King of Goryeo to discuss affairs in the northern lands.

“What a good job you did in pacifying those unruly fierce people! It surely wasn’t easy,” praised the King to Yi Jachun, reflecting on the earlier census-driven conflicts.<sup>51</sup>

But now the King had a bigger project in mind. As Yi Seong-gye’s father met with the Goryeo monarch in 1355, they talked geopolitics and the big developments upending the Mongol dynasty on its throne in China. In fact, even as the “Destiny-opening”<sup>52</sup> Yi Seong-gye turned twenty, another young man of destiny on the Chinese side of the Bohai gulf was casting his lot with a growing group of “Red Turban” rebels who would soon bring grief to the Yuan rulers. This was Zhu Yuanzhang, who helped overthrow the Yuan dynasty with the Red Turban rebels and became the first emperor (Hongwu) of China’s Ming Dynasty. The rise of Zhu Yuanzhang in China paralleled (and helped create space for) the rise of Yi Seong-gye in Korea. Goryeo’s King Gongmin couldn’t know all this yet, but he did see how things were cracking open in China, so he called the family Yi to consul.

In later years, Yi Seong-gye would often talk about how he missed the earlier and more simple days of his youth before such grand political affairs, when he could fish and hunt with his whistling arrows, and spend time on his horse ranch amid the pampas grass of Hamhung.<sup>53</sup> But as his father met with the Goryeo King in Gaegyeong, and the Red Turban rebellion grew across the gulf in China, those easy days of hunting and fishing were about to come to an end. For all of Northeast Asia, in fact, the 14<sup>th</sup> century world was about to come apart at the seams.

## The Frog and the Whirlpool



*It is said that one day the military officer Yi Jachun (father of Yi Seong-gye) hiked to a mountaintop to survey the area around the Hamhung River below. There Yi Jachun saw a monk, sitting on a flat rock, and staring south, towards the capital.*

*Ji Jachun asked the monk what he was doing, and the monk said he was waiting for Yi Jachun to arrive. Then the monk offered a thought to the military general.*

*“The frog was floating peacefully in the water.  
He didn’t realize that whirlpools were forming underneath.”*

*“In just this way, a great person is going to emerge and cause whirlpools soon,” said the monk.<sup>1</sup>*



While Yi Seong-gye was a boy, servants of the Mongol empire occupied the pinnacles of power and luxury in Goryeo society. Like the monk’s happy frog floating on a lily pad, Yuan occupiers and their allies among elite Goryeo society had created a world of wealth and privilege, floating far above common society. One typical young aristocrat erected a “Cloud Brocade Tower” at a local lake, where he hosted lavish festivities for family and friends amid a generally impoverished province. A Confucian scholar (Yi Che-hyeon) scorned the unearned excess, noting “He is still under 40 years of age. Whether in deep sleep or a drunken dream, he will enjoy fame, wealth, and honor.”<sup>2</sup> It was surely pleasant to float along in a drunken dream, but dangerous currents were brewing underneath. The Yuan-Goryeo world was about to feel the maelstrom.

By the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, elites of the Goryeo and Yuan dynasties were deeply inter-braided. Goryeo was a vassal of

Yuan, and Yuan military forces occupied multiple Goryeo fortresses, especially in the north. Both Yi Seong-gye and his father served as officers in the Mongol military system, but also reported to the Goryeo king. Yuan elites and pro-Yuan Goryeo aristocrats controlled vast lands in Korea. They travelled in the same social circles, attended each other's festivities, and intermarried their clans. Goryeo and Chinggisid elites commonly exchanged expensive gifts of sable and hunting falcons, joined in royal hunts, and celebrated sumptuous banquets together.<sup>3</sup> Goryeo-born officials served in the Chinggisid court in Daidu and could attain high administrative positions there. The Goryeo court was constantly influenced by Yuan efforts to shape who gained political power and wealth in their vassal across the Bay, and the Chinggisid court largely decided who would sit on the Goryeo throne.

One of the Yuan royals ruling from Daidu was actually a woman of Korean descent. Empress Ki was the secondary empress to Yuan emperor Toghon Temur and would soon become enthroned as the primary empress of the Yuan dynasty.<sup>4</sup> In 1331, four years before Yi Seong-gye was born, the 15 year-old Ki had been sent from Goryeo to Daidu as a servant girl in tribute wagons, together with offerings of falcons, ginseng, hanji paper and baskets of silver and gold.<sup>5</sup> Widely cultured and well-educated due to her birth to an elite family in Goryeo, Ki rose in her Daidu servant position and quickly became a favorite entertainer of the young Yuan Emperor, Toghon Temur. The Emperor fell in love and by 1333, the young servant girl from Goryeo had become "Consort Ki"—royal concubine to the emperor of the Yuan.<sup>6</sup>

Thirty years later, Toghon Temur's primary wife (Bayan Khutugh) passed away and Goryeo-born Lady Ki was enthroned as primary empress of the Yuan dynasty. Her son, Ayushiridara, was named crown prince and heir to the Mongol's Dragon Throne. Through these events, Lady Ki and her Goryeo Ki family gathered immense power, becoming a perfect example of the depth of Yuan court influence in Goryeo society. Exploiting their family ties to a Yuan empress, the Goryeo Ki clan amassed immense authority and wealth in Gaegyeong through Yuan favoritism rather than by demon-

stration of scholarly merit or accomplished public service. The Goryeo Ki were not a meritorious family of achieved scholars and administrators, but were well-connected and wealthy elites, with a growing reputation for flaunting the authority of the King and corruptly amassing wealth.<sup>7</sup> In this, the Ki family were not so different than many other Goryeo aristocrats, but their personal connections to the Yuan court (more than to the Goryeo court in Gaegyeong) placed them at odds with many Gaegyeong-connected elites. In fact, one particularly influential member of the Goryeo Ki family (Ki Cheol, Empress Ki's brother) had once pushed for the Yuan court to dissolve the Goryeo dynasty altogether and reduce the Korean peninsula into just another Yuan province.<sup>8</sup>

By the late 1300s, an increasing number of Goryeo aristocrats received their government positions or land titles in just these kind of ways—palace connections, corrupt favoritism by Yuan elites, or outright thievery from local farmers. The Ming imperial prince, Zhu Youdun, remarked on how “three generations [of Ki's family] were graced with imperial favor, exalted titles, and emoluments.”<sup>9</sup> Some estates grew so large as to encompass an entire province, turning local farmers into displaced tenants or homeless wanderers.<sup>10</sup> Aristocrats in control of such resources were increasingly critiqued for neglecting the condition of common people while indulging in conversation about “their profits in rice and salt market prices.”<sup>11</sup> Some of these aristocrats, tightly allied with Yuan, flirted openly with notions of eliminating the Goryeo royal family altogether, escalating Goryeo-Yuan tensions, even as populist resentment simmered against the increasing burdens of displacement and forced-tilling of aristocrat-owned lands. Some commoners criticized Goryeo elites who turned against Goryeo to work with the Mongols as nothing more than “a dog who barked at its owner.”<sup>12</sup>

Goryeo royals didn't much challenge the degenerative Yuan influence, since the Goryeo kings were themselves all chosen directly by the Chinggisid court at this time. Yuan leaders strategically required their hand selected Goryeo crown princes to marry Mongol princesses, not Goryeo women. Such intermarriages also made good sense for the ruling elites of Goryeo, who cemented alliances between



Chinggisid and Goryeo ruling families through such strategies.<sup>13</sup> Episodic efforts to push back on growing domestic corruption were squashed, as was the growing influence of Confucian scholars who built their power on venerated Confucian ideals rather than on military power or self-serving partnerships with Yuan elites.

For example, Goryeo's growing corps of Confucian scholars in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (such as Ahn Hyang and Jeong Mong-ju) increasingly criticized elite corruption and advocated for government positions based on merit exams and achievement, not wealth and palace favoritism.<sup>14</sup> One highly influential scholar (Jeong Do-jeon) castigated the corruption of how both benefits and punishments were typically based on personal connections.

So-and-so is So-and-so's son, So-and-so is So-and-so's relative or friend. So-and-so asked me to look after So-and-so... This is why corrupt magistrates can indulge their greed...Bribes are offered openly, exhausting the people's livelihood. Injustices are suppressed, and the people are unhappy.<sup>15</sup>

It wasn't hard to find long-standing examples of this kind of elite corruption or palace favoritism to critique, but what was changing in Goryeo society was the growing influence of Confucian scholars and their high-minded ideas on political life. As the scholars' influence grew, some established old families and military elites found their non-scholastic foundations of power threatened.

Moreover, although Goryeo had long relied on a civil service exam system to qualify for most government bureaucratic posts, the growing influence of classically trained Confucian scholars in late-Goryeo society meant that these exams were becoming more regularized and centrally controlled by increasingly powerful scholars in the capital. Traditionally, students attending a wide variety of private academies across the country could take these exams. These local academies featured close, sectarian connections between students and teachers in widely dispersed schools, while also

sustaining the influence of local influential families (typically large landowners) who taught and studied at these dispersed schools. Local curriculum was also more ecumenical than the classical Confucians of Gaegyeong, often including lessons in Daoism, fortune-telling, and Buddhism according to the philosophy of scholar Choe Seung-no that “practicing Buddhism is the foundation of moral training, and practicing Confucianism is the foundation of statecraft.”<sup>16</sup>

But as a wave of Confucian revivalism swept late-Goryeo, the national Confucian Academy (Sungkyunkwan) in Gaegyeong was put under the management of specialized government offices and came to be directed by the highly achieved Yi Saek, who took the classic Confucian exam in Yuan China, passing one stage in first place and the final stage in second place. As the Confucian student Gwon Geun later recalled, Yi Saek “studied a scholarship that is large, correct, delicate, and detailed.”<sup>17</sup> It was Yi Saek who pushed the Goryeo King to centralize the Confucian exam process in Gaegyeong and to reduce the influence of local schools and their more parochial studies of Buddhism, Daoism, and the military arts. In 1352, Yi Saek argued to the King that “those holding government posts must pass the civil service examination, and those applying to take the civil service exam must have studied at Sungkyunkwan.”<sup>18</sup>

Sungkyunkwan was the national academy which was becoming a haven for the rising class of Confucian scholars and bureaucrats intent on remaking Goryeo politics. The scholars’ attack on traditional sources of power in Goryeo (such as by undermining local schools, standardizing Confucian curriculum, and regularizing a national exam process) became a threat to some of the established family lineages and would lead to serious political conflicts.

In 1344, for example, the enthronement of Goryeo’s new 8-year old King Cheungmok (r. 1344–1348) provided a transitional opportunity for reformist Confucian scholar-officials (*sadaebu*) to abolish the Palace-based Personnel Authority (which distributed palace favors based on connections to the royals) and to replace it with tighter adherence to the scholastic exam system for government advancement through regularized bureaucratic institutions. However, the

queen mother (Princess Teongnyeong, closely allied with Yuan powers in Daidu) served as regent for the boy-king and quickly reversed this reform.<sup>19</sup>

In 1347, the reformers tried again to establish a “Directorate for Ordering Politics,” with a goal to advance principles of merit in government service. But when the Directorate focused attention on the alleged corruption of Ki Sam-man,\* brother of Lady Ki (the imperial consort of the Yuan emperor), Mongol authorities intervened and put a quick end to all Directorate activities.<sup>20</sup> In 1348, the Yuan suzerain supported Goryeo Princess Teongnyeong in turning control of Goryeo’s entire personnel appointment system over to another brother of Empress Ki, Ki Cheol, together with his associate Gweon Kyeon.<sup>21</sup>

These kinds of upheavals caused the Yuan court to dethrone two successive Goryeo kings of the time (both very young) and to install King Gongmin to the Goryeo throne in 1351, expecting him to be a loyal vassal. They had good reason to expect his submission. Like previous Goryeo crown princes during the time of Yuan vassalage, Goryeo’s King Gongmin (r. 1351–1374) had spent his youth in the Yuan capital of Daidu. There he lived as something of a hostage, helping insure Goryeo’s obedience to Yuan demands, and was educated in Yuan cultural and political expectations. He married the Mongol princess Noguk in 1348. Three years later, when he

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\* Ki Sam-man was arrested by Goryeo authorities for suspected illegal land seizures and beaten to death while in custody. The Directorate official charged that Ki Sam-man “abused his influence to carry out evil deeds,” and that the Yuan emperor himself would want Ki Sam-man punished. Indeed, Empress Ki (the consort to the Yuan emperor) had been concerned enough about her own family’s alleged corruption that she had recently issued an edict. “No member of our family is to abuse their status to seize people’s lands,” she proclaimed. “If there are violations or irregularities, they are to be punished.” Nevertheless, the arrest and beating death of Empress Ki’s brother prompted the Yuan court to end Directorate investigations. See Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, pp. 81–82.

was 22 years old, The Yuan Court removed Goryeo's 13-year-old King Chungjeong (r. 1348–1351) and installed King Gongmin and Queen Noguk as the new Goryeo royalty, allowing them to move to Gaegyeong to rule over their vassal state.

By now, Goryeo's Lady Ki had become secondary empress of the Yuan Dynasty, filling her court with well-attended Goryeo women, far out of touch with conditions of the Goryeo society they left behind. One Chinese poet of the day commented on the difference between conditions of poverty and endless hard work for the average resident ("uncombed hair and barefoot...no cash in her purse, no grain in the pantry") and the drunken grandeur of elite Goryeo women, increasingly captured by end-of-empire decadence in the Mongol's imperial city.

*I rue not being born  
 A woman of Goryeo.  
 [Suitors] fill carts with gold and pearls  
 As they compete to acquire her.  
 In a silver ewing, she warms wine,  
 She drinks from a jade cup.  
 To music in a great hall,  
 She sings and dances at night.  
 Gold bangles cover her arms,  
 Pearl hairpins fill her hair.  
 Kingfisher clouds patterns on silk fabric,  
 Mandarin ducks embroidered in silk.  
 Drunkenly she calls her eunuch servant  
 To part the silk curtains [of her sleeping  
 platform]  
 And to add incense to the warmer  
 At the foot of the bed.<sup>22</sup>*

But as they floated along quite luxuriously, occupying the cultural heights and controlling the peaks of power, the allied Goryeo/Yuan elites couldn't have expected what was coming from the gathering whirlpools below. It would be King Gongmin himself who would speed Goryeo's swirling discontent. From the very start, King Gongmin bucked against his

expected role of compliant vassal. Gongmin was well-aware that even as corrupt favoritism and aristocratic decadence undermined Goryeo society, so too were problems growing inside the suzerain Yuan empire. Yuan leaders faced challenges both in China itself, where rebellion was spreading across the provinces, and also in the Goryeo, where an ever-more oppressive Yuan elite and their local allies were becoming increasingly unwelcome among the people. In China, the Yuan dynasty had been rocked by the ravages of the Black Death, severe drought, famine, and debilitating conflicts between factions of the far-flung Mongol empire. It all added up to a destabilizing wave of mass death in the mid-1300s—around half of China’s residents died from disease or famine during the era of Toghon Temur and Empress Ki.<sup>23</sup> Such devastation provided room for the rise of millenarian Chinese Han rebels who came to be known as the “Red Turbans.” These Han Red Turban rebels became led by peasant Zhu Yuanzhang, who had his eye on pushing the Yuan out of Daidu (Beijing) and claiming the Mandate of Heaven for himself.

The Yuan also faced troubles in Goryeo, where famine was spreading in the northern borderlands. Locals increasingly turned against the Yuan, and some looked to Goryeo leaders for possible relief.<sup>24</sup> Amid the growing chaos, cases of Yuan elites stealing the property of Goryeo commoners abounded. Goryeo peasants were enslaved and forced to work confiscated Yuan lands. Young Goryeo girls were stolen away, raped, and enslaved, leading one Goryeo minister to describe “grief-stricken parents watching helplessly as Yuan envoys seized their daughters.”<sup>25</sup> Another Goryeo official circulated written accounts of many abuses of Yuan emissaries and eunuchs sent to the Goryeo court, which caused the Yuan court to remove him from office.<sup>26</sup>

In this social context, Goryeo’s King Gongmin decided the time had come to push back against the Yuan and their elite Goryeo supporters such as the infamous Ki family. In Gongmin’s view, these malefactors were controlling too much of the nation’s land and wealth and were too closely tied to the Yuan’s Daidu court rather than his own in Gaegyeong. In his first year as king (1352), Gongmin tried to take the personnel appointment power away from pro-Yuan administrators like

the Ki Clan and to reduce the power of pro-Yuan officials in the Privy Council (*Dodang*) who essentially ruled Goryeo society.<sup>27</sup> King Gongmin also established a *Directorate for Determining the Status of Lands and People*, with a mission to reverse the illegal seizure of land and slaves by powerful elites.<sup>28</sup>

The old aristocrats dug in and tensions mounted. Gongmin's early land reform efforts went nowhere and pro-Yuan elites like the family Ki retained their huge farms, avoided state taxes, insisted on immunity from many Goryeo laws, and kept expanding their population of enslaved persons.<sup>29</sup> Yuan rulers kept insisting that Goryeo send regular tribute of young boys and girls to become servants, eunuchs, and concubines in Daidu. Though notoriously corrupt, Empress Ki's elder brother (Ki Cheol) became Goryeo's Grand Minister of Education and Governor of the Yuan's Branch Secretariat for Eastern Campaigns. Other family members held lesser administrative positions. The *Koryosa* claims that even slaves of the Ki family behaved as they were immune to Goryeo law.<sup>30</sup> Even though the Yuan dynasty was facing increasing vulnerabilities, pro-Yuan elites were still in power and Goryeo remained "a country of Ki," with Empress Ki on the throne in Daidu and discreditable Ki family members holding important position in Goryeo.<sup>31</sup>

King Gongmin could hardly stand the situation. When he went out riding, he always tried to keep his horse away from Ki Cheol, the influential brother of Empress Ki, who Gongmin found unbearably arrogant and obnoxious. Gongmin ordered his guards to keep Ki Cheol at a distance whenever they went horseback riding or did archery. But Gi-cheol ignored these orders and rode right along the king, a constant source of insolent and offensive commentary.<sup>32</sup>

"I see now that our custom has become that of barbarians," Gongmin would mutter angrily. "Men entering into government office by luck, granaries empty, neighboring Japanese pirates invading us, and being at odds with the pattern of Heaven."<sup>33</sup> A stewing King Gongmin resolved to meet with the Yi clan warlord from the north, young Yi Seong-gye's father; dangerous currents swirled in the capital.



## “Men of Excellence Appear from Korea”



*Yongwang is the King of Dragons, living deep under the sea in his underwater palace. His dragon lords have no wings, but rise like clouds above the earth, protecting and blessing the people with health, prosperity, and rain. The divine dragons of Yongwang move in the deepest seas, heavenly lakes, and grandest rivers of Korea, sustaining the life of the country. When King Munmuu died in 681, after uniting all of Korea under one rule, he was buried in the East Sea, where his spirit lived on as a Dragon Lord, ready to protect his country from invasion.*

*But dragons don't live only in the great rivers and vast seas. Where there is water, there is a dragon. Some dragons lie submerged in even the shallow places.<sup>1</sup>*



As King Gongmin met with Yi Jachun, it was a dangerous time for Yuan. Not only were they under assault by domestic rebellion, but Chinggisid rulers were increasingly angering old allies like the northern Yi clan. In earlier years, the Mongols typically found Koreans quite culturally sophisticated and a loyal partner, after their long resistance was finally defeated. Korean military men could hope for promotion and even title within the Yuan system. The scholar poet Yi-Kok described Yuan openness to Korean achievement, with Mongol leaders celebrating talent from wherever it might appear.

*In matters of civilization, there is no north or south...  
To the Sagely Court come the ten thousand countries.  
Men of excellence appear from Korea.<sup>2</sup>*

Some such “men of excellence” hailed from the Yi clan, but unfortunately for the Yuan, by the time of Yi Seong-gye’s



ascent they were no longer able to recognize Goryeoan excellence when it came before them. Through the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Chinggisid policies increasingly privileged Mongol populations over other peoples that they governed. For example, a 1315 policy banned “northern Chinese, Goryeo men, and southern Chinese” (but not Mongols) from wearing extravagant clothing.<sup>3</sup> By the 1350s, under intense pressures from the Red Turban rebellion and devastating disease and famine, Yuan rulers retreated into nativism. Yuan overseers became increasingly discriminatory and demeaning towards Korean military officers, court officials, traders, and scholars. Just about the time that King Gongmin of Goryeo invited Yi Jachun to conversation in Gaegyeong, in fact, Yuan leaders announced a new policy by which they would separate migrants from natives on family registers, while making numerous privileges available only to Yuan natives. Coveted military titles and government positions now seemed destined only for descendants of a few Yuan family lines and commanders of Korean ethnicity would be left behind.<sup>4</sup>

It was a serious blow to any future ambitions of the family Yi within the Yuan system, delivered at just the time that King Gongmin of Goryeo was opening his own palace doors for an eventful conversation with an ambitious northern strongman. The situation would lead Yi Jachun and his son Seong-gye into an increasingly oppositional stance towards Goryeo’s old Yuan “allies”—the very ones they grew up with and served beside in earlier days on the Plains of Hamhung. The Yuan rulers would come to regret Yi’s growing anger at their treatment of Goryeo, for the Yi clan boasted an illustrious line of military strongmen and had developed a small private army of its own in the Hamhung highlands, independent of either Yuan or Goryeo.<sup>5</sup> It was to these private Yi forces, increasingly alienated from Yuan, that Goryeo’s King Gongmin appealed in that fateful meeting with Yi Jachun in 1355.

“Your grandfather and father were outside [our] kingdom,” King Gongmin admitted while welcoming Yi Jachun to his halls, “but their hearts were in our royal family.” Yi Jachun agreed that his family had always remained loyal to Goryeo in the end. So then, let us talk, the two men decided.

Through the 1355-1356 winter and spring, King Gongmin conspired with Yi Jachun to end the dominance of the Yuan and their Ki-family supporters in Goryeo. In private meetings, they talked about a military attack on a key Yuan fortress up north: Ssangseong, the very place where Yi Ansa had once surrendered to a Yuan general. Also on the King's mind was a coming attack on the Goryeo Ki family who were closely tied to Yuan power. Both King Gongmin and Yi Jachun agreed that the time was ripe to attack Goryeo's Yuan collaborators and to mount an assault on the Yuan's Ssangseong commandery—not far from Hamhung where the Yi clan was based.

Gongmin had previously relied on Yi Jachun to lead military expeditions to pacify the “unruly fierce people” of the northern lands, and Gongmin needed him again. “I want you to go back to your post [in northern Ssangseong] right away and pacify our people,” Gongmin dictated.<sup>6</sup> It was a treacherous command, because Yi Jachun's post up north was actually as a Yuan military officer—a *mingghan* “chief of 1,000”—helping to guard the very fortress he was now being ordered to take from the Yuan. But the King reached out to request the military forces commanded by Yi Jachun in his frontier base, and the northern strongman was intrigued by the opportunity.

King Gongmin elevated Yi Jachun's rank to Grand Master and ordered him to use his personal army to help other Goryeo forces defeat the Yuan commanders at Ssangseong. Yi Jachun agreed, bowed his head, and swore loyalty to the Goryeo king. To mark the solemn occasion of Yi Jachun betraying his Yuan position and going to battle against the Mongol empire, the King bestowed Yi with a purple golden pouch decorated with figures of fish.<sup>7</sup> Yi Jachun mustered his men and raced to meet other Goryeo armed forces already in the field near Ssangseong, under the command of Goryeo general Choe Yeong. At his side was his twenty-year old son, Yi Seong-gye.

Back in the capital, King Gongmin moved against the Goryeo Ki family. When he received news that the Yuan court had posthumously bestowed imperial favor and royal titles on Empress Ki's Goryeo ancestors, Gongmin sensed something worse might be coming and decided to act first.<sup>8</sup> Just nine days after hearing about the Ki family's new royal titles, in May of 1356, King Gongmin held a royal banquet for high-ranking

state officials. Several members of the family Ki attended, all of them well-connected to members of the Yuan court. Taken by complete surprise, three members of the Ki family were murdered with iron hammers on the spot during the banquet, as was another Korean supporter of their clan.

In the days to come, nineteen more supporters of the Ki clique were hunted down and executed, and many others were banished. One of those executed was a daughter of the Yuan emperor's consort, another was father-in-law to the Yuan heir-apparent in Daidu, and one was Empress Ki's elder brother.<sup>9</sup> As the Ki family and their supporters were killed or banished, their slaves and property in Goryeo were seized by the state, while the "sons and daughters of good families" who were held in service to the Ki family were returned to their Goryeo parents.<sup>10</sup> A public edict was issued, claiming that the Ki family "abused the laws of the country by relying on their prestige surpassing that of the king, and selection of officials was made according to their pleasure...If someone else owned land, they took it, and if someone else owned slaves, they took them." The Goryeo Ki family had been both purged and disgraced, while King Gongmin announced that "I pledge to brighten up the laws...so that the whole country can start over together."<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile up north, about one month after the purge, in July of 1356, Goryeo's forces under the command of General Choe Yeong attacked the Yuan's Ssangseong fortress at night. The fortress was commanded by Cho Sosaeng, the great grandson of Cho Hwi who first surrendered to the Yuan in 1358. His forces were entirely isolated. According to the *Koryosa*, many residents of the area, who had previously "ran away and hid in the valleys" to avoid the Mongols had now come out in force and celebrated Goryeo troops, declaring "The King of Goryeo is our true king."<sup>12</sup> Goryeo's Yuan forces in the field had already surrendered to the surprise attack by Goryeo forces, and the situation inside the fortress was hopeless. Inside the fortress was Yuan *mingghan* commander Yi Jachun and his son, Yi Seong-gye, at their imperial posts. As General Choe Yeong's forces began their assault on the Mongol fortress, commander Yi and his son Seong-gye were said to have quietly moved through the Yuan troops defending the

walls and came to the front of the fortress. There, they secretly opened the gate.

Goryeo forces poured inside, and pro-Yuan troops were routed. Cho Sosaeng and other fortress leaders disappeared, leaving their wives and children behind as they fled north, towards friendly Yuan forces commanded by a Jurchen warlord named Nahachu.<sup>13</sup> By the end of the campaign, Goryeo's commanders had roared across the northern lands, recapturing many border fortresses and destroying numerous Yuan postal relay stations across the Yalu river in Liaodong—places where horses, dogs, and reindeer were maintained to help travelers cross these cold lands.<sup>14</sup> Northern provinces were occupied by Goryeo forces all the way to the Yalu River.<sup>15</sup> These territories had been previously seized by the Yuan during the reign of Goryeo's King Gojong, the *Taejo Sillok* reports, “and it took ninety-nine years to recover them all.”<sup>16</sup>

Predictably, the Yuan's Empress Ki—though of Goryeo heritage—reacted with rage. Her family had been purged, her elder brother killed, and Goryeo troops were attacking Yuan forces in the field. The Yuan court announced that 800,000 troops were on their way to punish Goryeo and install a new king. Fearful residents of Goryeo's capital began to flee for safety, carrying all they could on their backs and horses. But King Gongmin of Goryeo refused to back down. He expanded his own bodyguard units and mobilized his armed forces to meet the attack.<sup>17</sup>

But neither side really wanted this war. The Yuan were facing the powerful Red Turban Rebellion that had already depleted their resources, and the Goryeoans were vastly overpowered by Yuan forces. In the end, before further battles broke out, Gongmin offered to step down his military assaults on additional Yuan strongholds in the area and promised to keep submitting part of the northern territory's gold production to the Yuan as tax. Goryeo also promised to “forever serve as a screen against the seas,”<sup>18</sup> meaning their troops would offer defense against pirating or Red Turban attacks on Yuan by sea. In turn, the Chinggisid court pardoned Gongmin and his officials of the crimes of executing the Ki family and attacking the borderlands.<sup>19</sup> The Chinggisid court also agreed to the abolition of most Yuan myriarchies in

## THE BOY IN THE BORDERLANDS

Goryeo, recognition of Ssangseong and other northern areas as Goryeo territory, and elimination of Yuan envoys to Goryeo Buddhist monasteries.<sup>20</sup> The brewing crisis of all-out war was averted—but the Ki family was still purged, Yuan lands south of the Yalu were returning to Goryeo hands, the Yi family was rising, and the times were changing.

## The Horseman in the Capital



*While Yi Seong-gye trained as a soldier in the north, he always sought the fastest horse. One day, he heard about a horse living a good distance away, on the coast. The horse was so fast that when it galloped the mountains shook and the air vibrated with a sound like thunder. However, people said the horse was completely wild. Anyone who came near was attacked, so none could approach.*

*Seong-gye decided to take a long journey to see the horse. On his way, he picked the finest grasses. When he arrived and presented the grass to the horse, the horse became docile and did not resist Seong-gye's approach. Yi Seong-gye then leapt on the horse's back to ride, and the horse galloped off as if it had been waiting for just this rider.*

*For a long time, Yi Seong-gye and his horse of lightning trained together, riding back and forth over the land. Seong-gye became an excellent rider, learning archery and other feats from the saddle. No horse, and no archer, could equal them. One day, Seong-gye decided to give the great horse a test.*

*He said to his horse: "I will fire an arrow at a pine tree in the distant woods. You must gallop to the tree and arrive before the arrow does, or I will cut off your head." The young warrior drew his bow and fired a speeding arrow at the tree.*

*His horse galloped off like the wind, but when it arrived, the arrow was already imbedded in the pine tree. Yi Seong-gye was in great distress, but he did as he promised. With streaming eyes, he took out his sword and beheaded the fastest horse of Goryeo.*

*As his horse's head fell to the ground, suddenly an arrow flew through the air and imbedded itself in the pine tree. Now Yi Seong-gye realized: the other arrow was there from a previous hunting trip. His horse of lightning had indeed outrun the arrow he had just fired. Yi was bereft. He built a commemorative pavilion and came often to venerate the horse that had helped him gain such great martial skills. The warrior hung his head and resolved to avoid human arrogance and careless judgement in the future.<sup>1</sup>*



Following his triumphant return to the Goryeo capital, Yi Jachun was promoted and honored with several honorary titles such as “Grand Master for Transmitting Discussions” and “Grand Master for Following Righteousness.”<sup>2</sup> When “Grand Master” Yi Jachun entered Gaegyeong as a conquering hero, his son Yi Seong-gye was by his side. Seong-gye was just 21 years old, and it was his first appearance in the political world of Goryeo—he was an unrefined mountain-man from the north, come to the big city.<sup>3</sup>

The backwoodsman would soon have his chance to impress his skills upon the Goryeo court. In celebration of the great victory at Ssangseong, a big festival was arranged, and some young military officers and sons of officials were selected to play *kyokku* on horseback. This ball game was something like polo, requiring players on fast horses to use mallets to drive the ball through goal posts.

The event was spectacular. A large area at the center of town was turned into a playing field. As described by the court records:

Then they set up a royal tent decorated with paintings of dragons and phoenixes, and the king held a banquet for high officials and noble ladies. The king watched the game from the tent along with his officials while entertaining girls danced to music. The ladies wearing their best silks, watched from tents along a side road. A huge crowd of spectators gathered to watch this spectacle.<sup>4</sup>

Everyone was in finery and ceremonial dress. The military heroes all stood together and swayed to the court music as the dancing girls swirled. The players' equipment was so luxurious that the cost of one saddle alone was said to equal the wealth of ten ordinary households.<sup>5</sup> Young Yi Seong-gye, the northern provincial never before seen in the capital, was chosen as one of the players. A complete stranger among the fops of Goryeo, Yi Seong-gye mounted his horse, took up his mallet, and destroyed them all.

During the match, Seong-gye's horse was running so fast that on one occasion Seong-gye hit the ball into a stone and it bounced back behind his racing horse. All in one motion, Seong-gye spun around in his saddle, struck the ball just as it flew out from underneath his horse's hind legs, and drove it back through the front legs of his galloping horse and into the goal. The crowd went wild, and this scoring technique was later given a name for the ages: *pangmi*. Yi Seong-gye dismounted, approached the tent of the gathered royals, and bowed low to the King.

On another occasion, Seong-gye hit a ball so hard that it bounced off the pillar of a bridge, shooting to his left. Seong-gye quickly took his leg out of the right stirrup so he could lean far left off his horse, and struck the ball again, driving it through the goal. The cheering crowd later called this technique *hoengbang*. Once again, Yi Seong-gye approached the royal tent and bowed to the King. "Everyone in the country was amazed to see his great skill and said that such a talent was unprecedented."<sup>6</sup>

Though this glorified account of this *kyokku* contest was produced by King Taejo's own court historians in later years, such that one might be skeptical of some details, there is no reason to doubt that Yi Seong-gye was in fact skilled at horseback archery and other contests. Horseback prowess was an essential feat of arms in Goryeo at the time and young Yi Seong-gye was a successful field warrior with a growing record of military success, both on fields of battle and friendly competitions.

The Yi clan seemed on their way up in the Goryeo capital. Both Yi Jachun and Yi Seong-gye were awarded military promotions. Yi Jachun was granted a house in Gaegyeong and a



government post as a third rank official. He became Supreme General of the Thousand Bull Guard. By 1361 he was named Grand Master for Glorious Happiness, Minister of Revenue, and head of the Directorate for Palace Buildings. He was also named commander of the northeast region and sent back north, with orders to represent the crown.<sup>7</sup>

Some Gaegyeong ministers were nervous at this turn of developments. The rugged Yi clan from the “barbarian” north hardly matched the traditional mold of Gaegyeong elites—who were mostly either urbane bluebloods from long-influential families or educated scholar-officials of the Confucian academies.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, some officials were quite nervous with empowering military men from northern border territories, an area of notoriously shifting political terrain and fluid loyalties. Although Mongol troops had been driven out of the Ssangseong area, it was entirely unclear that the Jurchen tribes and other residents of these unruly areas would really submit to Goryeo.<sup>9</sup> How could the Goryeo court be certain of the loyalties of the Yi clan warlords who had once betrayed Goryeo to Yuan, and then later betrayed Yuan to Goryeo? Their long-ago ancestor, Yi Ui-bang, had even once overthrown a Goryeo king.

“Yi [Jachun] is originally a man of the Northeast and also a chiliarch of that region, therefore, it is not advisable to appoint him the military commander of the border,” fretted one minister.<sup>10</sup> Still, King Gongmin felt he had few options but to trust the bold Yi clan and their fiercely loyal private troops to help Goryeo hold onto these newly recaptured northern territories, and so he sent commander Yi Jachun back home, with new authority. The northern warrior had been taken into the belly of Goryeo.

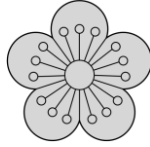
Nervous as they were with these developments, some of Gaegyeong’s ministers must have been reassured to learn of Yi Jachun’s death soon after leaving for the north. Life could be short in these times, and soon after Yi returned to his homelands he passed away, at 46 years old.<sup>11</sup> Yi Seong-gye was just 25 years old when he inherited the rank of northeast commander and the private troops of his father. Young and inexperienced, Yi Seong-gye was not expected to fill his father’s shoes and was not seen as much of a political danger

to the Goryeo court. Down in Gaegyeong, most ministers agreed that “there is now no one in the northeast region who can take [Yi Jachun’s] place.”<sup>12</sup>

For his part, Yi Seong-gye quietly fulfilled his filial duty. He spoke to two local monks about a good burial site for his father. Consulting divination and geomancy, the monks determined that one site would lead the family to great riches, while the other site would lead to great power. Yi Seong-gye chose the site of kingly power, frightening one of the old monks. “Isn’t that too much?” the monk nervously asked. Too much or not, an auspicious site of Kings on Kwija hill in Hamhung is where the legends say that Yi Seong-gye buried his father.

Yi Seong-gye then returned to life among his private troops—the *gabyeolcho*. These were elite forces of the northeast: skilled horse riders, expert archers, well trained men of battle. Several thousand of these troops, and all their families, looked to the Yi clan—not Goryeo leaders—for protection and prosperity.<sup>13</sup> Yi Seong-gye lived, trained, and fought with these warriors, and all their families lived within his fence. For more than a hundred years the families of these private troops—a mixture of Han, Mongol and Jurchen—had gathered under the Yi banner and paid taxes directly to the Yi clan in exchange for protection and a degree of stability. The old bluebloods of the Goryeo capital didn’t expect much out of the young and rugged rustic who now led the Yi clan, but a dragon can rise from a small stream<sup>14</sup> and the bluebloods should have remembered what was revealed in that game of *kyokku*.





## **THE GENERAL OF GORYEO**

“Since the survival of the state  
is now at stake,  
May you spearhead attacks  
like a god of war!”

— *The Taejo Sillok*



## The Advent of General Yi



*One day while hunting in the wild, young Yi Seong-gye came to rest amid some trees. Suddenly he heard a loud crash and saw another young man leaping through the bushes, chasing a deer. This other hunter brought down the deer, and quickly began drinking its blood. Yi Seong-gye admired the deer's size and asked to share a draught of the animal's blood. The other hunter refused, and the two men began to brawl. Yi Seong-gye was the stronger man and forced the hunter to share the deer's blood.*

*After this event, the two young men became best friends and declared themselves blood brothers. The hunter's name was Turan Temur, and he was a fierce warrior of the Jurchen people. He had the strength of a bear and a fine, beautiful face.*

*In later days, it came to pass that Yi Seong-gye and Turan Temur were hunting near a mountain spring. Turan said to Seong-gye: "Your beard is grand and powerful; it looks like a great dragon, flowing as a mountain spring! I predict that you will achieve a great thing." Yi Seong-gye said that before he could achieve a great thing, he should wait at this mountain spring for the water to burst like a fountain, and then he would drink of the fountain, as a sign from the dragon-king.*

*The two men waited and waited and returned to the spring many times, but the water never burst like a fountain. So Yi Seong-gye remained happy to just wander the north. Finally, Turan grew angry at his friend's inaction and yelled out: "Let's just pull out your great beard, since you are waiting forever!" Yi Seong-gye was angry and the two men fell to fighting. Again, Yi Seong-gye was the better man.*

*Turan Temur considered Seong-gye's fighting skills and realized that one day his friend would indeed achieve a great thing. The Jurchen warrior resolved to follow Yi Seong-gye for a long time.<sup>1</sup>*

Yi Jachun died in April of 1360. Because Jachun's eldest son had earlier been killed by a tiger while on a hunting trip, his second son, Seong-gye, inherited his honors and rank, including serving as a Goryeo senior *myriarch* (commander of 10,000 men) of the Dongbukmyeon (northeast) region.<sup>2</sup> Though he ostensibly could muster and command a large army of conscripts if commanded by the Goryeo crown, Yi's most important asset was his private "special forces"—about 1,500 elite soldiers who fought under Yi's personal banner and were not organized into larger armies.<sup>3</sup> These private soldiers were freed from corvée labor projects and taxation by the Goryeo crown, so they could spend all their time training and drilling.

In addition, Yi could count on support from the mounted cavalry of a local Jurchen ally, Turan Temur (1331-1402), who was a close friend of the young commander. Turan Temur was a skilled warrior and horseman, whose father was Ara Buka, a Jurchen chieftain with title as leader of a thousand men (*chiliarch*) in the Yuan system. This Jurchen family had local notoriety, as they were effective warriors and were said to be descended from a general of the Chinese Southern Song dynasty.<sup>4</sup>

In these northern areas, Korean and Jurchen mixed closely. The two peoples hunted together, lived in the same villages, inter-married, and sometimes worked together to protect their areas from raids from competing tribes or Japanese pirates.<sup>5</sup> But they also struggled for local influence and land, so Turan Temur sometimes had to work with his father to defend Jurchen households from the pressures of a growing population of ethnic Koreans near their Pukcheong home in Hamgyong province. By the 1350s, however, this task was growing ever more difficult as Goryeo's King Gongmin began pushing Korean control northward, ordering the Yi family to pacify the locals and drive the Mongols north. It became inevitable that local strongmen like Turan Temur and Yi Seong-gye would become either allies or enemies. The Yi clan had been ordered by King Gongmin to secure Goryeo's authority over these lands, so Jurchen tribes had to choose either to ally with the growing Korean power, or actively resist it, perhaps by joining in military campaigns of the displaced Mongols.

It was in this climate that young Yi Seong-gye met and joined forces with the Jurchen, Turan Temur. Folklore has it that he and Yi Seong-gye often hunted together and competed in local sporting contests while growing up. Thereby the two became close friends, a relationship that would serve Yi Seong-gye well all his life. In years to come, Turan Temur rose to command his own strong cavalry and would become a fiercely loyal part of Yi Seong-gye's private army, an elite force united by blood, mutual love, and regional roots in the northeast.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Dokro River Rebellion*

In October of 1361, just a few months after the death of his father, Yi Seong-gye received his first direct order from the Goryeo crown: he was to march to the Dokro River basin (a tributary of the Yalu river, now called the Changja) and put down the small rebellion of commander Park Ui. This commander had murdered several of his own Goryeo officers and likely was joining with Yuan and Jurchen forces in the area in rebellion against King Gongmin's anti-Yuan initiatives. Unlike the Jurchen of Turan Temur's clan, these forces were choosing to resist Goryeo's growing authority in the north. King Gongmin had originally ordered his Minister of Punishments to organize a response against the mutinous officer. But this minister proved militarily inept, so King Gongmin turned to the lower-ranking Yi Seong-gye and ordered him to track down and punish Park's mutinous forces.

The *Taejo Sillok* describes how, as early winter snow fell over the mountains, Yi Seong-gye sped his 1,500 private troops to the river basin and prepared to assert Goryeo's claim to these lands. The opposed forces met at the Dokro River, and did battle on its ice-covered sheets, amid the sleet and snow. Though precise historical records of this engagement are sparse, later court historians of the King Taejo era report that after an initial engagement, the combatants separated to opposite riverbanks, and glowered at each other under their war banners. After a time, the court history says that Yi Seong-gye stepped forward, raised his strong bow, and nocked one of his famous crane feather arrows. He took aim, drew the string, and struck the enemy flagpole across the river, dropping its



flag unceremoniously to the icy ground. At the time, regional soldiers believed that gods of war and mystical energies animated these battle pennants,<sup>7</sup> so a wave of demoralization swept over Park Ui's troops. Gloomy with the portents, Park's soldiers were happy that the sun was setting, putting an end to the day's battle. They could regroup and retire to their tents for the time being.

But Yi Seong-gye's troops didn't sleep that night. Instead, commander Yi planned a secret river crossing in the dead of night, sneaking across the dark river without torchlight and surrounding Park Ui's encampment. Before Park knew what was upon him, the field was lost. His troops tried to flee, but they were chased down by Yi's cavalry and most were killed.<sup>8</sup>

Yi Seong-gye had been victorious at Ssangseong fortress and on the polo grounds of the capital. He commanded the fierce loyalty of 1,500 warriors of the north. And he had now won his first military command, with hardly any losses at all. As the young commander prepared to leave the northern battlefield, his growing reputation marched out before him.

### *The Red Turban Invasion*

More battle, and more deadly, was to come. An isolated river valley rebellion was but a sideshow compared to the forces that were gathering just north of the Yalu River—hundreds of thousands of hungry rebels making up China's massive, millenarian Red Turban movement. Though the Goryeo military had pushed Yuan forces back across the Yalu, and Goryeo had declared its growing independence from the Mongol empire, there were increasing problems from Chinese Red Turban rebels who were assaulting the Chinggisids in China but were also crossing into Goryeo lands, plundering for grain and treasure.

In the summer of 1359, a communique arrived from the Chinese insurgents, advising Goryeo leaders that the Red Turban rebels aimed to take over all of China. The millenarian "White Lotus" teachings of this peasant movement were spreading like wildfire across the region, promising to expel corrupt elites from the world and "give salvation to mankind."<sup>9</sup> The Red Turbans expected Goryeo to support their rising

populist power or face the consequences. “We will succor those people who join us; we will chastise those whose resist us in battle,” they warned.<sup>10</sup>

The Goryeo court ignored the entreaty, and in December of 1359 Red Turban raiding parties crossed the Yalu River into Goryeo territory. By the end of the month, larger armies were crossing the Yalu and the Red Turbans pushed south towards Seogyang (modern Pyongyang), gathering grain and pillaging villages as they went. On January 17, 1360, Seogyang itself fell to the Red Turbans. Though King Gongmin’s forces regained the city about a month later, casualties were high, great stores of food had been taken, and civilian damage was immense. Then in April of 1360 the Red Turbans engaged in another wave of Goryeo coastal raids, capturing more granaries and burning buildings wherever they could. A severe drought followed that year, leading to widespread famine and even episodes of cannibalism in Goryeo—King Gongmin reduced his own meals to one a day in a show of support for his starving people.<sup>11</sup>

The situation was grim by the fall of 1361 and would only get worse. Just a few weeks after Yi Seong-gye defeated Park Ui’s rebellion in the northern borderlands, the Red Turbans crossed the Yalu in November with a second invasion force. According to estimates in the *Koryosa* and *Taejo Sillok*, somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 Red Turban troops moved south towards Goryeo’s capital. Though this estimate might well have been exaggerated, all records agree that this second Red Turban invasion was much larger than the first.<sup>12</sup> Red Turban officers themselves sent a written warning to the Korean Court with even higher claims of troop numbers: “We are now advancing towards the east with a force of 1.1 million soldiers. Come out quickly to welcome our army and surrender to us.”<sup>13</sup>

Commander Yi and his troops had only just weeks earlier won the day on the Dokro River battlefield. Now, on his way back to the Gaegyeong capital to report victory, Yi encountered a small Red Turban detachment. He routed them in battle, beheaded their commander and 100 soldiers, and delivered a live captive to King Gongmin in Gaegyeong.<sup>14</sup> The reputation of Yi Seong-gye soared in the Goryeo court and on the street:

the young hero had never yet lost a battle! It was a reassuring victory, but on Yi's heels came the massive Chinese army, ushering an ominous winter storm.

There was little hope of stopping the main force of approaching Red Turban soldiers—it was simply too massive. In addition, the royal army was poorly trained and badly led. For years, military officer posts had been granted as a sinecure to decadent and untrained elites. Many of Goryeo's most influential elites had their own private militias (typically much smaller than Yi Seong-gye's private forces), but these elites did not offer their private troops to the defense of the capital.<sup>15</sup> As compared these trained private militias, there was no professional training or even pay offered to part-time soldiers called to serve in the nation's army—they were simply conscripted as a form of national service. During a time of national crisis like the Red Turban invasions, even young boys and decrepit old men were sometimes ordered to report to service. As the Chinese army advanced, King Gongmin ordered his makeshift army of conscripts to fortify Gaegyeong as best it could. Prayers were made to the Gods of moats and walls, rivers and streams, mountains, and stars. But it was no use; there was no stopping the Red Turban advance. One scholar recalled how the Red Turbans “moved through our territory like a fire raging across a plain.”<sup>16</sup>

By mid-November 1361, the Goryeo court fled Gaegyeong altogether, making for nearby Ichon county and then travelled onwards to the southern areas of Sangju and Pokju (North Gyeongsang province, near today's Andong), out of reach of the invading forces. As the court fled, the Chinese Red Turban forces camped in the field before the gates of Gaegyeong. There they lit a grand bonfire, where the Red Turban commander casually dried his clothes before entering the capital in triumph.<sup>17</sup>

In distinction, the Goryeo King's flight from the capital was pitiful. “Young and old fell prostrate, while children and mothers abandoned one another. The suburbs were filled with those who had been crushed in the rush to escape the capital. The sounds of wailing moved Heaven and Earth.” Through a pouring rain, and then in cold and snowy weather, the queen had to ride on horseback rather than in a covered wagon,

while the King was freezing in his soaked garments. Along their journey south, one scholar observed that everyone they encountered seemed “panicked...like a started roe or a crouching hare...[refugees] were so numerous and desperate they would fill Heaven and Earth.”<sup>18</sup>

Back in Gaegyeong, the Red Turban forces occupied the capital on December 21<sup>st</sup>, and began to terrorize the population. Goryeo court historians described the terrible scene. “They butchered cattle and horses... butchered and roasted men and women. Fully indulging their depravity, some roasted women’s breasts to eat.”<sup>19</sup> Though Goryeo’s own historians may be suspected of hyperbolic demonization of their enemies as flesh-eating cannibals, the reality is that episodes of such cannibalism (among Goryeo commoners as well as Red Turban invaders) occurred with some frequency during the famine-stricken final decades of the Yuan dynasty, especially in northern China, and are a documented (if minor) part of warfare during these years.<sup>20</sup>

Holed up in the southern redoubt of Pokju, King Gongmin and his generals regrouped, gathered new troops, and planned to retake their capital. Yi Seong-gye had returned from his recent field victories and joined the military planning. On February 12, 1362, about 200,000 Goryeo troops advanced on the occupied Gaegyeong. They set up camp around their captured capital and prepared to lay siege. Among the Goryeo troops was a special unit under the command of Yi Seong-gye. Yi now had 2000 elite forces fighting under his personal standard and had never yet lost a battle.

In the pre-dawn hours, the war drums roared and the Goryeo forces attacked. Near the front were 2000 of Yi’s personal troops, charging in rain and snow against the walls. The battle at the walls continued all day, but Goryeo forces could not breach the walls. After sunset, the fighting calmed but the siege continued. Around midnight, Yi Seong-gye caught sight of an enemy detachment trying to break through the siege and escape. Yi pursued them on horseback to the East Gate of the city, where his soldiers and enemy troops became entangled in a desperate battle.

As told in the *Taejo Sillok*, “An enemy soldier with a spear tried to stab Taejo in the right ear from behind. Taejo at that

moment used his sword to cut down seven or eight of the enemy in front of him and, whipping his horse, jumped over the wall on horseback.”<sup>21</sup> This great leap startled and demoralized Red Turban rebels within, giving Yi’s troops an opening to breach the walls.<sup>22</sup> Precise records of these long-ago battles are sparse, but a modern Korean history committee imagines the kind of encouragement Yi Seong-gye may well have shouted. “We are unbeatable soldiers trained in the rugged mountains! Don’t be afraid of death and fight on!”<sup>23</sup> He then took aim at a Red Turban commander and dropped him dead with a heavy arrow from his famed bow. Red Turban forces panicked, and the rout was on. Within hours, the Red Turban forces were fleeing in disarray, reportedly trampling more than one thousand residents to death as they fled into the confused, dark night.<sup>24</sup> Young Yi Seong-gye was a key part of yet another victorious military battle.

Though Goryeo generals had recaptured their capital, King Gongmin delayed his return for months, preferring to remain in the suburb of Paju while the capital’s streets lay in ruin, and ambitious generals marched about with fully mobilized armies. The King had fled in disgrace, while the generals took back the city in triumph. It would be dangerous for the beleaguered king to return at this moment, to a city he had abandoned and that was now crowded with conquering generals and their loyal soldiers.

But Gongmin had a ruthless plan to handle those ambitious generals.\* Within a few weeks of his generals’ great victory in recapturing Gaegyeong, King Gongmin arranged the murder of four of his top commanders. One was beat to death at a congratulatory banquet. Another was summoned to a special congratulatory meeting in the King’s private quarters, and then struck down by the King’s attendants. A third was

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\* It is unclear if King Gongmin was directly involved in ordering the murder of several of the leading generals who had recaptured Gaegyeong. The Official History of the Goryeo Dynasty absolves Gongmin of involvement in these executions, but the King’s subsequent support of those involved in the murders suggests he approved of these events and may well have ordered them himself (Robinson, D., *Empire’s Twilight*, pp. 190–92).

called to welcome a visiting family member. He was sliced with a sword and killed while bowing in respect before his relative.

Another was branded a traitor and beheaded while the gruesome trophy was displayed on a pike in his hometown. All were slain due to Gongmin's fear that one of them might rise to challenge his vulnerable dynasty, following their great military victory. With many of his top generals all dead, that danger seemed well mitigated.<sup>25</sup> In the aftermath, two surviving generals soon rose to the most prominent positions in Goryeo's military: General Choe Yeong who became the highest-ranking commander in Goryeo, and General Yi Seong-gye, the rapidly rising northern star.<sup>26</sup>

But things were not at all certain for the King, for there were plenty of others who were becoming skeptical of their mercurial leader. Gongmin's chaotic flight from the capital, and now shocking murders of his commanders, were the talk of the realm. One despairing scholar delivered a withering critique in a eulogy to one of the slain generals, Kim Teuk-pae. "He labored at the enterprise of saving Goryeo...Why, when the sweat of his horses was not dry and the songs of his triumphant return not yet still, was his enormous merit (as heavy as Mt. Tai) transformed into blood on a sharp sword? This is why I weep tears of blood and beseech Heaven....What can be done? What can be done?"<sup>27</sup>

As for the streets of the capital, they were a wasteland. The palace was ruined. "Whitened bones [of the dead] stood in piles."<sup>28</sup> Residents had fled the city en masse, taxes for repairs could not be collected, and a drought spread over the land. The King's advisors grew concerned over the lamentations of the people, while officials delivered biting critiques: "The chaotic flight to the south in 1361; the loss of the ancestral altars to the enemy; the disgrace of His Highness' exile; they have become an object of ridicule throughout the realm. [All because] Your Excellency did not make plans in advance."<sup>29</sup> On top of all that, the King remained absent from the capital throughout the rest of 1361 and all of 1362, spending time in the nearby suburbs, watching archery contests, attending *kyokku* (polo) games, hunting, and boating to divert his attention from the struggles of the slowly recovering capital.<sup>30</sup>

*Nahachu on the Plain of Hamhung*

While the king dithered, the battles never ended for Yi Seong-gye. Even while Chinese raiders had crossed the northwest border and pushed south into Gaegyeong, a different enemy had crossed the loosely governed northeast border and pressed into South Hamyong province, where Yi's hometown of Hamhung was located. A Yuan-allied commander named Nahachu, the most powerful warlord in the northern highlands around the Yalu River, determined that both Goryeo and the Red Turban forces were weak from fighting each other and now was the moment to advance Jurchen and Yuan claims on north Korean territories.

The Yi father-son combination, together with other Goryeo commanders, had driven the Yuan out of the Ssangseong commandery five years ago, but the unstable north remained a fluid land of mixed ethnicities, heavily populated by Jurchen peoples, and up for claim by whoever had the necessary power. Goryeo had claimed this land of steep mountains, narrow passes, and high plateaus five years ago, but at a cost—now it had to defend them from area warlords like Nahachu.<sup>31</sup> As Nahachu occupied northern provinces, he burned slave registers and household registers, undermining the ability of the Goryeo court to govern and tax these areas.<sup>32</sup>

Nahachu of (later-named) Manchuria had already defeated one hapless Goryeo commander after crossing the border in 1361 with thousands of warriors, so Goryeo had few options other than to send the swashbuckling Yi Seong-gye on yet another campaign. Though Nahachu's forces were strong and Goryeo was sorely weakened from Red Turban invasions, sending Yi Seong-gye was quite a card to play. The Hamyong province was Yi's home territory, where he was very popular among the local peoples. Yi could count on their support as he headed north to confront Nahachu. Also, Yi was a master of the complicated landscape in the area. The trails and roads near Hamhung were "tortuously winding and crisscrossed in many

places," but Yi had roamed and hunted these lands endlessly in younger years. He knew his way around.\*

In July of 1362 Yi Seong-gye travelled back to his Hamhung roots. According to the *Taejo Sillok*, When Yi arrived, he linked up with his boyhood friend, Turan Temur of the Jurchen, who committed his own skilled cavalry to help Yi Seong-gye's campaign. With these joint forces, General Yi was pleased to catch up with Nahachu's forces at Hamwallyong Pass, near a village called Taldandong. Each commander had powerful cavalry and was comfortable with mounted battle in mountainous terrain, but on this day, Yi Seong-gye would win the field. His troops won this first encounter, chasing Nahachu's troops over the mountain pass and killing many. To regroup, Yi Seong-gye then withdrew to a mountain valley, while Nahachu made his way back near the fields of the original battle, to rest for the night.

But commander Yi was waiting for Nahachu and laid into him in a surprise night attack, putting the Yuan enemy again to flight. Yi kept on Nahachu's tail through the next day and soon attacked an unguarded detachment of Yuan wood-gatherers, followed up by a surprise cavalry attack with 600 of his best troops. But in this encounter, Yi's troops were having a hard time of it. Every time they tried to advance, "an enemy general clad with iron armor decorated with red ox-tails suddenly jumped out, brandishing a spear." He was terrifying and strong, and Yi's soldiers would not advance against the warrior.

So general Yi stepped forward and confronted the armored terror himself, pretending to run away as soon as the armored fighter rushed to attack with his spear. The red ox-tail warrior shouted in victory and chased after Yi Seong-gye. Fleeing on horseback, Yi quickly slid underneath the belly of his horse, shocking his opponent, who lost balance and fell off his own horse. Yi quickly rolled back into the saddle and fired a deadly arrow into the fallen enemy with the red-ox tails.

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\* All the details in this paragraph and subsequent paragraphs regarding Yi's encounter with Nahachu, are found in *Taejo Sillok*, "Cheongseo" ["General Introduction"], Kindle loc. 684-757. See also Im, J., op. cit., pp. 50-56.



“With their champion dead, the enemy troops were thrown into disarray and ran away” as the sun set behind tall peaks.

That night, Nahachu’s wife was nervous. “It has been a long time since you traveled the world, but you have not met such a formidable foe yet, have you?” she reflected in their tent. “You had better avoid meeting him again and return home quickly.”

But Nahachu resolved to campaign on. A few days later, the two great commanders each rode out on the field of battle with ten cavalymen at their side and met for parlay. Nahachu admitted that Yi had the stronger forces, and said he was prepared to surrender the field. But General Yi suspected deception, and calmly fired an arrow into one of the commanders riding next to Nahachu, and then shot Nahachu’s own horse dead. Battle broke out. Once again Yi Seong-gye had the better of it, until Nahachu was given another horse by his nearby commanders and fled again into the sunset. As night fell, General Yi withdrew and protected his rear guard.

In the following days, Yi hunted Nahachu relentlessly through the winding mountain roads. On one occasion, Yi was ambushed, and two enemy generals clad in silver armor and with long spears nearly ran him through. But the *Taejo Sillok* reports that Yi spun around on his horse, “shot both generals and killed twenty more enemy soldiers in short order.” During the subsequent battle, Yi rolled and dodged on his horse, attacking the enemy from all manner of surprising directions, and owning the field. He saw one enemy take aim at his torso, but quickly lifted up on his saddle and let the arrow pass between his legs. In another case, an enemy was “completely covered with armor and wore a helmet secured by a chinstrap,” making it difficult for anyone to bring him down with arrows. So Yi shot the man’s horse, which rose up in the air with pain. When the disoriented enemy opened his mouth to command and calm the horse, Yi fired another arrow straight into the exposed mouth and killed the enemy. Once again, Nahachu’s forces were thrown into a disarrayed retreat. “In their panic, the enemy soldiers trampled one another, and many died or were captured.”

But Nahachu still would not surrender, and Yi had to plan for one more encounter. He directed his reliable Jurchen ally,

Turan Temur, to take his men and lurk in the woods near the Hamhung plain, hiding and preparing for a surprise. In that day's battle with Nahachu, Yi's forces had the worst of it, and kept retreating down the mountain towards the plains below. These wide plains were exactly the kind of terrain Nahachu's Mongol cavalry loved to fight on, so his cavalry pursued Yi's soldiers relentlessly. They chased Yi Seong-gye all the way to the plain of Hamhung, where Yi's forces looked weary and panicked. There, where the Hamhung plain met mountain forest, Nahachu celebrated and howled with pride at his impending victory.

Though Yi's panicked troops retreated desperately onto the plains, General Yi did not give up. Following Nahachu's taunt, Yi turned on horseback to charge the enemy single-handedly, drawing out three enemy warriors who began to chase him at full gallop. As the three enemies came close behind his own galloping horse, Yi suddenly pulled up on his reins and brought his well-trained horse to a sudden halt. The three enemies roared past in surprise, unable to stop their horses quickly. The predators had become the prey, and Yi shot each of three pursuers in the back with his great bow, killing them all. Then charged Nahachu's main force of thousands, pursuing Yi and his retreating soldiers onto the plain of Hamhung, pouring like angry fire through the golden pampas grass of late summer.

But it was all a trap. Yi Seong-gye had disguised the true size of his army, and thousands of Turan Temur's troops were hiding in the forest. As Nahachu's men charged onto the plain, Yi Seong-gye suddenly turned his own forces around to do battle, and the hidden forces of Turan Temur emerged from their forest shadows behind Nahachu. In groups of three horses, standing side-by-side, Turan Temur's forces stood with long spears—a spiky fence blocking the enemy's retreat and ready "to sweep the enemy away." The trap was sprung, Nahachu was surrounded, and thousands of his best troops were slaughtered that day. General Yi pursued all the Jurchen soldiers he could, raging "like a meteor,"<sup>33</sup> but a small remnant, including Nahachu himself, fled the field.

The next day, Nahachu sued for peace. Though his army was much smaller, Yi Seong-gye had handily defeated the great

Jurchen commander and best hope of the northern Yuan. Nahachu told his troops that Yi Seong-gye was probably the best general they would ever meet in their lives. "No one can surpass him in the world," agreed Nahachu's sister. Nahachu offered General Yi a drum and a fine horse as a peace tribute and promised Yi that he would forevermore remain North of the Yalu. Nahachu recalled how he had long ago met Yi's father in these parts. "Years ago, Yi [Jachun] said he had a talented son. Indeed, he did not lie." When he returned to the Goryeo capital, Yi Seong-gye "presented to the king the trophies that he had collected, including tablets and seals made of silver and copper, respectively, as well as innumerable other spoils."

For his part, after he abandoned Goryeo lands for haunts north of the Yalu, Nahachu later sent a note of commendation to the Goryeo court and promised to respect the Tumen and Yalu river borders in the future. "How is General Yi doing?" Nahachu asked. "Though he is young, he is incredible in commanding his army. He is a real genius. I believe he will become a man of great responsibilities in your country in the days ahead."<sup>34</sup>

### *Yuan Invasion and the Battle of Chongju*

In one year of deadly battles, Yi Seong-gye had helped drive Mongol troops out of Hamhung, Chinese marauders out of Gaegyeong, and Jurchen warriors from the northern reaches of Goryeo. The northern border grew increasingly peaceful as Nahachu was now rumored to be "scared even by the blowing wind and suspicious of croaking cranes."<sup>35</sup> Yi Seong-gye was no longer just the son of Yi Jachun, but had become the great General Yi, building the fence of Goryeo. It was good that *someone* was building Goryeo's defense, since King Gongmin himself hadn't even yet returned to the capital city, following the purge of the Red Turban raiders. At the tail end of 1362, with the King still not returned to the old capital city, more bad news arrived.

Even though General Yi had driven Nahachu out of the north, King Gongmin now received news that Yuan leaders were mobilizing yet another effort to recapture Goryeo's loyalties and planned to forcibly conscript Goryeo troops into

campaigns against the Chinese Red Turban rebels. In December 1362, King Gongmin learned that the Yuan emperor had decided to forcibly dethrone Gongmin and replace him with Tash-Temur. Tash-Temur happened to be Gongmin's uncle but was slavishly pro-Yuan and a great favorite of Empress Ki, who still sought revenge for the earlier purges of the Goryeo Ki family. Empress Ki is recorded to have bitterly pushed her Chinggisid son, Ayushiridara, to move against the Goryeo court. "'You are now already grown," she harangued. "Why do you not avenge me!"<sup>36</sup> Empress Ki's anger helped drive the Chinggisids to conceive a plan to dethrone the Goryeo King and replace him with a hand-picked member of the Ki family.

From afar, the Yuan court announced the dethronement of Goryeo's King Gongmin, who in March of 1363 was still living in the Gaegyeong suburbs, where he had erected a small temporary palace. According to the Yuan, King Gongmin was no longer even running things in Gaegyeong, so they planned to put a new king on the throne.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, the blustering Yuan had retreated to the Mongolian steppes in the face of Red Turban assaults, and they didn't have much power to enforce their edicts on the peninsula. Still, they could engineer dangerous court intrigues in Goryeo. In April of 1363, the existential danger to Gongmin's position was made clear. On April 15<sup>th</sup>, deep in the night, one of Gongmin's own senior officials sent fifty assassins to kill the King in his sleep. They drove away Gongmin's bodyguard, but his eunuchs prevailed. One eunuch ran off with King Gongmin perched on his back, while another eunuch dressed up and pretended to be the King as assassins entered the royal chambers. The assassins murdered the eunuch imposter and ran through the temporary palace, seeking out the fugitive King. They found him hiding in the Queen dowager's quarters, seeking cover behind the royal widow who sat unmoving in the doorway. This Queen dowager was a Mongolian royal, who have married into the Goryeo court, as was so common in those days. When the Mongolian royal wouldn't budge, the cowering King Gongmin behind her was spared the assassin's blade. "Although willing to commit regicide, the assassins balked at harming a member of the Mongolian aristocracy,"

## THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

which provides some evidence that the Yuan court itself probably had something to do with the assassination attempt.<sup>38</sup> Confronted by the implacable Queen, the assassins lost their nerve and fled.

Once things calmed down, and Gongmin's troops had restored royal authority, Gongmin exiled or executed those responsible for the assassination attempt. But the danger was hardly passed. For one thing, the Yuan court didn't consider Gongmin the King any longer. They had sent Tash-Temur travelling from Daidu towards Gaegyeong, where he intended to be installed as Goryeo's new king. In January of 1364, Tash-Temur travelled as far as the Liaodong peninsula border area, where he awaited Yuan cavalry to escort him across the Yalu River and into Goryeo. There, Tash-Temur spun fantastical tales of future riches. He promised his Mongolian and Chinese soldiers that there would be great treasures awaiting them once they took over in Gaegyeong. All the "wives, concubines and property of Goryeo ministers would be their reward."<sup>39</sup>

On the first day of January 1364, a hundred thousand Yuan troops crossed the Yalu at the town of Uiju, in advance of the would-be King of Goryeo. But Goryeo military forces met them in the field, including the elite troops of commander Yi Seong-gye, who had never yet lost a battle. General Yi's troops marched north to guard the country amid brutal winter conditions. "Soldiers were so cold and hungry they could not remain upright...One after another died of hunger in the roads as they begged. Their faces were pale and emaciated."<sup>40</sup> And yet, the forces remained loyal to Yi and their other commanders and stood prepared to battle the Yuan.

After a series of small engagements that saw the Yuan driving Goryeo forces south, things ultimately turned around at the decisive Battle of Chongju in February of 1364. There, one Goryeo general beat a detachment of Yuan troops and executed a Yuan general in front of his own army. The very next day, Yi Seong-gye played his own important role, fighting alongside 1,000 crack troops. The night before, Yi had sternly reprimanded the cowardice of fellow commanders who were not fully committing to battle. The other commanders wryly noted that since he was so brave, Yi should "take charge of tomorrow's battle alone, then." Yi was challenged to lead his

private forces into battle himself, at the front of the charge. The unflappable commander Yi agreed to do just that.<sup>41</sup> The next day, Yi Seong-gye's forces led the charge and stood unbroken, and Goryeo forces drove the Yuan into a serious defeat.

In the end, Goryeo's two most important commanders (Generals Choe Yeong and Yi Seong-gye) pushed the Yuan completely out of Goryeo and across the Yalu River, with their would-be king in tow, just fifteen days after the Yuan had invaded. The Yuan army suffered a massive loss of life. Only seventeen Yuan mounted cavalry troops made it back across the Yalu, through many more unmounted soldiers survived. It was the first time Goryeo troops had defeated a large Mongol army in battle for more than a century.<sup>42</sup> Recognizing the new reality, in October of 1364 the Yuan court finally agreed to confirm Gongmin once again as Goryeo's king, and Goryeo essentially became wholly independent of the Mongol empire.

During these days, Yi Seong-gye's own cousins (Samson and Samgae) saw fit to create some problems back home in Hamhung. These two men were known as petty bullies who liked to run with a group of local toughs. They had gathered a small band to plunder as they pleased, holing up in a fort near Hamhung with some Jurchen tribesmen. But things changed quickly when Yi Seong-gye returned to Hamhung immediately after driving Yuan troops across the Yalu. It didn't take him long to scour Samson and Samgae from their stronghold and to restore order to the area. The two raiders, General Yi's own cousins, fled north across the Yalu and never returned to Goryeo.<sup>43</sup>

For his part in driving the Yuan out of Goryeo and winning his country's independence (as well as restoring order in Hamhung), the King promoted Yi Seong-gye to assistant royal secretary and commander of the northeast region, while raising his rank to Grand Master for Service and Assistance. Furthermore, the King bestowed upon Yi the prestigious title of "Extremely-Sincere, Brilliantly-Faithful, and Respectfully-Assisting Merit Subject", as well as giving him a golden belt as a sign of royal favor.<sup>44</sup> Gongmin then appointed Yi to keep watch on the Northern territories, including surveilling the situation north of the Yalu River, keeping watch

on lands long ago controlled by the Korean people, but now conquered by the Chinese and the Yuan.

*The Liaodong Campaign*

Things were on decline everywhere for Yuan forces. Not only had Goryeo pushed them out of the Korean peninsula, but across the Bohai Gulf, Red Turban Rebels drove the Mongols out of Beijing and all of China in 1368 and then declared the arrival of the Ming dynasty. Empress Ki, Emperor Toghon Temur, and the Mongol army fled into the interior Mongol highlands. Taking advantage of the weakening of the Mongol empire, in 1369-1370, King Gongmin declared to residents just north of Yalu River in Liaodong that they were considered citizens of Goryeo. There were perhaps 30,000-35,000 Goryeo residents near the city of Liaoyang at this time, living among thousands of Jurchens, Mongols and Han Chinese. Gongmin had decided the time was right to reclaim these lands north of the Yalu that had once belonged to the ancient Korean kingdom of Goguryeo, which once claimed to title to vast lands both south and north of the Yalu River.<sup>45</sup>

To enforce the king's will, General Yi Seong-gye mustered 5,000 cavalry and 5,000 soldiers on a mission to cross the Yalu river and conquer the ancient Mountain fortress (*Urasanseong*) that guarded those territories and was long ago built as the first capital of the ancient Korean kingdom of Goguryeo.<sup>46</sup> It was the largest Goryeo military force sent abroad since Yuan's ill-fated attacks on Japan one hundred years earlier (in 1274 and 1281).<sup>47</sup>

Yuan armed forces in the area targeted by Yi Seong-gye's troops were led by the son of Gi-Cheol,\* so it was another opportunity to attack the remnants of the old Goryeo-Yuan alliance that King Gongmin had so thoroughly shattered. Fulfilling his charge, Yi marched his troops northwards for 1300 li (650 kilometers). Strong winds were incessant and "a

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\* Gi-cheol was the brother of Empress Ki (who had ruled the Yuan Dynasty with Toghon Temur from the Dragon throne in Daidu) and a member of the Ki clan that King Gongmin purged through surprise assassinations.

vast continent of snowflakes unfolded,” but Yi made the journey in just 10 days.<sup>48</sup> He crossed the Yalu on a floating bridge and blew his famous conch horn upon entering the Liao lands beyond.

It so happened that a brilliant episode of the Northern Lights appeared above Gaegyeong that very night, with a glittering display extending all the way from the northern borderlands to the capital. Such a dynamic and beautiful aurora would almost certainly be seen as portentous by Yi Seong-gye’s forces. Reading the heavens for portents was a common feature of Goryeo life, so much so that about half of the thousands of portents recorded in historical Goryeo documents relate to heavenly phenomenon.<sup>49</sup> We can guess that Yi Seong-gye might well have believed that the northern lights welcomed their crossing into Liaodong, even the sky flying the flag of victory at their coming.<sup>50</sup> Down in Gaegyeong, the officials of the Directorate of the Astronomical and Meteorological Observatory concluded that the brilliant night sky “portends a valiant general.” Pleased with the heavenly portents, the King replied: “The sign must have to do with Yi, whom I sent to the north.”<sup>51</sup>

General Yi faced demanding conditions in Liao lands on his way to Goguryeo’s old *Urasanseong* Mountain fortress. Winter winds and snowstorms slowed his troops whose horses constantly slipped on the roads. Soldiers became incapacitated and froze to death.<sup>52</sup> This was doubly dire since Yi’s soldiers were already badly outnumbered by the troops of Nahachu (his old enemy from the Plain of Hamhung) who patrolled these areas north of the Yalu. Nahachu’s army began to hunt down Yi Seong-gye’s exposed forces as they became extended beyond their home territory, far out in the field).<sup>53</sup> It was a dangerous moment when Nahachu discovered Yi’s exposed troops on a cold snowy field, since Nahachu had a three-to-one advantage in numbers.

Yi Seong-gye was committed to pressing on as ordered, since he was now only about 10 li (5 kilometers) east of the fortress. But he knew Nahachu had been chasing after his army for a few days and didn’t want to alert the enemy to his dangerously depleted numbers. Therefore, Yi ordered his troops to camp openly in the field, and to spend precious time



building toilets and stables. He also ordered them to build several campfires for each small group of soldiers, rather than just one. The many campfires suggested an army far larger than what Yi actually had, and the field construction project confused Nahachu. "Since they built toilets and stables [in the field], their troops must be well prepared," Nahachu concluded. "It is impossible to attack them." Therefore, Nahachu withdrew from the field and returned to his base camp, leaving the mountain fortress to its fate.<sup>54</sup>

The next day, as the wily General Yi marched towards the fortress, one local leader came out voluntarily, took off his armor and surrendered. He claimed that his ancestors were originally from Goryeo and that he wished to return to the Goryeo kingdom. This man (Yi Won-gyeong) only had a small contingent of thirty soldiers and 300 village households, but the surrender suggested better things to come. In fact, soon after this surrender, other local villages felt the winds changing and another 10,000 households (about 50,000 people) came over to Yi Seong-gye's side, swearing they would be loyal to his Goryeo command.<sup>55</sup>

Several months after these initial victories (after delivering some of the surrendering families and leaders to King Gongmin in Gaegyeong), General Yi was back campaigning in Liaodong. In late November 1370, he made it to *Urasanseong* Mountain Fortress, built up on high cliffs. He surrounded the cliffs with 20,000 troops. Inside was the much smaller force of Go Ki-win, still loyal to the Yuan and shouting out that the surrendering Won-gyeong was a traitor. Won-gyeong rode his horse up to the fortress walls and shouted back: "There's nothing we can do about it. The fate of the Yuan dynasty has come to an end." In response, fortress commander Go Ki-win simply shot arrows into Won-gyeong's horse, which screamed loudly as it collapsed and died.<sup>56</sup>

General Yi had no choice but to lay siege. His forces surrounded the fortress and watched the castle walls light up with watch torches as night fell. According to both the *Taejo Sillok* and the Goryeo history of the account, which likely exaggerates Yi Seong-gye's military prowess, the general spent the night demoralizing the fortress defenders. All that night, Yi Seong-gye became a shadowy sniper, moving quietly in the

dark below the castle and taking aim with his great bow. One by one, Yi would lock onto a target and send a whistling bolt of doom through the night. The records say that General Yi killed seventy guardsmen on the fortress walls that night, completely demoralizing the defenders. By the next day, the fortress lay quiet and near abandoned. Panicked by the army at their doorstep and the deadly sniper in the dark, many defending soldiers had fled as the sun came up. The few remaining enemy captains in the fortress surrendered to Yi Seong-gye that morning and news quickly arrived that other nearby forts were also surrendering to the Goryeo forces.<sup>57</sup>

The general was magnanimous in victory. When he entered the fortress and its protected town, Yi espied one elderly man standing in the wreckage, naked and wailing in the snowy waste. "Who is that man standing naked and crying in this cold winter?" asked the general. He learned this man was an elderly Confucian scholar: an old Goryeo loyalist who had become lost to the Yuan and was now about to die in the wild, far from his old home. Yi took the old scholar in, clothed him, and gave him a title of "Judge." He later took the old scholar with him back to Gaegyeong, presenting him to the court as a loyalist, and gave him the nickname of *Hanbok* ("Korean clothes").<sup>58</sup>

In capturing the mountain fortress, Yi had won two thousand oxen and several hundred horses that were managed by fortress overseers. He returned all this livestock to local villagers who once lived in Goryeo, promising them that the rule of Goryeo would be generous and just. The northern locals were so impressed that they began to follow General Yi around like crowds in a marketplace.<sup>59</sup>

It was after this campaign that Yi Seong-gye's boyhood friend, Turan Temur, was finally persuaded to fully swear his loyalty to General Yi. The general responded by naming Turan Temur as his brother, giving him the new family name of Yi, making him known hereafter as Yi Turan, of the General's Hamhung Yi clan (later, the name evolved to "Yi Chiran").<sup>60</sup> The Jurchen commander Choe Myeong also swore fealty to Yi Seong-gye, together with the Mongol Yuan general, Jomu. Many of these submitting warriors would fight beside General

Yi in later campaigns, showing up in battles against Japanese pirates down south, for example.<sup>61</sup>

Goguryeo's old Liaodong lands suddenly seemed within reach of Goryeo control. Yet for all his success, Yi Seong-gye had to abandon these Liaodong lands north of the Yalu in the end. Though King Gongmin had dreams of recapturing all these lands for Goryeo rule, the reality is that the winter campaign had proved demanding on Yi Seong-gye's troops and Goryeo didn't have the supplies or manpower to sustain a military occupation through the brutal winter and year to come, especially if Yuan and/or Ming forces mounted a response, which seemed likely. Goryeo soldiers had to butcher their own horses for food.<sup>62</sup> Supply problems were exacerbated when a fire broke out in a local warehouse and destroyed a good deal of food. Some Goryeo court advisors pointed out the difficulties of holding on to these territories, which would require substantial manpower and constant envoys, and argued that the area should be turned over to governance by local tribes and clans, since it could act as an independent buffer zone against both Mongol and Chinese forces beyond. In addition, down on the Korean peninsula, attacks from Japanese pirates were escalating along the coastlines, making new demands on the Goryeo military.<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, King Gongmin was increasingly despondent over the unexpected loss of his beloved Queen Noh Guk, who had tragically died during a recent childbirth. King Gongmin just didn't seem to have his heart in complicated matters of governance any longer, which was unfortunate, since serious threats to Goryeo dynastic future were only going to worsen in this critical time of Yuan-Ming transition in the east Asian hierarchy. In the face of all these mounting challenges, General Yi's troops were ordered to return to Goryeo lands south of the Yalu, soon after conquering the *Urasanseong* mountain fortress. Though General Yi returned with several hundred households from the north, and 50 surrendered leaders, Goryeo could not hope to sustain its reach of power into territory beyond the Yalu.<sup>64</sup> The lands and people that had once belonged to Korea's ancient Goguryeo kingdom were left in the shadow of the Ming dynasty's growing reach, and Goryeo's great Liaodong adventure had come to an end.

## Royal Intrigues: Reform and Resentment in Late Goryeo



*The wind that blew last night  
Brought snow and frost,  
And the great spreading pines  
have all fallen to the ground.  
No need to speak  
The fate of flowers yet to bloom.*

— Yu Eungbu<sup>1</sup>



There were high honors when the hero of the Liaodong expedition returned to Gaegyeong in 1370. General Yi was received by the royal carriage at the gates, and the streets were filled with cheering crowds. He was named a merit subject and granted land and enslaved servants. In addition, General Yi was appointed a grand councilor of the Chancellery that managed Goryeo's most important political affairs. The northern general now had a top government post and a permanent home in the capital city.<sup>2</sup>

But it was a capital city divided and not everyone appreciated the wreck that Yi Seong-gye's military victories were making of Goryeo's previous political arrangements. General Yi's return from successful battles north of the Yalu, deep in old Yuan territory, was a sign of how seriously things were changing in Goryeo itself. As the old Yuan rulers retreated, it brought serious challenges to those Goryeo elites who had accommodated themselves quite nicely to Yuan influence, building up their own great wealth and privilege.

Now, as Yuan influence waned, Goryeo experience its own increasing hostility between the established (but waning) power of the pro-Yuan aristocratic elites, secure in their vast

wealth and political favors, and the rising influence of austere Confucian scholar-officials, who had a vision of building a more virtuous and socially harmonious Goryeo in the wake of the Mongol retreat. The established aristocrats who had done so well under Yuan rule were known as the *gwonmun sejok*\*—influential families with vast land rights, hundreds of enslaved persons, and personal connections to the heights of government power.<sup>3</sup>

The rising Confucian scholars who challenged these aristocrats were known as the *sadaebu*,<sup>†</sup> and gathered around the influence of Sungkyunkwan, the highly regarded National Confucian Academy that increasingly called for a scouring of corrupted national politics.<sup>4</sup> Although many of these *sadaebu* themselves came from rich and powerful Goryeo families, and intermarried with established lineages,<sup>5</sup> a growing divide was emerging between the elite scholars who dedicated themselves to study and a Confucian revival and the less studious aristocrats who spend much of their time on hunts, festive banquets, and amassing of more land and slaves. Yi Seong-gye was rising in the world of Gaegyeong politics himself, but what world would he join? The splendid luxury and established power of the *gwonmun sejok*, or the spartan austerity and misty dreams of the Confucian scholars?

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\* *Gwonmun sejok* means “powerful hereditary families,” though the term (and related terms like *gwonmun*, *gwonsin* and *gwonsega*) came to be understood as a pejorative describing a range of powerful elites who abused their position and not just referring to the old, hereditary families. *Gwonmun sejok* has come to be used in a broad range of scholarship to describe a degenerate social class of late Goryeo aristocrats, typically with vast, inherited wealth and an endless hunger to amalgamate power through corrupt and oppressive practices. Duncan, J., *The Origins of the Joseon Dynasty*, p. 87.

† The *sadaebu* (literally meaning “scholar officials”) were scholars who rose to government position through the examination system, proving their literary, administrative, or technical skills by demonstrated merit. These *sadaebu* were part of the flourishing Confucian literary network of their day, having attended Confucian academies before they could take a qualifying civil service exam.

*Legacies of Yuan: The Wealthy and the Weak*

For one hundred years following King Gojong's submission to Mongol invaders in 1259, Goryeo had been thoroughly dominated by Yuan oversight. In exchange for their submission and regular tribute, Goryeo's royal house had been guaranteed dynastic continuity, but at the cost of a radical shrinking of its independent authority. During the period of Chinggisid intervention (1259-1356), the Yuan court supervised the installation and political machinations of seven consecutive Goryeo kings. Before being installed as king, the Goryeo crown prince had to reside in the Yuan capital and was required to marry a Mongol princess: Goryeo had become the Yuan's "son-in-law nation."<sup>6</sup>

During this time, the Yuan court deposed and installed Goryeo kings at will. Several kings were forced to abdicate when they ran afoul of Yuan desires, and one king (Chunghye, r. 1330-1332, 1340-1344) was beaten so severely when deposed that he died while being taken back to the Mongol capital. King Chungjeong (r. 1348-1351) was also probably poisoned by Yuan officials when he was deposed and taken back to their capital.<sup>7</sup> Tributary missions to the Yuan were frequent and even sitting Goryeo kings often lived in Daidu for months at a time, in submission to the Yuan Emperor. Goryeo had become a weak shell of a nation and the Goryeo royal family became thoroughly Mongolized.<sup>8</sup>

Many Goryeo elites found ways to benefit from the situation. Some Goryeoans of means and status would travel to Yuan as envoys, delivering large tribute. They would request Yuan officials to grant them and their relatives all manner of favors back in Goryeo: land titles, tax exemption, government posts, and immunity to corvée labor. One Goryeo envoy in 1354 presented a list of 300 associates to be granted government posts and sinecures in Goryeo in return for his tribute and loyalty to the Chinggisids. Some Goryeo high-flyers chose to live in the glorious Mongol capital for some time, supporting lives of luxury with high taxation on their private holdings of Goryeo lands back home.<sup>9</sup>

Goryeo's powerful landowners became known as the *gwonmun sejok*—the landed aristocrats of late Goryeo. This

class became known as a parasitic power in Goryeo that took corrupt advantage of overworked and overtaxed peasants and avoided any service to the Goryeo state themselves.<sup>10</sup> These families had produced great fortunes for generations, cunningly amassed huge farms which they kept off the official tax rolls, and constantly robbed peasants of their small lands, converting them into enslaved workers on *gwonmun sejok* holdings. Many of these *gwonmun sejok* were closely allied to the Chinggisids, such as the Goryeo Ki clan before their purge. Many central government ministers, provincial governors, and lower-level functionaries traced their power to such *gwonmun sejok*-Yuan relations, using corrupt connections to avoid legal punishments and obligations, while exploiting commoners at will. The *gwonmun sejok* were so immune to control by the Goryeo crown that many families built their own private militias and refused to submit any soldiers or even taxes to help the state repel threats, such as constant piracy attacks on coastal lands.<sup>11</sup> They had become something of an impregnable, closed circle of immensely powerful elites, beyond the reach of the Goryeo crown or public morality.<sup>12</sup>

For commoners, this situation looked bleak. Instability, over-taxation, economic despair, and threats of enslavement to Goryeo's *gwonmun sejok* were so pervasive that people were known to castrate themselves trying to get admitted to the Goryeo or Yuan court as eunuchs. At least in that case, people would be provided with food and clothes, and a possibility of respect and advancement. Families similarly sent their young daughters to Yuan, hoping they would find opportunity as servants or concubines, rather than being enslaved or starved in Goryeo.<sup>13</sup>

Common families had few options to avoid such sad fates. Because so much land was taken by corrupt aristocrats, commoners had little land to farm for themselves, without owing crushing tax debt to the *gwonmun sejok* who claimed rights to tax the land. At the same time, so much land was taxed privately by the *gwonmun sejok*, and thus unavailable for state taxation, that the Goryeo crown had no money to pay soldiers in times of crisis. Instead, farmers were conscripted without pay to fight off constant Japanese piracy attacks, while elite families protected themselves with private forces. When

people couldn't pay their tax obligations to the *gwonmun se jok* who "owned" their land, or couldn't pay back loans with usurious interest rates, they became harassed until starving or enslaved. Many people left their lands altogether and wandered homeless.<sup>14</sup>

*A Small Efflorescence: The Coming of Neo-Confucianism*

King Gongmin was a reformer who tried to change some of these dynamics. Soon after accession in 1351, Gongmin openly blamed subservience to the Yuan as fostering domestic corruption. He eliminated Mongol music from the court, replaced Mongol dishes with traditional Korean foods on the royal menu, and began to wear the royal robes of old Goryeo again, which were abandoned when Yuan fashion washed over the court: "it was a gesture to regain minimum self-esteem as Goryeo."<sup>15</sup>

Gongmin's reformist impulses were accompanied by a rising new force in the hearts of the Korean literati—neo-Confucianism. Decades earlier, the scholar An Hyang (1243-1306) took a hugely consequential trip to China. This scholar had returned with Confucian works of Zhu Xi, which catalyzed a wave of Confucian scholarship on the Korean peninsula. Scholars of the age were excited to discover high-minded texts offering practical precepts on "how to become human" by behaving more virtuously in daily life, which they found an exciting alternative to the self-interested corruption of Goryeo political elites and the other-worldly prayers of the Buddhist monks.<sup>16</sup>

Following An Hyang's efforts, several scholastic missions were dispatched to south China in the early 1300s to purchase Confucian books and scrolls and return them to Goryeo. After being forced by the Yuan court to abdicate Goryeo's throne, the former King Chungseon (r. 1308-1318) returned to Daidu where he built the Hall of Ten Thousand Volumes as a library of Confucian materials, helping transmit Confucian scholarship to Goryeo.<sup>17</sup> Goryeo's scholars began to speak of Chinese classic Confucian civilization as "*zhonghua*" (in Korean, *chungwha*), the "central efflorescence" that illuminated the universe. They sought to make Goryeo the "small efflo-



rescence,” transmitting the brilliance of Confucian virtues to their little corner of the world.<sup>18</sup>

The calligraphy brushes of Goryeo’s flowering community of scholars were an inspiring counterpoint to the corruption of the *gwonmun sejok*. The Chinese classics offered venerable wisdom and practical advice on how to restore order to the state and how to prioritize idealism and virtue versus corruption and excess. A growing circle of scholars, studying in private training centers (*sahak*), became increasingly enthused by the Confucian moral philosophy of self-cultivation, defined by deepening one’s moral wisdom, virtue, and propriety in the basic relations of life.<sup>19</sup>

Early in King Gongmin’s reign, this emerging “reading class” sought strategies to break out of their private study halls and impact broader Goryeo society.<sup>20</sup> The great scholar Yi Saek was one of these ambitious reformers, who had studied Confucian texts for three years in Daidu between 1348-1351. He took the Confucian civil exam in Yuan China, placing both first and second place at different stages. Upon his return to Goryeo, Yi Saek submitted an appeal for government reform to King Gongmin. “The study of national literature, the foundation of cultivating customs, and able men are the foundation of politics and education,” his appeal claimed.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, almost all people holding government posts should pass a civil service exam, rather than being appointed corruptly through family connection or payment of bribes. Furthermore, the only people eligible to take the exam should have studied at a recognized Confucian academy, and any high government official must have studied at the national Confucian academy. Goryeo should expand its education system, grow state support of the national academy, and re-establish a system of royal lectures for top officials to receive instruction in the Confucian classics.

It was a bold proposal, exciting the reformist King Gongmin. In 1367, Gongmin re-established the government-authorized Sungkyunkwan as the national Confucian academy. He established the royal lectures, through which leading scholars would edify the king and his court with discourses on history, Confucian classics, and proper behavior.<sup>22</sup> Two years later a reformed and more rigorous three-stage civil exam-

ination system was introduced to determine eligibility for government posts.<sup>23</sup>

With royal patronage, the new Confucian Academy became a sanctuary for high learning, fostering a rising class of idealistic scholars and reformers. Director Yi Saek attracted hundreds of scholars to the halls of Sungkyunkwan. About 200 students were enrolled at any one time, and all of them had to pass rigorous entrance exams in literature or Confucian classics.<sup>24</sup> Yi Saek imagined an academy to surpass the Ten Thousand Scroll Hall in Beijing, filled with books “as precious as gold and jade” and scholars “as splendid as a phoenix.”<sup>25</sup> Students engaged in spirited, all-night poetry, debate, and drinking sessions.<sup>26</sup> Dazzling scholars like Jeong Mong-ju, Cho Chun and Jeong Do-jeon became well-known for their erudition at the academy, passing reinvigorated exams in Confucian precepts and gaining admission as Goryeo’s virtuous and philosophical civil servants.

A new path to social prestige and mobility had been opened up in Goryeo, filled with men\* of talent—a chattering class of Confucian idealists. The Halls of Sungkyunkwan gave a base of influence to the idealistic social reformers and a revolution of rising expectations washed over the literati.<sup>27</sup> The Confucian idealists argued that Goryeo had to fully reform its government, promoting men of virtue and deep study, rather than favoring the wealthy and influential families who had done so well under Yuan rule.

The scholars became openly critical of old alliances with Yuan, which they believed had led Goryeo to advance men without merit, and to become a vulgar country “full of bandits.”<sup>28</sup> Corruption is everywhere, the scholars argued. Goryeo elites use violence and illicit land titles to enslave people. Agriculture is collapsing as people are not allowed to farm freely. We can’t pay or train adequate soldiers, so invasions by Red Turban raiders or Japanese pirates are

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\* Only men were allowed into the Confucian academy, as Confucianism of that time was thoroughly patriarchal and consigned women to subservient social roles, including requiring women to mostly stay hidden in the sphere of the private home while leaving all public affairs to men.

constant.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Heaven itself is punishing us with frequent “flooding, drought and disease” due to disharmony between Goryeo’s corrupt elites and the virtuous will of Heaven.<sup>30</sup> Through such damning critiques, the scholars became a serious force to be reckoned with, using the Confucian classics to give themselves “ideological claims to political power that the military and old aristocracy could not possibly have matched.”<sup>31</sup>

*The Firebrand Jeong Do-jeon*

An archetypal Confucian idealist and radical crusader was the *sadaebu* named Jeong Do-jeon, who would come to play an oversized role in Yi Seong-gye’s life.<sup>32</sup> Jeong Do-jeon was born about 1337 to a family of mid-level government functionaries without much wealth or status. His family’s modest income left them often hungry as Jeong was growing up, and he could only rely on his own talent and studious diligence to change his lot in life.<sup>33</sup> As he spent endless hours of study, he became affectionately known by his penname “*Sambong*” (“Three Peaks”), referring to a three-peak mountain near his hometown.

Though *Sambong* became highly achieved (passing the civil service exam and entering the Sungkyunkwan Academy in his early twenties),\* some of the old aristocrats complained about his allegedly humble origins to hold him back. Though his family was of minor nobility, it was pointed out by some that *Sambong*’s mother was a concubine, rather than a first wife. Some of the established bluebloods who *Sambong* had grown up with knew of this background and used it to torment the young scholar (even though secondary wives/concubines

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\* The influential *sadaebu* (scholar-official) Gwon Geun wrote that “All who listen [to Jeong Do-jeon] are persuaded. reason, those who visit holding copies of the classics clog up the gates and lanes. Those who have studied with him and become prominent officials stand abreast one after the other. Even military men and mediocre scholars listen raptly to his lectures.” See Robinson, D. *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, p. 44.

were considered fully legitimate wives under Goryeo standards of the time).

After Sambong passed the civil service exam, and thus became eligible for government office, Wu Hyeon-bo (a Minister of the *Dodang* council) spread word of his concubine mother and there were suggestions that perhaps this concubine was lowly-born. Though concubines could be considered legitimate wives under Goryeo standards at the time, slave or low-born concubines did not have the requisite status as mothers of high officials. Spreading rumors of Sambong's possibly low birth, Wu Hyeon-bo and his three sons campaigned to refuse Sambong the royal seal of appointment, which delayed his position for some time. Finally, a very frustrated Jeong Do-jeon (whose mother was in fact not a commoner) received appointment to the Ministry of Rites. He would hold Wu Hyeon-bo's family in contempt thereafter, which they would come to regret.

At the Academy, and in his government position, Jeong Do-jeon was a relentless scholar and social critic. He would become so lost in his work that he would show up to study or his government post with mismatched shoes. He was known for pursuing a scholarship of practicality, engaging the world with specific ideas for reforms, rather than simply producing beautiful poetry or ethereal celebrations of virtue in the abstract. Sambong criticized many of his peers for losing their social purpose in their scholarship of aesthetics, "writing only with an emphasis on poetry and literature."<sup>34</sup> He called such scholarship "a ship without direction" and urged colleagues to join him in creating a community of practical reformers. "Morality without politics is nothing by empty ideology," he maintained, "and politics without morality is reduced to formal legalisms."<sup>35</sup> Sambong described how Some scholars thought the best day was to sit in a warm room reading a book of classic ideas. But he disagreed. Sambong urged his colleagues to get out of the study and into the real world: "it is the most enjoyable thing to hunt on the plains with yellow dogs and blue hawks in leather clothes on the first snowy winter day!"<sup>36</sup>

Sambong embraced a mission of transforming society. He critiqued corruption everywhere and published works about how to reform the bureaucracy and reform social ills. He

argued that the elite establishment was abusing the people and illicitly growing wealthy. He maintained that the purpose of royal power should be to improve the lives of common people and teach them virtue by modeling Confucian propriety.<sup>37</sup> Government positions should not be determined by favoritism, bribery, and family heritage, he argued. Rather, appointees should have to pass exams relevant to their position. They should have excellent writing skills and be adept at law and mathematics. Where necessary, they should be “good at astronomy, geography, medicine or any other discipline.”<sup>38</sup>

In 1370-71, when Yi Seong-gye came to Gaegyeong after the northern Liaodong campaign, Jeong Do-jeon was a teacher at Sungkyunkwan (together with notables like Yi Saek and Jeong Mong-ju) and was a Government Minister of Rites. He was also a committed social reformer and intellectual firebrand, which put him on the front lines of a brewing war between the Confucian *sadaebu* and the *gwonmun sejok* elites who maintained their Yuan allegiances of old. It would prove a precarious position in the civil war that was soon to engulf the Goryeo court.

### *Execution and Exile*

The idealist aspirations of confident literati like Jeong Do-jeon fit well with King Gongmin's hopes for a reformed Goryeo. In his very first years of rule, Gongmin had tentatively pursued a land reform effort to take state lands back from some of the *gwonmun sejok*, though these efforts were quickly stymied by entrenched elites. He also had commissioned Yi Jachun and his son, Seong-gye, to help drive Yuan military forces out of Goryeo lands beginning in 1356 while simultaneously purging the excessively corrupt relatives of Empress Ki in Daidu from their Goryeo positions. In the following years, Gongmin had pursued other reforms like distributing stores of rice to the poor in times of famine, reducing taxes by one-third, and capping allowable interest charges on loans. In the mid-1360s, Gongmin established the Confucian academy of Sungkyunkwan. He also created a reformed and much more strict national exam system to rationalize the personnel system

which created a direct path for progressive scholars to win position and breach the walls of Goryeo's political system.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, King Gongmin also elevated the reformist monk Sin Don to become "Most Reverend Priest" and prime minister. Like the Confucians, Sin Don bluntly described "the recent collapse of the nation's discipline," criticizing how "greed has become a trend."<sup>40</sup> He had ambitious goals to drive out many old *gwonmun sejok* elites from government power, through such strategies as taking control of the personnel appointment system and conducting inspections of the work of local officials. Together with King Gongmin he pushed for appointment of more skilled military officers, supervised the work of a wave of new reformist judges, and began to inspect the jails for improperly imprisoned people. He also pushed an ambitious land reform movement between 1365 and 1371, attempting to return stolen land to farmers and the state, and reclassifying thousands of illicitly enslaved persons as free commoners.<sup>41</sup> The plan was a huge blow to Yuan-allied *gwonmun sejok* landowners, and was pushed at the same time as General Yi Seong-gye was campaigning north of the Yalu, delivering massive blows to the old Yuan relationship that had supported many of Goryeo's *gwonmun sejok* for so long.

During that same time (the spring of 1369) King Gongmin dispatched an envoy to Ming congratulating the Hongwu emperor on defeating the Yuan and on his accession to the Dragon Throne. The new Ming emperor responded in May of 1370 with an envoy to invest King Gongmin as the king of Goryeo, bestowing his family with 10 rolls of fine silk carpets. Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang also bestowed Gongmin with Ming caps and gowns for government officials, a Ming calendar, Ming musical instruments, and classic texts of Confucian thought and Han history. Gongmin announced that he would henceforth follow Ming, not Yuan, titles and calendars.<sup>42</sup> Goryeo envoys were soon dispatched to request Ming musicians travel to Goryeo to teach Ming musical styles. Gongmin also implied that a tribute of warhorses bred on Tamna (Jeju) island (long controlled by Yuan horse ranchers) would soon be sent to Ming.<sup>43</sup>

None of these ideas enthused the old *gwonmun sejok*. Many of the landed aristocrats had built their power on

control of land and alliance with the Yuan and they were not about to give up their privileged position easily. Though the Confucian scholars had an institutional base in Sungkyunkwan, the old aristocrats held more serious political power through land holdings and key posts in the Goryeo government. Though Goryeo was a monarchy, its most important political matters were managed by a cabinet known as the *Dodang*, a collective leadership council that had about thirty members in King Gongmin's time. The *Dodang* met regularly for management of all manner of Goryeo affairs: financial, criminal justice, personnel, agriculture, commerce, and foreign relations. Only rarely did the King step over the council and rule things directly. Goryeo's *gwonmun sejok* elites who dominated this council were not excited by the rise of the Confucian busybodies, nor with Gongmin's reformist initiatives and recent embrace of the Ming.<sup>44</sup>

During this time, King Gongmin's position grew increasingly fragile. His efforts to drive out the Yuan and embrace the rising Ming dynasty earned him influential domestic enemies whose personal fortunes and long intimacy with the Mongols made them favor the Yuan. The anti-Yuan campaign also meant advancing the interests of the Chinese Ming, whose Red Turban rebels not too long ago had invaded and ravaged Goryeo lands. Goryeo's pro-Yuan elites could stir the pot with memories of King Gongmin's chaotic and demeaning flight from the capital, and Gaegyeong's subsequent destruction by Chinese Red Turban forces, just a decade ago.

There was also the troubling fact of Gongmin's increasing detachment from direct involvement in political affairs. While Gongmin had embraced the land reform efforts of monk Sin Don, and supported the Confucian scholars at Sungkyunkwan, his own political efforts became increasingly erratic. His decline began in 1365, when his beloved Mongol wife No Guk died in childbirth, and "King Gongmin looked blankly into space like a soulful doll."<sup>45</sup> Gongmin fell into grief and abstained from eating meat for the next three years. He built his deceased wife a shrine, hung a portrait of her that he had painted himself, and spent hours kneeling before the portrait in paralyzed grief.<sup>46</sup> In manic despair, he ordered a huge

temple built in honor of No Guk, though its massive scale and cost burdened an already overworked and hungry populace. Things got worse when the temple's main beam collapsed during construction, crushing 26 workers. Still, Gongmin pushed on and ordered the temple project to continue, at even bigger scale. An ill-wind spread among the people.<sup>47</sup>

Though the King withdrew from direct involvement in state affairs and attended mostly to the queen's portrait and temple construction, his favored monk Sin Don continued to push reform: seizing illegal lands of the *gwonmun sejok*, redistributing them to the people, and improving the state's tax coffers.<sup>48</sup> These efforts earned him powerful enemies, and with the King's disinterested retreat from politics an opening was made for the *gwonmun sejok* aristocrats to accuse Sin Don of usurping royal power and conspiring to overthrow Gongmin. Abandoned in the end even by the erratic King, Sin Don was exiled to Suwon and beheaded in 1371, right about the time Yi Seong-gye had returned from his Liaodong campaign in the north. In Sin Don's place, a faction of Goryeo aristocrats, led by military General Choe Yeong and minister Yi In-im emerged to restore the *gwonmun sejok* authority of old. The reform efforts of the Gongmin era came to a halt.<sup>49</sup>

Recognizing a dangerous situation and without a royal heir, an increasingly morose King Gongmin chose now to recognize a once cast-aside young boy as his son and heir. In earlier years, King Gongmin denied rumors that he had fathered baby Monino, who was born in the house of Monk Sin Don. But now Gongmin claimed the six-year-old Monino as his own son, making him eligible for designation as crown prince. Suspicions were high, as many believed Monino had been born to an enslaved woman in Sin Don's house (Banya), and that Sin Don (not King Gongmin) was the likely father. Still, Monino was now the claimed son of King Gongmin, which the King hoped would calm court intrigues about his successor.<sup>50</sup>

To further protect his position, Gongmin also established a circle of personal bodyguards, the *Jajewi* or "Noble Youth Guards."<sup>51</sup> His critics took note of the increasing number of young boys and men serving as palace guards and began to spread rumors. Reportedly, the King had pederastic relations with some of these young guards, while ordering others to



secretly lay with his palace consorts in an effort to produce additional royal heirs. Though there is no hard proof of these charges brought by factions opposed to Gongmin's rule, Gongmin's mental state seemed to concern many in the court.<sup>52</sup> In fact, the very name "Gongmin" was actually a posthumous title bestowed upon him by the Ming Emperor, with the most likely interpretation being "pitiable" or "wistful," a title that summarized Gongmin's distressed frustration as besieged ruler.<sup>53</sup>

During these uneasy days, Gongmin's anti-Yuan faction continued to push for deeper relationships with the Ming dynasty, now occupying the Dragon throne in Beijing. Yuan and Ming forces continued to struggle for supremacy in the Liaodong lands beyond the Yalu River, and both constantly appealed to Goryeo for allegiance and assistance. In 1371, Gongmin had announced that he would ally with the Ming, and use their title and calendar, while calling Yi Seong-gye's troops back from their campaign north of the Yalu River, leaving the lands to the Ming's growing power. The Ming dynasty was happy to accept Goryeo's allegiance, and immediately demanded that Goryeo prove its loyalty with tribute and military support in the Ming's campaign to destroy what was left of Yuan forces.

On April 13 of 1374, a Ming envoy arrived in Gaegyeong, requesting that Goryeo provide 2,000 strong horses from Tamna Island to support Ming war efforts. This island off the southern tip of Korea had been ruled by Yuan commanders since they conquered the peninsula one hundred years ago and was famous for its expert horse breeders. Mongol herders had been settling on the island for generations, and the Yuan court sometimes exiled disfavored Mongol elites to the island.<sup>54</sup> The southern island was culturally distinct from the Goryeo mainland and populated with many Mongol descendants or mixed Mongol-Tamna households (about 30,000 Mongols lived on the island at the time)<sup>55</sup> —it was not a willing partner in supplying war horses to the Ming. This was all the more reason for the Ming Court to demand that Goryeo rulers subjugate the island and begin delivering horses to Ming.

The Ming envoy, Chae-Bin, was arrogant and abusive. Passing through Goryeo territories on his way to Gaegyeong,

he thrashed anyone he found inadequately obsequious. Even though food was scarce, he demanded that local granaries be emptied when his party passed through so that huge feasts could be prepared. After Chae-Bin presented the Ming's demand for 2,000 Jeju warhorses to King Gongmin, another grand feast was arranged. During that feast on June 3 of 1374, a Goryeo *kisaeng* approached Chae-Bin and placed a flower in his hair. The hothead exploded. Yelling that it was degrading to have a lowly *kisaeng* touch his august person, Chae-Bin stormed out of the feast and angrily departed the capital, hurrying back to Ming. King Gongmin had to send soldiers to chase down Chae-Bin, calm his spirits, and cajole him to return to the capital where he could await delivery of the Jeju war horses. The envoy did return, but only after seriously beating a few of the people sent to retrieve him.<sup>56</sup>

On July 12, the Jeju horses finally arrived—or at least 300 of them did. Down on Jeju island, the Mongol-allied horse-breeding elites (*hachi*) had refused to turn over 2,000 horses, so only 300 horses were delivered, and these were of poor quality. “How could we dare present horses pastured by Qubilai Khan to the Great Ming,”<sup>57</sup> the Mongol horsemen asked. Indeed, it seemed likely that the rawboned horses weren't from elite Tamna ranches at all.

Enraged, Gongmin's court decided to punish the Tamna Island horse-ranchers. In September-October 1374, a force of 300 ships and 25,000 soldiers was sent to Tamna under the command of General Choe Yeong to subjugate the island and enforce the King's will.<sup>58</sup> Soon thereafter, on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, Chae-bin (the abusive envoy) began heading back to the Ming with the 300 gaunt horses and a promise that more horses would be delivered after Choe Yeong's expedition to Tamna Island. A Goryeo envoy named Kim Ui was sent to escort Chae-bin back to Ming.

But things were not how they appeared. While King Gongmin was indeed trying to ally with the Ming and subjugate pro-Yuan elements on Tamna, other forces were moving among his ministers. Several of these ministers were allied with the pro-Yuan influential families of Goryeo and were desperate to find a way to restore relations with Yuan and turn their backs on the hated Ming, who were now

occupying lands north of the Yalu and threatening war on Goryeo if tribute weren't delivered.

In addition, according to historical records of the era, King Gongmin's own bizarre behaviors with his young personal bodyguards (the *Jajewi*) led to strange intrigues within the palace walls. These historical records present Gongmin as a homosexual or bisexual man, who was unable to produce an heir to carry on the Goryeo royal line. It is recorded that Gongmin enjoyed making himself up as a woman, "was not fond of sex and was unable to mount women."<sup>59</sup> He supposedly organized forced sexual relations with dozens of his young bodyguards, keeping himself excited during the act by watching other bodyguards having forced sex with young servant girls. He hoped in the end that one of his *Jajewi* would get one of the young girls pregnant, so he could claim the baby as his own and produce a (false) heir.

However, such accounts were written by court historians of the Joseon dynasty which overthrew the Goryeo ruling house, and who likely had goals to besmirch Goryeo royals and justify their downfall. Some scholars doubt the accounts of Gongmin's supposed sexual depravity, and the related story of frightened bodyguards and eunuchs being driven to murder him for personal reasons. An alternative reason for Gongmin's murder could be that he was increasingly allied with the Ming court, and the pro-Yuan elites of Goryeo wished to remove him and restore relations with the Chinggisids.<sup>60</sup>

Whatever the actual mix of motivations that led to Gongmin's downfall, here is how the historical records of his time tell the story. In October of 1374, as the Ming envoy was returning home with the 300 horses, Goryeo's Gongmin discovered that one of his concubines was said to be pregnant with the child of one of his palace guards (Hong Ryun). Though the King wasn't upset that the concubine was pregnant (indeed, he wished for more royal heirs), he threatened to kill the palace guard all the same (together with palace bodyguards and eunuchs in the know), so that the secret of the royal heir's paternity would never come out. Rumors of the King's murderous intent began spreading among his *Jajewi* (personal bodyguards) and palace eunuchs.

Things were on a razor's edge when, on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1374, a group of Gongmin's attendants surrounded the King's bed around midnight and stabbed him while he slept, spraying blood and brains all over the room.<sup>61</sup> The 44-year-old Gongmin, twenty-three years a king, was dead. Those involved in the regicide included Hong Ryun, supposed target of Gongmin's anger over the concubine affair. The King's assassins fled but were rooted out after a palace eunuch discovered one assailant in hiding, his clothes still covered with the King's blood. The names of five other killers were extracted under torture. All six were beheaded and their heads hung in public places. Their children were hanged, their fathers were imprisoned, and other relatives were flogged, exiled, or sentenced to death. Their family property was confiscated, and their wives reduced to palace slaves.<sup>62</sup>

A week later, on November 8<sup>th</sup>, the Ming envoy Chae-bin arrived at the banks of the Yalu River and prepared to cross into Liaodong. But there at the river, the Goryeo escort Kim Ui rose up and killed the Ming envoy and fled with 300 soldiers and all the horses across the Yalu to Yuan territory, where he turned over his plunder to Yi Seong-gye's old enemy, Nahachu.<sup>63</sup>

Gaegyeong's political tables had turned. Goryeo's pro-Yuan faction had almost certainly played a role in Gongmin's assassination. Even though the direct assassins had been punished, and the whole thing was blamed on disgruntled young *Jajewi*, members of the broader clique of anti-Ming officials now had the upper hand and could pursue renewed relations with the Chinggisids.<sup>64</sup> That faction included Yi In-im, *Dodang's* thoroughly corrupt Prime Minister who disdained Gongmin's pro-Ming policies.

With Gongmin deceased, Yi In-im's faction quickly worked to enthrone the ten-year-old Monino as the new monarch—he was installed as King U three days after Gongmin's death. Yi In-im had a close relationship with the young boy and was confident that such a young king would allow his pro-Yuan faction to manipulate politics as they wished. Though U was King Gongmin's claimed son, rumors persisted that he was born to a monk's maid, so the sudden accession of a boy-king

with uncertain heritage, and under suspicious circumstances, caused some court unease.

During the transition, one historical account says that the servant Banya (rumored to be Monino's mother) showed up to court, demanding to be recognized as mother to the king. She poured out a stream of curses that her (alleged) son was being made a court puppet. Yi In-im would have none of it. Now the dominant force in Goryeo politics, who "exercised power at will,"<sup>65</sup> the Prime Minister ordered Banya immediately executed. "To settle this issue quickly, kill Banya," he said. "Since the King's mother isn't clear, we need to quickly put people's suspicions to rest." One court minister spoke up snarkily to challenge Yi In-im's dismissal of Banya's claim "There are times when we aren't certain who the father is, but I've never heard of a case where we aren't sure who the King's mother is."<sup>66</sup> But this minister was in the minority. Yi In-im's will was done and Banya was thrown into the river to drown, while her supporters were exiled or beheaded.<sup>67</sup> Still, the minister's dissenting remark endured, and a dangerous cloud of suspicion lingered over young King U.

Securing the new order, Yi In-im quickly took over the personnel system, and reshuffled government appointments. He elevated 59 people with special merit awards and forged an alliance with General Choe Yeong, who had fought beside Yi Seong-gye in several important battles. General Choe—a member of Goryeo's old elite clans—was allowed to give awards of land and position to family and friends for their military merit against Japanese pirates, even though many of these people had never fought in the General's forces.<sup>68</sup> Coming together as the two pillars of the post-Gongmin era, Yi In-im and Choe Yeong agreed that Gongmin's land reforms (limited though they were) had to be reversed, and that Goryeo needed to re-establish its relationship with the Yuan dynasty.

The pro-reform faction of the deceased King Gongmin, including the Confucian scholars of Sungkyunkwan, were despondent—but there was nothing they could do. They had been systematically locked out of political power in Yi In-im's wave of merit awards and government posts. Almost none of the scholars were now sitting in on deliberations of the

*Dodang*, even more the center of Goryeo's politics now that a boy-king was on the throne.<sup>69</sup> Many of the scholars raised voices in dissent, refusing to support a proclamation of King U's ascension and protesting renewed relations with the Yuan.<sup>70</sup> "The Great Ming arose like a dragon," Jeong Mong-ju observed, and it is disastrous to anger them.<sup>71</sup> One scholar, Park Sang-chun, lamented that the assassination of Gongmin would lead to disastrous conflict with Ming. "The emperor of the Ming will be more suspicious and the whole country will be angry!"<sup>72</sup> But Yi In-im and General Choe Yeong squashed the protests. General Choe's forces showed up at the doors of Sungkyunkwan and ordered the arrest, torture and exile of dozens of scholars and other officials who resisted the new order or protested relations with Yuan.<sup>73</sup>

A Goryeo envoy was sent to Nahachu up north, notifying him that things had changed in Goryeo, and opening the door to renewed cooperation with the Jurchen and Mongols. Yuan leaders were greatly pleased at Goryeo developments and quickly sent their own envoy south, to seal a newly friendly relationship with the young King U.<sup>74</sup>

Still, the scholars protested. One of the most vocal and idealistic of the scholars was Jeong Do-jeon, who served as Minister of Rites and was in despair that the reforms of King Gongmin were going up in smoke. The Yuan oppressed and ruined our country for decades, Jeong Do-jeon cried out, and their allies surely were involved in murdering King Gongmin. "If you receive the Yuan envoy, the whole nation will fall into chaos!"<sup>75</sup>

Delighted to further humiliate the scholars, Yi In-im refused to bend and ordered Jeong Do-jeon himself to greet the arriving Yuan envoy and escort him with honor to the palace. But Jeong Do-jeon was not a man for circumspect politics and he replied quite bluntly: "If I greet the envoy, I will cut off his head, and send it to Ming!"<sup>76</sup> Jeong Do-jeon had his supporters, but amid the fiery debates of *Dodang's* red-robed ministers, Yi In-im won the day. Jeong Do-jeon was stripped of his title for disobeying his superior and was exiled far to the south, where he would be forced to survive on "green vegetables and insects."<sup>77</sup>

## THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

As the popular scholar prepared to leave for exile to the farming village of Naju (Jeolla province) many government ministers regretted the harsh punishment of a respected thinker. Four officers joined Jeong Do-jeon at the East Gate for a round of farewell drinks, where they advised him to linger near the gates a bit longer. Things are calming down on the *Dodang* council, they explained, and Jeong might be allowed to stay in the capital after all. But Jeong was a zealot without compromise—someone who wouldn't kneel even when broken. The scholar stood up to leave. "My words and anger are for the sake of our county, which should stick to our beliefs. There was a royal order to leave, so how can I not leave immediately?"<sup>78</sup> As the sun fell, Jeong took up his bag and headed south through smoke-filled fields of rustic houses. I have become a stranger among "lonely birds," Jeong wrote. "As I suffer, it is hard to say farewell to my friends."<sup>79</sup> Goryeo's leaders "have abandoned their country and their king," Jeong lamented on his path to exile, and "all I have are poems."<sup>80</sup>

He wouldn't see the capital city again for ten long years.

## Seong-gye the Cipher



*Clouds cluster thick.  
 Where white snow melts in the valley.  
 The lovely plum, where has it bloomed?  
 I stand alone  
 In the setting sun, not knowing  
 Whither I should go.*

- Yi Saek<sup>1</sup>



Goryeo was perched on a razor's edge, increasingly divided between *gwonmun sejok* elite and Confucian scholar—but where would General Yi cast his lot? Though Yi Seong-gye always respected the scholars, he could see as well as any that they were facing serious troubles in post-Gongmin Goryeo. After torture and exile, the ambitious moralizing of Sungkyunkwan fell silent for a time as the Confucian scholars descended into despair. Their reform plans lay in ruins. Though the scholars had proven their talent and merit by study and exam, the most ambitious reformers were increasingly locked out of government power as all the top positions went to the old aristocrats. Their economic fortunes looked bleak as the *gwonmun sejok* continued their illicit land grabs. And now their country was refusing to break ties with the Mongols and wouldn't recognize the rising force of the Chinese Ming.<sup>2</sup> Allying with the scholars of Sungkyunkwan did not look politically promising.

On the other hand, the northerner Yi Seong-gye was not familiar with the capital's blueblood society and must have been a bit uncomfortable in his early years at Gaegyeong, even after riding in as a conquering hero. Yi Seong-gye was a rugged frontier man in the big city, draped with northern attire and



manners, and speaking with a country tongue.<sup>3</sup> He probably struggled amid the patriciate of Gaegyeong. Their court garments were exceedingly complex, their rituals impossibly precise, the etiquette quite delicate. There were different rules for whether one was walking or riding, for when to sit or stand, for how low to bow and to who. Rituals changed depending on who was in a higher or lower position, and who was older or younger. Expectations varied by time of day, area of the city, and occasion. Impossibly complicated as it was, officials were commonly impeached for not performing the full rituals, in just the right ways.

This was a foreign society to General Yi Seong-gye, and he was commonly disrespected and left behind in those days of his early military victories. For example, when he won a great victory against Japanese pirates in the south, Yi was only given some stony and infertile land as reward. Meanwhile, an officer from a traditional influential family of Goryeo received far better land, though he had performed more poorly in the military campaign. Yi had few social connections of his own. His wife, Lady Han, was a quiet northerner from a middling family in Hamyong province. His top military aide, Yi Chiran, was a Jurchen tribesman from the north. Some other Yi family and subordinates had been involved in various lowbrow conflicts, such as those of his petty raider cousins (Samson and Samgae) in the northeast. Another cousin would be imprisoned for killing a man in a brawl in 1376.<sup>4</sup>

But things started to change for Yi Seong-gye after his Liaodong military victories of 1370. When he returned to Gaegyeong, King Gongmin had promoted him as administrative grand councilor of the Chancellery (*Dodang*), at the same moment (1371) that he elevated the renowned scholar Yi Saek as Chancellery scholar. Gongmin was delighted at what he thought was a clever idea to bring the scholar and the northern warrior together onto one council.<sup>5</sup>

Around this same time, Yi Seong-gye's children also began marrying into the traditional Goryeo elite. Several of his sons married into established families, while a daughter became married to a nephew of Yi In-im, the most powerful member of *Dodang*.<sup>6</sup> His eldest son, Yi Bang-woo, married King Gongmin's niece, making him a nephew-in-law to the king.

As the Yi family climbed the social ladder, Seong-gye himself found opportunity to take a second wife. Multiple wives were common in Goryeo, especially for elites, though Yi had just one wife, Lady Han, who he had married when he was 23 years old (in 1358). Lady Han was a northerner who remained at the Yi's hometown of Hamhung. But now, with Yi Seong-gye spending so much time travelling the Gaegyeong social circuit, new opportunities arose. On the heels of King Gongmin's murder (1374), Yi Seong-gye began a relationship with Lady Kang, member of a once powerful (though recently declining) *gwonmun sejok* family.

Lady Kang's family had once served as guards for Goryeo's King Chunghye (r. 1330–1332, 1340–1344). But when he was dethroned for his life of debauchery (e.g., he raped his deposed father's concubine), some of her family members were also executed. Her mother fled with her three-year old daughter (who would become Lady Kang) to her hometown of Goksa, where the family lived as declining elites due their former association with the corrupt court of Chunghye.<sup>7</sup> Still, Lady Kang's brother had a large, rich house, and he had even hosted King Gongmin for a time when the King had to flee the Red Turban rebels.<sup>8</sup>

The legends tell us that Yi Seong-gye met Lady Kang by accident while hunting near her hometown. Chasing after wild animals, Taejo came upon a young woman at a water well. He asked for a bit of water. She drew him a cup of water, but before offering it, she carefully pulled leaves from a nearby willow tree and floated them upon the water. The General asked why she would do such a thing. She replied that the General seemed very thirsty and in a hurry, but she believed it better if he slowed down a bit and drank his water more mindfully—and the willow leaves would see to that. General Yi was smitten with the woman's beauty and wisdom, and soon asked for her hand in marriage.<sup>9</sup> In this way, Lady Kang became General Yi's second wife, in 1376. The General was 41 years old and his new wife just 20.

Though the story is often told, it is unlikely that General Yi just ran into Lady Kang happenstance at a well and asked an unknown maiden to marry him. Both General Yi and Lady Kang had social prominence and moved in similar circles.

Their cousins had inter-married, and relatives of Kang's family had fought in Yi's army. The families were intertwined long before the "meeting at the well," and it is likely they knew each other for some time before this mutually advantageous marriage between two elite clans.<sup>10</sup> General Yi was on his way up the social ladder, and he benefitted from connection to an established family. Lady Kang's family had become stagnant and declining, and she likely saw promise in the rising hero. Often, Yi Seong-gye would call Lady Han from the north "Hyang-cheo" ("My Hometown Wife")—she was mature, careful and withdrawn from political life. He would call Lady Kang "Gyeong-cheo" ("My Capital-City Madam")—she was young, bold, and ambitious.<sup>11</sup>

With this marriage and those of his children, it could be said that the Yi family was joining, not challenging, the established elites.<sup>12</sup> But this wasn't so clear. For Yi Seong-gye was no sure friend of the decadent Goryeo aristocrats with their vast landholdings and luxurious parties in cloud brocade towers while common people starved. He had no record of illicit land seizures of his own, nor of corrupt favor-currying. His spartan military sensitivities were weary of aristocratic decadence, and troubled by common people facing hunger and constant threats of wars.

Though a general, he refused to eat meals while campaigning among starving soldiers, and typically showed more humility than hubris.<sup>13</sup> While other generals were known to conscript many of their soldiers and beat them mercilessly to enforce order, Yi Seong-gye built a well-trained army of professionals and treated them with dignity. He mixed with his own soldiers easily and had a popular following.<sup>14</sup> Most dangerously to the established Goryeo elites, most of Yi's soldiers were northerners, loyal to Yi Seong-gye more than to some abstract notion of the timeless Goryeo dynasty. Yi Chiran, Yi Seong-gye's boyhood friend, was one of these loyal northern warriors from the Jurchen tribe.

Moreover, compared to the failed royal elite and corrupted aristocrats of Goryeo, Yi Seong-gye much preferred the austere dedication and moral philosophizing of Confucian scholars like Jeong Do-jeon, and he was patron of the Sungkyunkwan academy.<sup>15</sup> "Though he was busy at war, he

loved the scholars,” says one canto of *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*\* (Hereafter, *Songs of the Dragons*). Another canto tells how Yi Seong-gye always honored the literati, no matter how powerful he became. “Seeing an old scholar, he kneeled down out of respect. How’s that for exalting the literati?”<sup>16</sup> The *Taejo Sillok* also reports how “Taejo always had great respect for Confucianism. Whenever he took a break after throwing spears in his military camp, he called on Confucian scholars such as Yu Gyeong and others to discuss classical texts with him. He particularly enjoyed reading the *Daxue Yangi* (Extended Meaning of the Great Learning) by Zhen Dexia, so he read it until late at night, growing a dream of changing the world.”<sup>17</sup>

It isn’t surprising, therefore, that many of the old Goryeo patricians whispered that Yi Seong-gye was not a dependable Goryeo loyalist and could not be trusted. On several occasions Yi In-im had observed the martial talents and compelling personality of Yi Seong-gye as compared to unstable Goryeo monarchs and predicted a dramatic future: “This country certainly will be taken over by the Yi clan” he darkly warned his *gwonmun se jok* friends.<sup>18</sup>

Yi In-im was right to be concerned. The brittle Goryeo dynasty was tottering under the weight of internal tensions

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\* Canto 80. These songs, in the form of 125 Cantos, were the first document ever printed in Korea’s Hangeul script. This document was produced during the reign of King Sejong (Joseon’s fourth king, and the grandson of King Taejo). *Songs of the Dragons* celebrates the ancestral heritage and founding acts of the “six flying dragons” of Joseon. The six dragons are Yi Seong-gye, his four paternal ancestors, and his son Yi Bang-won who became King Taejong. “Flying to Heaven” refers to the rise of the Joseon dynasty in accordance with the Mandate of Heaven. In these Cantos, the history of the Yi family is presented as the divine history of country, blessed by six “dragons” who secure its borders from foreign powers and who demonstrate superior moral virtue in their behaviors so as to edify the people (See *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, translated by Hoyt, J.; Choi, M., “*Yongbiochungae Natanan Yeonalseonchoui Yongto-jeonjengwa Byeongeong*” [“A Study on the Territorial Wars and Northern Border in Yongbiocheonga”]).

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and world changes all about. Epic dynasties were falling and rising on their borders. Old sureties of enduring mandates to rule—whether in Daidu or Gaegyeong—were dissolving. Destructive invasions by the Red Turbans had weakened national will and treasury. The Goryeo king had been murdered by his own people. And now an uncertain boy King sat on the throne, dominated by his pro-Yuan Prime Minister Yi In-im. For their part, Ming leaders in China were hardly pleased with developments to their west. The pro-Ming King Gongmin had been assassinated and a young boy with suspicious royal lineage had ascended to the throne. Even worse, anti-Ming military officials seemed to have new prominence in Goryeo. The Ming court refused to recognize the legitimacy of U's rule, and storm clouds gathered.

As for his part in all this, Yi Seong-gye remained a cipher that none could read. He was famously quiet and reserved at important meetings. Sitting with squinted, serious eyes, he listened a lot and didn't say much. Whenever he finally spoke, people listened. The question was, what would he say?<sup>19</sup>

## Pirates, Gunpowder, and the Brave Baby



*There was a time when General Yi was hunting down a huge Japanese pirate invasion led by Ajibaldo, who was so young they called him the “Brave Baby.” General Yi came upon a small village and let his troops rest. As his men slept, village roosters started crowing near midnight. General Yi took it as a sign from the Heavens that the day should start early. He roused his troops and began marching south in the middle of the night, as if it were daybreak.*

*He soon learned that the Japanese pirates were also marching through the night, preparing a surprise attack on the nearby city of Namwon. Due to Yi Seong-gye’s nighttime march, he caught the pirates by surprise, laying into the Japanese forces in a narrow gorge just as the sun rose. More roosters started crowing all around, encouraging the Korean attack.*

*The battle was fierce, but General Yi won the day. After the victory, General Yi stopped again at the local village to praise the roosters that had woke him in the middle of the night. He declared them to be heroic incarnations of heavenly dragons and renamed the village as Yonggye-ri, the “Dragon-Rooster Village.”<sup>1</sup>*



After a time, court politics stabilized following King Gongmin’s assassination. Prime Minister Yi In-im rose to political dominance beside the young King U, and the reformist dreams of the Confucian *sadaebu* were submerged with the arrest, torture, and exile of many of their most prominent proponents (most notably, Jeong Do-jeon). No one could challenge Yi In-im’s dominance and the *gwonmun sejok* remained certain of their privilege. Goryeo kept delivering just enough tribute to Ming to keep them from considering invasion. In any case Ming

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forces were preoccupied with defeating Yuan remnants and fully pacifying Liaodong lands north of the Yalu which they had occupied after Yi Seong-gye had returned south of the Yalu in 1370.<sup>2</sup> Through the 1370s, the northern border remained uneasy, but stable.

But other military threats emerged. Goryeo's worst military crisis in the years following King U's accession was the constant threat of devastating pirate raids along Korea's 16,000 li (8,600 kilometers) of jagged coastline and hundreds of islands. The decline of unified Yuan rule on the Korean peninsula had been accompanied by growing instability in Japan. In 1333 Japan's Kamakura shogunate fell and was followed by decades of warfare between northern and southern dynasties in the Japanese islands. In this unstable situation, ungoverned piracy flourished. With alarming frequency, dozens or even hundreds of pirate warships would appear on Korea's shoreline in huge raids, plundering granaries, enslaving locals, and burning villages. It would sometimes get so bad that miles of Korean coastline would depopulate as people fled inland for months.<sup>3</sup> The scholar and poet Gwon Geun presented Goryeo's view of the situation:

*In the east beyond the sea,  
There live a wicked people called Japanese.  
Having never been exposed to the influence of  
sages,  
They are always brutal and cunning.  
Invading and plundering the neighboring  
countries,  
They live in the mountains along the sea.<sup>4</sup>*

Due to their oft-short stature, Goryeo called them "Wakou pirates" ("dwarf pirates"). These pirates were mostly Japanese, but there were also many raiders from southern China, Mongolia, and various other marginal islands across the local maritime. Pirate forces often included southerners from Korea as well, including Tamna (Jeju) island.<sup>5</sup> Political instability in Japan, China and Goryeo had driven thousands to desperation and opportunism in ungoverned areas and they took to coastal raiding for rice, beans, and slaves.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, constant

warfare in Japan drove various military factions to raid the Korean coast in search of troop rations, military supplies, and new soldiers to enslave.<sup>7</sup> A Japanese governor of Kyushu island lamented that he would like to control these pirate rebels, but local instability prevented him. These pirates were not regular Japanese forces, he maintained, but “evil Japanese people of the Western Sea amid this confusion and not ordered by us...We promise to Heaven and Sun that the piracy will be forbidden when Kyushu is recovered.”<sup>8</sup>

The Goryeo royal court was ineffective in organizing a response. In the early 1350s, King Chungjeon (r. 1348–1351) had ordered provincial elites (*hyangni*) to send forces to drive off the pirates, but most *hyangni* ignored the King’s authority and refused to give up private troops to the cause. When King Chungjeon tried instead to conscript local farmers by force (and without pay), it led to a massive peasant rebellion in 1351, driving thousands into the arms of the Red Turban movement growing in China. It was this very rebellion that had led the Yuan court to dethrone King Chungjeon and install King Gongmin on the Goryeo throne in 1351.

With local elites shielding their private lands from state taxes and refusing to give up their private militias to help defend the coasts, pirate attacks exploded in the mid- to late-1300s. Dozens would happen every year. By 1360, most Korean coastal rice storage facilities had been eliminated and moved inland to protect them from raids.<sup>9</sup> By the 1370s, it was common to have 30-50 serious raids a year. In the summer of 1375, for example, half of all entries in the Koryosa pertained to pirate raids.<sup>10</sup> General Yi had been sent to drive one small northeastern raid away in 1371 (on the Yeseong River northwest of today’s Seoul), where he had effectively terrorized Japanese sailors with his reputation and by casually shooting pinecones out of the trees over their heads.<sup>11</sup>

A more serious test was to come in 1377, with the Battle of Mt. Jirisan. In 1376-1377, Japanese pirate attacks escalated—there were more than 100 attacks at 200 locations—especially along the coast in Seosan (near Pyeongtaek, about 60 miles south of today’s Seoul) and in Jeolla province near Namwon and Unbong.<sup>12</sup> In one devastating attack, several thousand pirates invaded Naju and Buyeo



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on the Southwest coast in July of 1376, raiding up and down the peninsula and then moving inland to cross from Jeolla to Chungcheon province. These raiders terrorized the locals and lived off whatever they could plunder. The land became so devastated and dangerous that Goryeo farmers stopped cultivating and began “looking at clouds and rainbows” for deliverance.<sup>13</sup>

After several months of ineffective resistance by local leaders, General Choe Yeong volunteered to raise a national force versus the pirates and headed to battle in 1377. He was 61 years old, a member of a long-time influential family, and the top General of Goryeo. Among his ten subcommanders was General Yi Seong-gye. Enjoying early success, Choe Yeong's forces drove pirates out of the Sogang River basin near Gaegyeong. He then sent Yi Seong-gye south to the Yeongnam and Honam areas, where strong Japanese forces still plundered.<sup>14</sup>

In May of 1377, General Yi caught up with these pirates near Jirisan mountain, far south down the peninsula. When Yi first encountered a detachment of these pirates, their force was located some distance away. Confident in their distance, one pirate drew down his pants, bent over, and slapped his buttocks to taunt General Yi. That was a mistake. Yi Seong-gye drew his great bow, aimed high, and fired a heavy bolt into the pirate's rear end. Yi's antagonist dropped dead, and his pirate allies fled for cover.<sup>15</sup> The panicked pirates fled up a mountainside, and took cover amid steep rocks, brandishing their spears like the back of a porcupine. None of Yi's troops, including even one of his own sons, was able to successfully charge up the steep rocks and reach the enemy troops. So Yi said he would lead the charge himself. He pulled out his great sword and began to beat the hind end of his horse with the flat of the sword, yelling and encouraging it to clamber quickly up the rise and jump over the rocks, with his troops following behind. As the *Koryosa* records, “the sun was in the middle of the sky, and the light of [Yi's] sword was like lightning.” The general's assault so terrorized the pirate detachment that many fled and fell off the cliff to their deaths.<sup>16</sup>

In a later engagement with the main force of Japanese marauders that year, Yi Seong-gye told his troops that he

would aim only at the left eye of his opponents. According to the mythologizing accounts in both the *Koryosa* and the *Taejo Sillok*, Yi shot seventeen carefully aimed arrows. When the battle was over, among all the dead were seventeen pirates laying with arrows penetrating their left eye sockets.<sup>17</sup>

After this rout, Yi's soldiers chased the pirates down to a rugged area in the rocks, where the pirates had built a stronghold behind a tangled wall of brushwood. Yi approached the makeshift fortress and began to mess with the raiders' minds. He stationed some troops left and right of the cave, and then moved right in front of the cave with one hundred cavalries. As the pirate forces angrily brandished spears behind their brush barricade, Yi calmly removed the saddles from his warhorses, set them to grazing, and took a leisurely break. Right there in front of their brush barrier, Yi set up a picnic table. He laid out a nice banquet and sat down to enjoy a meal, ordering music to be played. He and his fellow soldiers began to eat and drink merrily.

As the pirates' unease mounted, Yi had his men approach the tangled brush barricade and calmly light it all on fire. As the General drank and sang loudly, the flames rose, and smoke filled the pirates' shelter. At the height of the song and flame, pirate arrows flew out aimlessly. One arrow actually struck a bottle of wine sitting right in front of Yi Seong-gye, but he simply ignored it, lifted his bottle to drink on, and sang all the louder. In the end, the Japanese had to flee their smoky oven in terrified disorder; almost all were cut down.<sup>18</sup>

In the months to follow, the legend of the clever General spread all about the Jirisan area. Everywhere he travelled, later court historians claimed that local people "waited for him like the rain during the drought and admired him like a rainbow in the sky."<sup>19</sup> The *Koryosa* records how "Taejo usually won the hearts of people, and his soldiers fought with an elite level, and there was nothing that he could not win."<sup>20</sup>

In the wake of these victorious battles over Japanese raiders, Goryeo's diplomatic envoys to Japan also enjoyed some success. The *sadaebu* (scholar-official) Jeong Mong-ju had been sent to Japan in 1377 to resolve the piracy situation. He returned in 1378 with a promise by a local warlord to control the pirates; this warlord also returned several hundred

Koreans previously taken prisoner in pirate raids. In appreciation, Goryeo sent the Kyushu warlord a gift of gold, silver, ginseng, and leopard furs.

But such diplomatic niceties couldn't be counted on without strong military defense on the ground, so both Choe Yeong and Yi Seong-gye advocated for stronger national defense. Choe Yeong's national navy had about 100 warships and 3000 sailors, but he wished at least to triple these forces for an effective defense against future raids.<sup>21</sup> One of his commanders suggested that this larger force could be used to take the battle right to the heart of the pirate strongholds, invading Daemado Island (Tsushima), known to be "a den of Japanese thieves."<sup>22</sup>

But in Gaegyeong, Yi In-im feared the establishment of such a large military force. A national army or navy like that could be turned against his own power, and Yi In-im was well aware that the oppressive corruption of his *gwonmun sejok* allies had fostered simmering unpopularity across the land. In any case, a large standing army in Goryeo had years ago been abolished by the Yuan court<sup>23</sup> so Choe Yeong was fighting against tradition. Plus, the state coffers were low and there was no appetite among his elite allies for the taxes on their lands that would be necessary to support such a large military force.<sup>24</sup> When Choe Yeong had earlier tried to build a 200-ship navy (under King Gongmin), there was no serious state support and poorly paid farmers had deserted the ship-building teams. Though a small expansion of naval forces occurred at Naju and Mokpo, Choe Yeong's ambitious ship-building plan collapsed.<sup>25</sup>

In similar fashion, Yi In-im stymied Choe Yeong's plans to raise an effective navy and army this time around. He wholly abolished what was left of the national army in 1379. Generals Yi and Choe had fought off the pirates this time around, but without a standing army, the country would just have to remain vulnerable to pirate raids in the future. Sometimes elite ministers would wave their old swords around in council meetings and threaten grand mobilizations against Japanese raiders, but there was no longer any royal army to rely upon.<sup>26</sup> The Goryeo court could only rely on private militias and whatever untrained and poorly led forces could be mustered

by conscription of farmers in times of need. One local marshal was famous for hosting “soju gatherings” (“drinking with his soldiers day and night, every day”), even as marauding pirates “slaughtered and burned” more than a dozen villages and military campus in his province.<sup>27</sup> Other commanders were known to drink heavily and fall asleep in the day, opening opportunities for pirate attacks.<sup>28</sup> Reflecting on such realities, one of Yi Seong-gye’s officers remarked on how battles against the pirates would be hopeless as long as only private elites and “incompetent generals have soldiers”<sup>29</sup>

While Yi In-im and his aristocratic allies were busy defunding Goryeo’s military, piracy attacks continued. Some officials grew increasingly outraged at how the Goryeo court lived in luxury while leaving the countryside largely defenseless against the pirates. “Japanese raiders are invading the county, and we eat here to our heart’s content and are not ashamed at all,” fumed one military official. “How can we be called human beings?” Yi In-im became furious that the critique was directed at him and sent the commander away into field combat.<sup>30</sup>

About one hundred mostly small-scale raids once again hit the coast between 1378 and 1380, enough to keep the local granaries empty.<sup>31</sup> In one representative case, the village of Heunghae (located in today’s eastern coast city of Pohang) used to be a bustling fishing village, surrounded by fertile lands—but many of its residents had been killed by Japanese raiders and their property was looted. By 1380, the village became empty and thorn bushes covered all the local roads.<sup>32</sup>

Following this new wave of pirating attacks, Goryeo had to mount a response. For his great success in the battle of Mt. Jirisan, Yi Seong-gye was appointed commander of forces in three southern provinces in August of 1380 (Yanggwang, Jeolla and Gyeongsang), with a charge to drive out any invading Japanese. This was Yi Seong-gye’s first independent military command of a large force in Goryeo territory. A court scribe was attached to him to keep close watch on the rising General and report all affairs back to Gaegyeong.

The elevation of General Yi happened at a critical moment, as Goryeo was facing its largest Japanese invasions ever. On Japan’s northern Kyushu, the ongoing Japanese civil

war had put the Lord of northern Kyushu (Shoni Yori-hisa) in a corner. He needed military supplies and food in a bad way, and Goryeo's vulnerable provinces beckoned. In May of 1380, 500 Japanese warboats landed in Jinpo, at the Geumgang river mouth border between Chungcheon and Jeolla provinces—a fertile, grain-producing area of the peninsula. Thousands of Japanese soldiers began plundering the area for grain, slaves, and supplies, heading inland to chase the fleeing locals.<sup>33</sup> It was the largest invasion of Japanese pirates to date, and would produce the largest engagements between Japanese and Korean military forces until the massive Imjin War battles more than 200 years later.

In fact, these invaders weren't really "pirates" at all. They were hardened and well-trained warriors, having participated in several civil war campaigns on Kyushu. They had serious military equipment and some of their leaders wore heavy armor, impervious to normal Goryeo arrows.<sup>34</sup> Confronting such a force, things didn't go well for the untrained and poorly equipped Goryeo army at first. One provincial force attacked Japanese land troops and lost badly, losing 500 soldiers. But as General Yi began to mobilize his own private troops to confront the massive forces from Japan, things began to turn around. It started in a Goryeo attack on the Japanese naval ships anchored at Jinpo, in the Geumgang river.

Goryeo's first victory in the struggle of 1380 was due to Korea's discovery of the secrets of gunpowder.<sup>35</sup> Visiting China as a travelling merchant, a clever tinkerer named Choe Musan had witnessed the wonders of gunpowder and fireworks. He was inspired, but Chinese authorities guarded gunpowder's formula closely and the Korean trader was unable to quickly replicate it. Choe resolved to figure things out on his own. He took what he could observe from China and conducted a series of personal investigations. Over time, and after bribing a wealthy Chinese merchant on a Goryeo trading island, Choe learned the secret of producing *yeomcho* (potassium nitrate, aka saltpeter). He added his own discoveries of how to mix it with sulfur and willow charcoal and produced Korea's first gunpowder. Between 1374 and 1376, Choe produced the world's first gunpowder outside of China and convinced the Goryeo court to establish an experimental Department of

Arms, under his direction. At Choe's government-sponsored Department of Arms (*Hwatong Dogam*), all sorts of powerful weapons of war were invented. Choe invented a "magical machine arrow" (*hwajeon*), capable of firing dozens of fiery arrows simultaneously. A cannon that shot fire barrels was invented (*hwatong*), as were mortar shells (*jilyeop*), rockets, and a signal gun called *shinpo*.<sup>36</sup>

Many of these weapons were first used at Jinpo, where they were unleashed against the 500 Japanese warships anchored there. In August of 1380, a small navy of about 100 Goryeo warboats sailed into the Jinpo harbor to shock the much larger Japanese armada. A heretofore unseen array of flaming arrows, fire barrels, mortal shells and fiery rockets rained down from the small Goryeo navy upon the Japanese boats. As hundreds of ships burned, the Koryosa reports that "smoke and flames covered the sky. Almost all of the Japanese were burned to death, and there were also many who drowned in the sea."<sup>37</sup> It was the first serious naval victory for Goryeo in the thirty years since Japanese pirates had started invading Goryeo coasts in earnest.

All five hundred Japanese ships were lost, but the main Japanese land force remained intact. The sea escape route was destroyed, so Japanese soldiers now battled their way inland, wreaking havoc where they went. According to the *Koryosa*, They killed the Goryeo children then had captured earlier, "and piled them up like a mountain, blood spattered wherever they passed."<sup>38</sup> Their commander sent notice to the Goryeo court that they didn't intend to leave the peninsula, and they expected ransom. They claimed they would soon capture a local fortress and threatened to invade the capital itself after that. They threatened that if members of the court wished to save their lives, they had better clear a path to Gaegyeong, and come out and bow down when the Japanese arrived.

The only thing standing between the Gaegyeong court and thousands of hardened Japanese soldiers was the army of Yi Seong-gye, now marching through the southern provinces, seeking battle with the Japanese invaders. On his journey through Goryeo's southern breadbasket, General Yi passed through the fertile rice fields and mountainsides of fruit trees that the Japanese raiders meant to plunder, coming at last to

his family's ancestral seat in Jeonju—the town his grandfather Yi Ansa had fled so long ago. General Yi paused here to bow down and pay respects to his original clan ancestor, Yi Han, who was buried in the area. He promised locals he would return soon and headed out to find the marauding pirates.<sup>39</sup>

As Yi moved south, following the Japanese trail, he saw only devastation. His scribe recorded the gruesome scene, likely exaggerating Japanese atrocities in the interests of further inflaming locals against the outside invaders.

[The Japanese] slaughtered or burned the districts along the seacoast, killing or capturing countless numbers of our people and devastating the villages and towns. Corpses were strewn everywhere, including in fields and on mountains, and the grain they spilled on the ground while transporting it to their ships at the harbor was piled as high as a foot.

The enemy also ruthlessly cut down young children, causing their corpses to form mountains, and all the areas that invaders had passed through were awash in blood. They even slaughtered two- or three-year old girls [as human sacrifices]. They first shaved the hair of the victims, slit open their stomachs, and removed the entrails. They then filled their stomachs with rice and wine and presented their bodies as a sacrifice to Heaven...

Surveying the corpse strewn landscape, [General Yi] was so saddened he could hardly eat or sleep.<sup>40</sup>

When Yi arrived in Namwon, near Mt. Hwangsan on August 6<sup>th</sup>, he knew the Japanese forces were near. A white rainbow hung across the sky, which a local fortune teller said was a sign of victory.<sup>41</sup> Planning a campaign of surprise, the General split

his troops into two. He sent a large force along a flat road at the base of the mountain as a lure, and snuck a smaller force along a small, twisting road above. Yi was sure that the Japanese forces would use this same hidden road to try to ambush his flatlands troops below, and he wanted to catch the Japanese forces by surprise up there. Hurrying with his personal troops along the twisting mountain path, General Yi was proven right. He soon came upon the mass of Japanese troops, high in the hills. Yi had surprised the Japanese, but he was still massively outnumbered, and the battle was fierce.<sup>42</sup>

At first, the Japanese troops were winning, as they fought from a vantage point higher on the mountain. But Yi's troops were excellent archers and several rounds of *yuyeopjeon* (small, willow leaf shaped arrows) turned the tide. The Japanese troops were forced to flee up the mountain. Yi Seong-gye pressed on. As the Japanese moved to higher ground, Yi blew his conch horn and charged up the hill, his troops rushing all about him like ants. During the fierce battle, one enemy got behind Yi with a long spear and stabbed at him, brushing his back. The soldier took aim again and prepared to run the General through. Yi had his back turned and didn't realize he was in danger. Saving the day, Yi Chiran—Yi's old boyhood friend—shot an arrow straight and true and cut the attacker down.

Still, enemy reinforcements poured down the ridge above. General Yi had two horses shot out from under him and was shot in the leg himself. But Yi pulled out the arrow mid-battle and continued to fight. As the Japanese troops surrounded the great General and Yi's forces quavered, Yi rose up strong. He pointed his sword to the sun and swore an oath to his comrades. "I want anyone who is afraid to die to withdraw now," Yi proclaimed, "because I intend to die here while fighting the enemy!" And then Yi laid into about eight hapless Japanese soldiers, dropping them all. His forces rallied and fought on.<sup>43</sup>

Then, in the heat of battle, the enemy general appeared, clad in shining armor. This was Ajibaldo—famous for his unbeatable skill. He was just a boy, maybe 15 or 16 years old, but he had fought bravely in other battles and destroyed all he encountered. Koreans gave him the name of *Aji* (referring to



the Korean word “aji” for “baby”) + “baldo” (derived from the Mongolian word for “brave”).<sup>44</sup> When the “Brave Baby” appeared, Yi’s forces recoiled. The *Koryosa Choryo* records his features as “neat, fine, fierce, and valiant,” and notes that “the ground shook everywhere he went.”<sup>45</sup> As the *Taejo Sillok* records, “He was very handsome and matchlessly courageous. He brandished his spear fiercely, riding a white horse, and no one dared to challenge him.”<sup>46</sup>

As he cut down Yi’s forces, Ajibaldo had strong protective armor and a metal helmet, making it difficult to hurt him with arrows. No blow seemed to stop him. But General Yi was an excellent archer. He quickly made a plan with his Jurchen brother, Yi Chiran, and they went to work. “I will shoot the top of his helmet,” Yi Seong-gye said to Yi Chiran. “So when the helmet falls off, you shoot him immediately.”<sup>47</sup> According to the *Taejo Sillok*, Yi Seong-gye delivered a perfect arrow bolt that shot Ajibaldo’s helmet off his head. Quickly, Yi Chiran followed up with an arrow into the throat of the now exposed Ajibaldo. The great pirate commander collapsed and died.<sup>48</sup>

When Ajibaldo was cut down, the enemy despaired. Yi’s court scribe tells how “The enemy soldiers began to wail, and they sounded like ten thousand oxen bellowing together.”<sup>49</sup> The demoralized pirate forces fled, abandoning even their horses. They made it to a nearby riverbank, but it was no use. They were surrounded by Yi’s troops and driven into the river to die. Thousands were killed and “the mountain streams ran red with enemy blood for a week.”<sup>50</sup> General Yi had destroyed an enemy army at least four times the size of his own (some records say he was outnumbered 10 to 1). He gained 1,600 war horses from the Japanese troops and countless enemy weapons.<sup>51</sup>

As the court scribe assigned to follow General Yi reported: “Returning to his military camp, he let the military band play music noisily and the soldiers enjoyed themselves with a mask dance. Our soldiers cheered and presented decapitated enemy heads, which made a mountainous pile.” Some of the commanders serving under Yi Seong-gye had feared for their lives and run from battle at the very start of things. They were now in despair. They bowed their heads to the ground, even until they were bleeding, and begged to be forgiven. Yi said only

that he would report them to the court. “Your crime and your punishment are up to the government.”<sup>52</sup>

This battle of *Hwangsán Daecheop* was the decisive moment in defeating Japanese invasions of that time and General Yi’s star was rising fast.<sup>53</sup> No longer just a man of the north, Yi Seong-gye now had a reputation in the south and had become a national hero. The conquering general remained considerate as he prepared to leave the area. After the battle was over, some of his soldiers wanted to replace their heavy wooden tent poles with much lighter bamboo poles, plentiful in this area. Yi Seong-gye would not allow it. “It may be much easier to transport the bamboo poles since they are lighter than ordinary wooden poles,” he said. “However, bamboo is a product cultivated by the people and therefore does not belong to us. It will be sufficient if we can return home without losing what we brought.”<sup>54</sup>

On his way back to the capital, Yi Seong-gye made a slight detour to stop by his clan’s ancestral home of Jeonju once again. Locals gathered at the pavilion of Omokdae for a celebratory feast, just a few yards from the ancestral home of Yi Ansa, his great-great grandfather. During that feast, legend says Yi grew inebriated and boisterous. He even sang the same song that the founding emperor of Han China (Liu Bang) had once sang when he returned to his old village after a military victory (*Daepungga*—“Song of the Great Wind”). “Now that my might rules all within the seas, I have returned to my old village with power,” the song goes. “How can I assign my fierce warriors to guard the four corners of our nation?”<sup>55</sup>

The warrior from the north now had a national reputation. He had won battles across the peninsula, defeated the largest army of Japanese pirates ever, and answered the hopes of the people. He was singing songs of kingly power and having other visions as well. Just outside of Jeonju, in fact, General Yi happened to gaze upon the unusual double rounded peaks of Mt. Maisan (looking like two horse’s ears). He exclaimed that this mountain looked exactly like the mountain in a dream he once had where a divine spirit had given him a golden ruler in order to straighten out the country. The General engaged in long prayers on this portentous mountain, seeking divinations and guidance.<sup>56</sup>

While the locals must have loved such talk of kingly portents emerging from their town, some of the Gaegyeong royals who heard of Yi's boisterous songs and strange dreams must have shivered. One of those Goryeo loyalists, the scholar Jeong Mong-ju, had actually fought beside Yi Seong-gye at the battle of *Hwangsan Daecheop*, and was there at the Jeonju pavilion to hear the drunken general sing of a great new country to come. Jeong Mong-ju was an idealist. He hoped to improve things in his country, and he admired General Yi, who he described as a sleek "peregrine falcon," and as a grand and resourceful dragon. "There is no hero like this," Jeong Mong-ju concluded.<sup>57</sup> Still this drunken talk of a great new country to come—that kind of revolutionary language—made Jeong Mong-ju nervous. Shortly after hearing Yi Seong-gye sing of the Great Wind, Jeong hiked up a local mountain to see if he could catch a vision of this beautiful new country people were dreaming of. But as he told in his poem written that day, all he could see was fog and clouds.

*On a hot day, I climbed to the top  
of a blue mountain,  
filled with curved valleys and yellow leaves.  
The high September wind is making wanderers  
feel bittersweet.  
Now at the summit, the beautiful sunset is  
covered by clouds.  
In the fog, how sad I can't see the lands of our  
country.*<sup>58</sup>

Down on the ground, word of Yi Seong-gye's great victory spread before him. When he arrived at the Imjin River near the capital, royal escorts awaited. At the Cheonsu gate of Gaegyeong, there were colorful decorations and musical entertainment to welcome the returning hero. General Choe Yeong was there to greet General Yi in formal attire. The Great General Choe, highest military authority in Goryeo, clasped Yi Seong-gye's hands, as Yi bowed his head in respect. "Who except you can accomplish such a great thing?" General Yeong asked in wonder, tears in his eyes.

Yi thanked the General and bowed his head more deeply. "I only followed your instructions and was lucky to win," he said. "I don't deserve such praise. The enemy is now suppressed. If they come back again, however, I will continue to take responsibility."

Choe Yeong was deeply impressed. "My dear general, you saved the country once more by winning this single battle. The state can rely on nobody but you!" Again, Yi Seong-gye refused to accept the praise.

In the royal palace, Yi was feted as the "general of the people," who now stood with the great general Choe Yeong as his only equal. King U bestowed 50 taels of gold upon Yi, but General Yi declined the award, saying "It is my duty as a general to kill the enemy. How do I dare accept it?"<sup>59</sup>

The greatest scholars and poets of Goryeo joined in the palace celebration and composed odes to Yi's greatness.<sup>60</sup> Gwon Geun, Libationer of the National Academy, offered his thoughts.

*Your bravery that cut the enemy raises the  
wind.  
The red bow in your hand shines with glory,  
And the arrows with white feathers look  
fiercely intimidating.  
Once you returned triumphantly, the state  
regained its peace.  
When you mounted your horse, we knew this  
would happen.*

Kim Kuyong, of the State Finance Commission, also gave a poem.

*Striking down the strength of the enemy's  
attack like lightning,  
Everyone felt your strength and leadership.  
The august mist spread to push away the  
poisonous vapors,  
And the frosty wind helped to add power to  
your authority.*

## THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

*The island barbarians turned pale when they  
saw your majestic army, and neighboring  
countries held their breath and trembled.  
Everyone in the court stands in line to praise  
you.*

Even Yi Saek, founding director of the National Confucian Academy and greatest scholar of his time, joined in the praise.

*Since you cut down the enemy forces as if they  
were rotten trees,  
All the joy running through the country is due  
to you.  
Your loyalty reaches the sky, sweeping away  
the thick mist.  
And your majesty is so great that the wind on  
the sea is hushed.*

Yi Seong-gye was now a national hero of immense consequence. Yet the record shows that he rejected most financial reward and remained humble before the Goryeo court. Taking a break from politics and warfare for a time, Yi Seong-gye spent private time with his “capital city Madam,” Lady Kang. In 1381, one year after his great victory, Lady Kang of Gaegyeong gave birth to their first son, Bang-beon. The next year, Bang-seok was born. Yi Seong-gye now had two young baby boys with Lady Kang of Gaegyeong and his star was rising fast amid the dazzling world of Goryeo’s royal capital.

**“It is You who will Accomplish my Will!”**



*Back in the days when tigers used to smoke, the fabled Mencius was born in China. His father died when he was very young, and his mother raised him alone. During his upbringing, his mother was determined that Mencius would become a great scholar, and so she observed his studies and how he played every day. At one time, Mencius and his mother lived near a cemetery and his mother observed that Mencius liked to play by imitating the funeral rites that he saw. “This will not do, for my son should be a scholar,” the mother said. And so they moved away from there. For a time, they lived near a marketplace, but young Mencius began to imitate the vendors there, especially play-acting as a butcher with sharp knives. “This is no place for a scholar,” his mother said and so they moved again. Finally, she moved near a school, where Mencius imitated the sincere scholars, reading and studying all day. “Mencius Mother, Three Moves,” became a popular saying regarding the dedication it took to raise a proper child. It reminded parents that study, not swordplay, was necessary to raise a serious scholar.<sup>1</sup>*



Border troubles seemed never-ending for Goryeo in these days, and General Yi could not enjoy his laurels for long. In January of 1382, the warrior Hobaldo of the Jurchen people roared south across the Yalu River and began plundering the borderlands. He only brought about 1000 troops, but these northern Jurchen were fierce fighters. One provincial commander had been ordered to defeat Hobaldo but failed. Now the Goryeo court turned again to Yi Seong-gye. He was named the provincial commander of the northeastern area (Dongbukmyeong) and ordered to drive Hobaldo out.<sup>2</sup> In July of 1382, as Yi Seong-gye mounted for war once again, the scholar Yi Saek bade farewell the Goryeo’s “god of war” with a poem and hoped for quieter days to come.

## THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

*Since Songheon\* outshines his colleagues by his  
daring spirit,  
He alone is entrusted with the great wall of ten  
thousand li.  
How busy he has been repulsing the enemies!  
When he returns, we will enjoy spring-like days  
of peace together.  
Since the survival of the state is now at stake,  
May you spearhead attacks like a god of war!<sup>3</sup>*

Another call to battle must have been wearisome for the General, but how much more so for his friend Yi Chiran, who was currently in mourning for his recently deceased mother. No matter, Yi Seong-gye simply couldn't do without the Jurchen warrior by his side. He sent an urgent message to Chongju, where Yi Chiran knelt in white mourning robes before his mother's tomb and ordered him to join the march to battle. "When state affairs are urgent, you cannot stay home wearing mourning clothes," General Yi said to his blood brother. "I want you to change your clothes and follow me."<sup>4</sup> Upon receiving the order, Yi Chiran was in grief, bowing and crying to the heavens, but he had taken a vow to follow Yi Seong-gye everywhere. So the Jurchen warrior took off his white robes, took up his bow and arrow, and rode off to war.

Marching across the high mountainous borderlands, General Yi's army came upon Hobaldo on the Plain of Kilchu, where several small waterways come down out of the northeastern mountains before joining the East Sea. Yi Chiran's vanguard forces led the first attack, but they were utterly routed and forced to retreat. When Yi Seong-gye came upon the routed soldiers a bit later, they were quite demoralized. Across the plain, Hobaldo sat tall on a great black horse, wearing three layers of heavy armor and a mantle of bright red fur.<sup>5</sup>

"He's too strong," said some of Yi's captains. They feared that Hobaldo couldn't be beat. General Yi didn't ask any of his

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\* Yi Seong-gye's casual pen name, meaning "Pine Tree."

men to face the fearsome Hobaldo. Instead, he took his horse and rode out alone onto the field of battle. Rising to the challenge, the red-furred Hobaldo also rode out on his black warhorse, alone. The two generals solemnly faced each other on the Plain of Kilchu, their two armies some distance behind.

Suddenly, Hobaldo raised his great sword and bellowed, galloping fast towards Yi Seong-gye. Yi did the same and galloped straight at the speeding Hobaldo. The generals rushed by each other at full speed, their swords flashing in the sun, but both missed their blows. Hobaldo had fallen off his horse in the rush, so Yi spun around quickly on his horse and shot Hobaldo in the back before he could remount. But his armor was too thick, and the arrow just bounced away without harm. Hobaldo ignored it and leapt back on his black mount with a roar.

Undaunted, Yi Seong-gye fired another arrow into Hobaldo's horse, dropping it. Hobaldo fell to the ground. Yi rushed forward, drawing his great bow for a killing shot, but by that time Hobaldo's soldiers had reached him and were carrying him from the battle. As his own troops rushed in to help, Yi chased down the retreating forces. Hobaldo barely escaped with his life, fleeing back across the Yalu, and did not bother Goryeo again. To cap things off, on his way back to his home base near Hamhung, General Yi took the time to drive some marauding pirates out of a nearby coastal town, growing his local acclaim.

Yi Seong-gye then returned to the hometown fields of Hamhung that he always adored. Though Seong-gye's reputation was growing across the peninsula, there was no denying that General Yi's nostalgic memories and deepest foundation remained in the northeast territories that his troops and clansmen called home. Here, he could visit his “Hamhung wife” and his family home, which he had hardly seen in years.

While Yi rested in Hamhung, the King of Goryeo sent special honors, awarding General Yi with 50 pieces of platinum, five rolls of cloth, a jeweled saddle horse, and a new honorary title as a merit subject. He also invited Yi to return to Gaegyong, where he could join the grand council of *Dodang*.<sup>6</sup>



## THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

But Yi sought to stay home in Hamhung and rest. The Japanese pirates and northern tribesmen have been driven out, he claimed, and things are growing peaceful. I am no longer needed in the capital. "State affairs, formerly in disarray, are now in proper order, and the government is starting out anew...I entreat Your Majesty to accept my sincerity and release me from the heavy burden of responsibility. Then I may be able to make way for men of virtue and free myself...I would be grateful if Your Majesty would let me live out my days at home, praying for Your Majesty's good health."<sup>7</sup>

General Yi wished to lay down his sword for a time and visit his northern family. He was especially interested in checking in on his son, Yi Bang-won (born of Lady Han, in Hamhung). The seventeen-year-old boy had been exceptionally diligent in his Confucian studies and had recently taken the exam which could qualify him to enter the Confucian academy and high civil service. No matter his military victories, Yi Seong-gye always valued these scholastic pursuits best of all. General Choe Yeong and most other military officers didn't appreciate the Confucian classics as sincerely, but Yi Seong-gye treasured them and constantly told Bang-won to "study hard every day." Yi's greatest hope was that Bang-won would transcend a life of war and violence and win his family honor as a refined scholar. Often, when he saw Yi Bang-won studying the Confucian classics by candlelight, the great General would tear up and exclaim: "It is you who will accomplish my will!"<sup>8</sup>

That very spring of 1383, Yi Bang-won had passed the civil service exam and received a government appointment. On receiving notice at his Hamhung villa, General Yi gathered his son, Bang-won, and made the government messenger read the notice of Bang-won's meritorious appointment out loud, over and over again. The General's son would be a scholar after all, serving Goryeo's king with a bureaucratic post. Perhaps the General could lay down his sword for a time and watch his learned son rise among the literati of Gaegyong.

## Decadents and Exiles of Late Goryeo



*“My dear Arjuna, how have these impurities come upon you? They are not at all befitting a man who knows the value of life. They lead not to higher planets, but to infamy.*

*O son of Prtha, do not yield to this degrading impotence, that it does not become you. Give up such petty weakness of heart and arise, O chastiser of the enemy.”*

— *Bhagavad Gita*



Except for his capital city madam and recently born baby boys in Gaegyeong, there probably wasn't much that attracted Yi Seong-gye to life in the capital. Regardless of Yi's military victories, the reality was that Goryeo in the 1380s was a collapsing society. For decades, the entire region had been devastated by the upheaval, warfare, and power vacuums of the Yuan-Ming transition. Goryeo faced constant warfare from the 1350s to the 1380s, including two massive Red Turban invasions, constant Yuan and Jurchen struggles up north, and hundreds of Japanese pirate attacks (there were 378 pirate attacks in the fourteen years of King U's reign). This warfare led to frequent famines and epidemics (twice as frequent in late Goryeo than earlier), which killed tens of thousands.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the Mongol empire's regional retreat had led to collapsing trade networks and related economic crisis for the merchants and traders of Goryeo.<sup>2</sup>

Decades of political, cultural, social, and economic upheaval were the result, as Goryeo became a tumultuous pandemonium. Unfortunately, Goryeo's governing elites didn't have an answer. According to both the *Koryosa* and the *Taejo Sillok*, Prime Minister Yi In-im served as mastermind behind the throne of the young King U, but he was the foul head of a

rotting fish. No one moved up in government without paying him a bribe. The outcome of trials and prison sentences depended on who paid the most to Yi In-im.<sup>3</sup> No government policy could pass without his support. Yi In-im built his corrupt network by awarding land and government positions to hundreds who supported him, regardless of their merit. He punished who he wished and protected his supporters from the law. He allowed his allies to expand their private militias. Peasant farmers and small merchants were extorted and taxed massively to pay for it all.<sup>4</sup>

Yi In-im's key allies were the *gwonmun sejok* families, elite landowners who ruled through high positions in the central government. The richest of these families owned enough land to cover half a province, which reduced thousands of farmers to enslaved or indentured servants on their land, while taking massive land holdings off the state tax rolls. In Goryeo, the private "ownership" of land mostly meant ownership of taxation rights. Lands weren't typically owned in the fashion of being enclosed and restricted to use by non-owners—rather they generally remained open and farmable by locals, even when "owned" by others. But large parts of the product of these lands—the harvest—was "owned" by the *gwonmun sejok* in that these powerful families could tax the harvest of lands for their own private coffers and keep them immune from state taxation.<sup>5</sup>

The private right to collect taxes on various Goryeo lands had originally been granted to government and military officials as a form of pay for their service. But over time, these elites had converted these rights to permanent titles, holding taxing rights over vast swaths of land even when their service to the government was completed, and passing down these rights to their children as inheritance. In effect, they had converted once publicly owned state lands into private holdings, as manifested in the right to tax farmers who tilled the land.

Even worse for the farmers, multiple private landowners commonly claimed taxation rights over a single parcel of land. Farmers were commonly taxed numerous times for a single lot of land, with multiple private tax collectors showing up and claiming a chunk of the harvest. As the scholar Jeong Do-jeon

described the situation, "Since more than five or six owners of the land claim that other people's land is inherited from their ancestors...tenants must pay 80% to 90% of their income through taxes." People lamented that even if they made their crops grow "into the sky, they are not enough to support their parents" because of this multiple taxation system.<sup>6</sup> In the end, hardly any harvest at all was left to state tax collectors, or to the farmers, and famine spread. "Children were abandoned and dumped on the road, and the starvation was immeasurable."<sup>7</sup>

People who could not pay their taxes, even though starving, could be converted to enslaved persons by the *gwonmun sejok*. "The strong devoured the weak," court scribes wrote; by some estimates, one-third of Goryeo's population became reduced to slavery by the 1380s.<sup>8</sup> Thousands of commoners fled the land and wandered without a home.

Such a situation meant that the number of taxpayers declined dramatically by the mid to late-1380s. Moreover, once private families held taxation rights on plots of land, the state could not tax these lands or conscript enslaved persons working these lands into government projects. With lands, tax revenues and enslaved labor increasingly captured by private elites, there was no longer enough state resources to pay salaries to many officials or soldiers, to complete public works, or maintain a paid military. Officials began to receive their pay mostly through bribery, while soldiers had to be conscripted without pay during a crisis.<sup>9</sup> As the *Taejo Sillok* reports, this situation eroded the spiritual foundations of society.

As the rules and regulations were in disarray at the end of the former dynasty, ignorant and petty people neglected their parents and relatives, refused to help their neighbors, collected unreasonably high interest on old loans, and recklessly seized merchandise in the market against the will of the merchants. Sometimes when one fell ill or died, no one provided either help or burial. As a result, humaneness and good customs deteriorated.<sup>10</sup>

As for King U, he was incapable and disinterested in doing anything about the situation. When Yi In-im rose to power together with U's accession, he quickly exiled, tortured, or killed his opponents, including those who might have been independent allies of King U.<sup>11</sup> This included even King U's wet nurse, who was killed in an upheaval that threw the young king into a crying fit. After his wet nurse was killed (and her relatives tortured), U realized the extent of his helplessness and lost interest in state affairs. At one banquet, "the intoxicated king likened himself to a puppet and lamented the powerlessness of his situation. He spent most of his time hunting, horse riding, and drinking."<sup>12</sup>

If the records of the *Koryosa* are to be believed,\* King U's hopelessness and debauched behavior only worsened with time. He would go out "hunting" in the capital city's streets, firing arrows at people's chickens and dogs.<sup>13</sup> He would catch sparrows and roast them for fun.<sup>14</sup> He climbed to the top of the palace and threw rocks and roof tiles down to hit people below. He once dragged a villager around behind his horse until "his blood gushed and covered his whole body."<sup>15</sup> He would sometimes beat his court associates furiously if they didn't join him in festivities.<sup>16</sup> He stole other people's horses at will, and if his horse became unruly, he would flog and exile his horse trainers.<sup>17</sup>

He constantly tried to get drunk with pretty women, including even noble women about to get married. He would kidnap women and lock them away in the palace, destroying

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\* The *Koryosa* presents a constant stream of daily diary entries about King U's licentious and debauched behavior. It is important to keep in mind that these records were produced by supporters of the subsequent dynasty (Yi Seong-gye's Joseon dynasty), which threw down the Goryeo dynasty, so they would have motivation to besmirch King U, so as to legitimate Yi Seong-gye's political revolution. In the end, it's hard to tell how much of the critique of King U was accurate and how much was propaganda. The sheer number of daily entries summarizing questionable behavior by the King, together with the text of multiple entreaties and supplications by his advisors to change his ways, suggests that there likely was some truth, at least, to the unflattering historical record.

marriages.<sup>18</sup> He frequently arranged large, costly parties with kisaengs and clowns, draining the state treasury to pay for it all.<sup>19</sup> He required one official to give up his daughter for the night to his pleasure, though the daughter had just been engaged to a pirate-fighting warrior. He erected special houses outside of the palace for his liaisons.

King U especially loved to spend time at the house of Prime Minister Yi In-im and became infatuated with a beautiful servant girl (Bongai Fei) who lived there. The King took to calling Yi In-im and his wife (Park) his “father and mother,” and spent nights cavorting with Bongai Fei at their house. Yi-In-im would simply spend those nights elsewhere.<sup>20</sup>

The Queen Dowager (among others) urged the debauched king to “refrain from acting as you please”<sup>21</sup> and to reduce his drinking and hunting and pay attention to state affairs, but he heard none of it. He continued hunting chickens, beating dogs, kidnapping women off the streets, drinking all day, and cavorting with concubines all night.<sup>22</sup> During his hunting trips, he would have servants following him, “singing barbarian songs, blowing barbarian flutes, and playing drums and harps.”<sup>23</sup> One diarist lamented how every day “the king hunts, comes back, dances and plays. The world of this man is like dew on grass...the sense of futility in his life to attributed to Yi In-im, who is King and does politics at will.”<sup>24</sup>

General Choe Yeong witnessed the declining situation of Goryeo and despaired. Choe was a general who valued duty and nation above power and wealth—he was said to value gold itself as just a stone<sup>25</sup>—and he lamented the growing decadence of Goryeo’s leaders. King U’s frivolous life “is like dew on the grass,” Choe once reflected.<sup>26</sup> When the King became drunk and fell off his horse while riding around in public it would make Choe weep, thinking of the resentment of the common people at such decadence.<sup>27</sup> “Right now famine is repeating and the people cannot live,” Choe complained to the King. “So you should refrain from going out and playing.” King U only replied that “My ancestor, King Chung Suk, also liked to play.”

Other court officials offered up petitions and supplications to the King to change his ways. “Sickness and famine are raging all over the place,” the scholar Gwon Geun observed.

## THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

Japanese pirates are constantly plundering the land, and people grow more and more poor.

Now is the time to be truly troubled day and night, and diligently rectify your mind and engage in politics. [However] Your Majesty does not pay attention to this, and plays at night and gets up late, lusts for pleasure inside, runs horses outside, enjoys small entertainment and forgets worries about the future.<sup>28</sup>

Another petitioner observed the same troubles of famine and unrest, together with strange portents like “abnormalities of animals and fish.”

Because of this, there is not one among the people of the country who is not worried and not afraid....I hope you will stop drinking and flirting, singing and dancing, stop hunting with falcons and dogs, do not underestimate the words of the sages, do not offend the faithful, do not shun the virtuous paths, and do not shun the virtuous children.<sup>29</sup>

But nothing was to change for the licentious King U, and beyond the palace walls, Goryeo's declining situation fostered a spiritual and political crisis—Gwon Geun described it as “a time of perilous and dizzying difficulties.”<sup>30</sup> Songs of despair and crude language began to spread. “In broad daylight, strange men and women committed lewd acts.”<sup>31</sup> Street performers, underground slave movements, and shamans alike all began to foresee a coming transformation. Strange prophets predicted end times and people “were completely taken away by the words that dazzled them.”<sup>32</sup> In the midst of spreading famine, one influential Buddhist monk began to spread the gospel of Maitreya, a millennial philosophy that a savior Buddha would soon return to cleanse things and start

the world anew.\* “Anyone who eats and does not share his wealth with others will surely die,” the monk prophesized. Crowds of people began following him around, and even some noble households invited the prophet inside their doors. In such an uneasy social environment, this millennial Buddhist and other followers of Maitreya were exiled and executed.<sup>33</sup>

Though currents of ideological and social transformation swirled also in the halls of the Confucian Sungkyunkwan academy, Yi In-im’s government heard none of it. Goryeo’s corrupt *gwonmun se jok* just filled their larders and exiled the critics. Following decades of famine, invasion, and corrupt oppression, Goryeo’s heroic past receded into mist and its current world was collapsing, but the future was not yet born.

At that historic juncture, Goryeo’s exiled scholar Jeong Do-jeon would come to play an oversized role. Jeong was that principled Confucian crusader who had loudly denounced the rise of Yi In-im’s pro-Yuan faction in the days after King Gongmin’s assassination, only to be exiled to the distant south. Sometimes Goryeo unfortunates were exiled to remote islands where they lived in a quarantined house, cut off from everyone behind tall thorny walls. Jeong Do-jeon didn’t face this level of isolation, but was sent to the small town of Naju in 1374, far from the capital. Naju was in Jeolla province, a rich farming region and the birthplace of Korea’s large round pears. It was isolated from the circuits of Goryeo political power, filled with tiny houses and no libraries at all. Living there was a serious fall from favor for a leading scholar-official of the Confucian Academy. Jeong Do-jeon described the experience as being “cast out into the southern wilds, [where] I suffered from the heat and miasma and hovered close to death.”<sup>34</sup> Jeong was frustrated because “the house is low, tilted, narrow and dirty,” Jeong Do-jeon complained.<sup>35</sup>

Here in the village, Jeong Do-jeon could work, eat, and talk with “sweaty and mud-covered”<sup>36</sup> farmers all he wished, but

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\* This millenarian philosophy of impending salvation by a world-cleansing Buddhist deity was similar to what many of China’s Red Turban rebels had predicted in their own “sorcerous” uprising against the Yuan. See Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 112.



he missed his vibrant discussions with the scholars and ministers of the capital. "While living in the countryside, all [friendship] is broken; I can't see any visitors. Wilted leaves falling before the frost comes; Chrysanthemum blossoms after rain. With books left in the room I treat myself to a drink I've found. Not only to try to forget the world..."<sup>37</sup> Jo Do-jeon nostalgically called himself a "man without a post, a 'leftover man' in a splendorous age."<sup>38</sup>

In this lonely solitude, Jeong Do-jeon had plenty of time to ponder the ills of Goryeo. While the virtuous scholars were tortured and exiled, the corrupt elite of Goryeo grew fat on the backs of peasants. Those that spoke out were ruthlessly beaten, exiled, or killed. As the *Koryosa* reported, "The prosperous families occupied endless farmland, but the little people had no land for crops, so both their parents and their wives starved, and families separated. God and the Heavens became deeply sad."<sup>39</sup> Thinking about it all drove Jeong Do-jeon mad with frustration. "Why is the good man cursed and why is the evil man blessed? Why is my province so desolate? What can I do but drink?"<sup>40</sup>

But there was something good about this time of exile as well. Free from the stuffy and corrupt air of Goryeo, Jeong Do-jeon came to appreciate the simple and generous virtues of the Naju farmers who treated him so well.<sup>41</sup> Although Sambong complained that "the place where I live is humble and crude, and I was depressed and listless,"<sup>42</sup> he soon came to enjoy the friendliness and folk wisdom of the farmers around him. Farmers shared what little food and drink they had. They showed him the ways of their town and were happy to host "Sambong" (Jeong Do-jeon's casual penname) for dinner. They enjoyed hiking about the hills and listening to Sambong's poetry. Sambong's writings describe how he came to enjoy eating the local foods, drinking with the residents, and forgetting life in the corrupt capital. "I slept early and got up late...and ate whatever food I wanted." He wandered the mountains and streams with the locals, and simple farmers felt like old friends.<sup>43</sup> As one scholar imagines, "[Sambong] went up and down the valley along a stream. When he was tired, he rested. He walked when he was energetic and when he met a

place with a beautiful view, he whistled and delayed going back to the city.”<sup>44</sup>

Once, Sambong offered to teach a friendly old farmer to read and write, but the farmer was pleased just to keep tilling his land honestly. “I have been a farmer my whole life,” the rustic said. “I till the fields to pay taxes to the state. With the remainder, I support my wife and son. I don’t understand anything beyond that. Don’t cause me any problems.” Sambong came away inspired and compared the farmer to famous rustic sages and “hermit princes” of old.<sup>45</sup>

This bucolic life among virtuous people saved the increasingly gloomy soul of Jeong Do-jeon. Though his scholarly old friends had “scattered like clouds” when he went into the exile, the common people embraced him.<sup>46</sup> Generous and hard-working farmers taught him that the common people were the foundation of Goryeo, not the capital elites, and not even the scholars. The people were suffering immensely, and their struggles were far more important than airy debates and honorary merit titles back in the capital. “I was kicked out [of Gaegyeong] for saying the right thing, but I saved my life by coming back to my country,” Jeong Do-jeon concluded.

The people of Dong-ri were naïve, and hardworking, especially Hwang-yeong (an old farmer). His house was well made and Hwang-yeong liked to drink. But when the alcohol was ripe, he always invited me first and I drank with him. He always served wine when guests came and the more days went by, the more polite he was...

I have been abandoned by the world and have been exiled, but my fellow villagers treat me so warmly, because they feel sorry for my plight. I now know that I was a sinner because I [was] far away from the people and did not hear their words.<sup>47</sup>

But alas, these virtuous people faced constant struggles. Not only were they overtaxed and harassed by Goryeo officials, but

they were constantly attacked in Japanese piracy raids. On several occasions, Jeong Do-jeon and the villagers had to flee for the hills when marauders arrived, abandoning their homes to the foxes and rabbits, while the *gwonmun sejok* hid in protected villas guarded by private militias.<sup>48</sup> Jeong Do-jeon's wife wrote him in despair, describing how his own family was also collapsing

Children fill the house, whimpering with cold and crying out in hunger...Your reputation was besmirched, your accomplishments erased. You were exiled alone to sweltering lands where you breathe miasmatic toxins. Your brothers have fallen. The gates of our house have been torn down and we are ridiculed by the world.<sup>49</sup>

In his increasingly frustrated musings, Jeong began to imagine a new world. "One day, we have to overturn this rotten country." Jeong Do-jeon fumed in a letter to his wife still in Gaegyeong. "That way the people and the country may live."<sup>50</sup> He wrote about a vast reform project that would take lands from the *gwonmun sejok* and redistribute them to hard working farmers. He wrote of earlier days of Korea where "all the people under Heaven received land...because the land belonged to the state and was distributed to the people and there was no one who did not cultivate land."<sup>51</sup> The rich/poor gap was narrow in this system, he said, and everyone paid fair taxes to the state. In such an equitable system, famine would disappear, and the virtues of the people could flourish. "If the people are engaged in work for their livelihood, if men have enough to eat and women have enough clothes to wear, and if there is no shortage in serving one's parents and raising their children, the people will know good manners and the customs will be honorable."<sup>52</sup>

Reaching for this warm vision, Jeong Do-jeon developed a plan. The Goryeo government should confiscate all the land in the country, count the people in an area, and then redistribute the land based on how many people have to be supported in any given area. Inheritance should be strictly limited, and most

lands should return to state ownership when one dies. The pattern of multiple “owners,” each with the ability to tax a parcel of land, should be ended, so that farmers only have to pay taxes to a single owner. People should only be able to “own” land (e.g., privately tax the land) if they have a current government duty requiring a salary. Tax rates should be reduced on almost all lands. Large landowners should also have to pay their share of taxes to the state and tax exemption for various elites and merit subjects should be ended.

These were all grand ideas, floating on air. The reality was that Jeong Do-jeon was spending year-after-year exiled in what he called “cold, drizzly mountains...detached from the troublesome world,”<sup>53</sup> while his old reformist friends at Sungkyunkwan had scattered like frightened birds upon the rise of that malefactor, Yi In-im. No matter how beautiful the rural mountains and streams are, “the exiled servants think it is a prison,” Jeong wrote. Isolated in the South, “I sing a poem of resentment to the distant sky alone.”<sup>54</sup> Without a source of real power, there was little hope of realizing any of these hopes for a new world. Here in the provinces, “my mind is as dead as an old tree.”<sup>55</sup> Even when Jeong Do-jeon’s exile was loosened after three years (allowing him to move about the country outside of Naju, but not enter the capital), things didn’t improve. Jeong moved to his old hometown (near the Sambong peaks at Samgaksan mountain) and started teaching Confucian classes to circles of disciples by candlelight, wearing only a “shabby, hemp suit.”<sup>56</sup> But even this small effort was thrown down. A local official called his class a “disturbing thought group” and demolished Sambong’s house, kicking all the students out of the area. Sambong moved to a nearby town and tried again, but his new house was also torn down by a suspicious magistrate and he was forced to move yet again.<sup>57</sup>

His belongings destroyed and forced to wander without purpose, the scholar became despondent. “The old tree is lonely,” he wrote, despairing that time seemed to have stopped for him.<sup>58</sup> “My old friends even cut off their letters, leaving me as the wind blows.”<sup>59</sup> It was an impossible situation, Sambong concluded. The common people are increasingly desperate, with their food and land being taken at will by powerful families, while Goryeo’s leaders are simply “obscene,

extravagant and reckless.” They were nothing but “Big Cheaters” and “Big Devils.” “I can’t bear to turn a blind eye to the destruction of my country,”<sup>60</sup> Jeong wrote, but only the most dramatic of solutions could overcome “the Big Wicked.”<sup>61</sup>

Sambong could take heart in the fact that more and more local communities featured small circles of Confucian scholars giving public lectures, while books of Confucian thought seemed to be showing up even in the most rustic of houses<sup>62</sup>—but this scholastic flowering was not yet bearing much fruit. Things would never change until philosophers became the kings, Jeong Do-jeon finally concluded: “morals and politics are inseparable,”<sup>63</sup> and “only a true scholar should be in charge of politics.”<sup>64</sup>

When he thought carefully, Sambong realized the scholars would probably never be kings themselves, but he began to hope that perhaps the philosophers could hold hands with a virtuous king—one who was free of the “Big Wicked” and who respected the ideas of the Confucian scholars. In thinking about how this virtuous future king could possibly be, Jeong Do-jeon could only think of one man. Living up in Hamhung, General Yi Seong-gye had recently defeated the pirates of Ajibaldo and had driven out Hobaldo’s “barbarians.” This virtuous warrior had humbly denied great rewards. Moreover, the northern general always liked to visit and talk with the Confucian scholars when he was in Gaegyeong.

Jeong Do-jeon looked to the north and wondered what it might mean. Watching Goryeo’s ruling class running towards destruction, he packed his bags and left for the north one day, crossing country roads “thick with fog and smoke.”<sup>65</sup> It was the fall of 1383.

## The General's Bow and the Scholar's Brush



*There was once a fox who came upon a powerful tiger. The fox asked the tiger if he knew that the fox was stronger than all the other animals. The fierce tiger retorted that this claim was outrageous. So the fox said to the tiger: "Follow me, and you will find out." The tiger followed the fox, and everywhere they went all the animals in the forest ran away. The tiger came to believe that the fox was indeed very strong and bowed to the fox's strength.<sup>1</sup>*



When Jeong Do-jeon headed north to meet the great general, it was a historic inflection point. It can be described as a "Machiavellian moment," when the current conditions descend into chaos, but the new order has not yet emerged.<sup>2</sup> Social chaos is the mother of political thought and the times called for grand ideas and bold leaders. Jeong Do-jeon had those ideas, and his calligrapher's brush was active, but he had need now of a sword, not an ink well.

Heading north with his portfolio of ideas, Sambong was a dangerous character: "an unemployed man with political knowledge and ability."<sup>3</sup> This dangerous character well knew the growing reputation of Yi Seong-gye and wondered if some sort of alliance might be possible. Yi Seong-gye was a national hero, so famous after defeating Ajibaldo's pirates that people would sing lullabies to their babies, promising that Yi Seong-gye would protect the wee ones.<sup>4</sup>

And yet General Yi remained humble and lived with spartan dignity, which only increased his popularity. After battle victories, the General would turn down excessive rewards. When ministers recited poems or songs of praise, Yi Seong-gye was often embarrassed, asking them to quit and humbly denying the greatness of his achievements.<sup>5</sup> Though he was intimidating in battle and could be stern and authoritative in meetings, "when he met with the people, he

looked kind and benevolent, mixing with them easily. For that reason, people were eager to follow him.”<sup>6</sup>

While on the march, Yi Seong-gye wouldn't let his soldiers take the bamboo or supplies of the villagers, and he fiercely punished soldiers if they raided people's food or damaged their fields.<sup>7</sup> He treated his soldiers well and boasted a well-trained and exceptionally loyal fighting force. Most other generals “mistreated their officers and men when they were not satisfied with their performance. They not only cursed them but also whipped them, and sometimes even tortured them to death.”<sup>8</sup> In distinction, the *Taejo Sillok* reports that “[Yi Seong-gye] was the only commanding general who treated his soldiers with respect and dignity. So the officers and soldiers led by other generals wanted to serve under his command.”<sup>9</sup> Unlike so many other officials, Yi Seong-gye had little record of abusing authority, or corruptly amalgamating court power, and was a clearly a refreshing personality.

Even better for the dreams of Jeong Do-jeon, Yi Seong-gye respected the Confucian scholars. At Gaegyong, Yi patronized and visited the scholars of Sungkyunkwan, and he was beloved of Yi Saek. He enjoyed late night discussions of the classics and studied Confucian texts in his barracks (most notably, the *Daxue yangi*, a text describing the moral virtues of kings).<sup>10</sup> Yi Seong-gye was exceptionally proud of his son's Confucian studies as well. At every feast, when the poetry contest broke out, Seong-gye excitedly called on Yi Bang-won to take charge of the event and to recite his own verse.<sup>11</sup>

Yi Seong-gye seemed a man who appreciated the deep thinkers and belles-lettres of his day, while maintaining the humble virtues of a natural leader. So in 1383, Jeong Do-jeon travelled to Yi Seong-gye's field barracks in Hamyong province to see the great man for himself. Upon arriving, he introduced himself as a friend of Jeong Mong-ju, an influential *sadaebu* who Yi Seong-gye greatly admired and who had fought beside General Yi in battles against the Jurchen (1364) and at Hwangsan versus Ajibaldo, the “brave baby”. Yi Seong-gye laid out a table of welcome.

Jeong Do-jeon arrived in Hamhung as a scholar alienated from power and unable to rise in the world. Yi Seong-gye was a man isolated from the top social circles and still mostly seen as

a rugged man of the north. It was a marriage born in heaven. Over the next several days of his visit, Jeong Do-jeon must have passionately discussed his many ideas for reform and how to stabilize the people's lives. He always did this wherever he went, and besides, Yi Seong-gye enjoyed such talks.

Towards the end of his visit, Jeong Do-jeon viewed Yi's private troops practicing their drills. These warriors were great horsemen, training their cavalry on horse obstacle-courses and famous for deadly archery at a full gallop. Yi Seong-gye himself was one of best archers in the land and constantly trained with the troops. His army was not the ill fed and glum conscripted forces so common down south, but an elite force of well-trained loyalists, with high morale. The Jurchen warrior Yi Chiran was also here, with his clan's powerful cavalry. Jeong Do-jeon watched these elite soldiers and stars grew in his eyes.

"What couldn't I do with such an army?!" he said to Yi Seong-gye, beside him.

"What do you mean?" asked a startled Yi.

"I only mean this army could repel the pirates in the southeast," stammered Jeong Do-jeon—but surely other thoughts must have danced about the edges.<sup>12</sup>

In March of 1384, Jeong Do-jeon left General Yi's camp in high spirits.\* Before departing, he stopped by a tall and ancient pine tree, rising near the gates of Yi Seong-gye's barracks—reminiscent of Yi Seong-gye's own pen name of Song Heon ("Pine Tree"). There he carved a poem of praise to the General on the pine tree's bark.

*I see a [tall] pine tree that has endured myriad years,  
That was born and grew in ten thousand folds  
of green mountains.  
I wonder if we can see each other in years ahead?<sup>13</sup>*

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\* Jeong Do-jeon visited Yi Seong-gye's Hamhung military camp again in the summer of 1384, spending about 6 months in total discussing ideas with the general. See *Sambongjip*, Vol. I, p. 200.



## THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

Hiking off, Jeong Do-jeon pondered what a deeper relationship with Yi Seong-gye might mean. He had talked for hours with the General about various reforms to stabilize and improve the country, and Yi Seong-gye had seemed interested. Finally, might someone with real power listen to the dreams of the scholars? Jeong reflected morosely on his long years of futility up to this point.

I studied very hard until my hair became very white, from a very young age, so as to find a way to find the truth and straighten the king. But the crazy world of officials is worthless, and I was kicked out to the south and said farewell to my friends. There was no way to straighten the king or give benefits to the people. I went to [the south] and read books.

For the past ten years there were lots of wars and students studying Confucianism fell down and dispersed like the clouds. I studied famous Chinese philosophers. Time passed by and I didn't accomplish anything. There were only books unfinished sitting on the dusty desk. I couldn't even sword fight. I went back to the fields and farmed. There were horrible conditions and high land taxes on us.

How can this situation be?!<sup>14</sup>

It had been a sad and unproductive life for Jeong Do-jeon to date, but perhaps a new wind was blowing. In fact, good signs came quickly after the meeting, when General Yi submitted a proposal to the court in Gaegyeong, clearly influenced by Jeong Do-jeon's thinking. This report was a detailed analysis of "Measures to make the Border Safe," while simultaneously improving the lives of the people.

"The enemy strongholds are extremely close to the borders of our Northwest Region. Nevertheless, we pay little attention to our borders," complained General Yi. "Since I was

appointed to take charge of this region, I cannot just sit idly by and watch what is happening. So I made plans to reinforce our security and I submit them to Your Majesty.”<sup>15</sup>

Yi's proposal noted that the northern border was dangerous, and that enemies north of the river were always trying to lure or steal Goryeo's residents away to join their forces. Therefore, he proposed extensive new military training with a clear chain of command. He advocated for better supply storage facilities and for something like a prepared national guard all along the border.

He noted that opportunistic elites and treacherous Buddhist monks in the area would often charge usurious interest rates (up to ten times the principal) on emergency loans of food after floods and droughts, which reduced people to utter poverty. “The people who fail to pay their debts are harassed and persecuted until they are starved and ragged,” Yi noted. “Much worse, groups of people dispatched from various government agencies and local army units force the people to entertain them with food and wine, plunging the already-poor people into further desperation. Consequently, eight or nine out of ten people abandon their homes and wander around the country.” Yi urged that these practices be prohibited.

Taxes are inequitable, Yi noted, as they are based on the size of one's household rather than on the productivity of a family's oft-barren land. Moreover, many local officials pay no taxes at all, as the government granted them exemptions. These practices should change so that all the lands and all the people are taxed fairly. Helping reduce the unfair burdens on people will enhance their loyalty, and they will be less vulnerable to enemies north of the border who constantly try to turn them against Goryeo.

As a final set of recommendations, Yi noted that state welfare distributions should be expanded, and only meritorious officials and generals should be promoted. In the end, whether the people are good or bad depends on the quality of their leaders, Yi argued, but the people in charge now only care about their own power and wealth.

Those who now serve as local magistrates  
gained their positions through their alliance

with the powerful families. Hence, they are negligent in their duty. The soldiers are ill provided with what they need, and the people experience hardship in maintaining their livelihoods. The number of households decreases, and the state warehouses are empty. Therefore, I sincerely request that Your Majesty send men of integrity and diligence as local magistrates and let them govern the people with benevolence. Let them take care of widows, widowers, and others left alone.<sup>16</sup>

The imprint of Jeong Do-jeon was all over these recommendations. Correspondingly, at about the same time as Yi delivered this impressive bit of military and social analysis to the court, he also recommended that Jeong Do-jeon be brought back into government and granted a ministerial post again. "The study of Jeong Do-jeon has delved into the deep problems of Confucian scripture and history," said Yi Seong-gye. "His knowledge is well-versed regarding ancient times...He has good insights and writing skills. In addition, he has a gentle scholar's spirit."<sup>17</sup>

With the General's support, Jeong Do-jeon was finally brought back from exile in July of 1384. It had been a long ten years, and the scholar stood alone for a time in the rain and wind, "hesitant outside the door,"<sup>18</sup> before walking once again through the doors of the Sungkyunkwan Confucian Academy. Jeong was reinstated as a fourth-class officer, responsible for writing up ceremonial occasions. The very next year, also on the recommendation of Yi Seong-gye (who had met with Sambong several other times by now), he was promoted to Grand Minister of the Confucian Academy.<sup>19</sup>

A new alliance was emerging in Goryeo. While the old order was based on the power of *gwonmun sejok* landed elites, with special connections to the royal family, this new force featured an alliance between idealistic scholars from across the peninsula, civil service bureaucrats, and the northeastern military force of Yi Seong-gye.<sup>20</sup> Many of these Confucian scholars or mid-level bureaucrats were small- to medium-

sized landowners of moderate wealth themselves, but they were alienated from what they saw as the thoroughly corrupted and inaccessible high summits of Goryeo power.

These *sadaebu* had been nurtured inside the cocoon of Sungkyunkwan academy, where they grew as an intellectual and political force. Now approached their eclosion. The northern general had found his philosophers of state, and the scholars had found their man.<sup>21</sup> In later years, whenever he grew boisterously drunk, Jeong Do-jeon liked to laugh about how “Liu-bang, the founder of Han China, did not take advantage of Zhang Liang [his philosopher-advisor]; rather, Zhang Liang took advantage of the founder of Han China.”<sup>22</sup>

Following his dramatic reform appeal to the court, Yi Seong-gye returned to his place on the *Dodang* council and to his Gaegyeong family. The conquering general was a great hit back in Goryeo's capital. He went on lots of hunting trips with local dandies and his own soldiers. On one occasion, General Choe Yeong held a grand banquet and asked Yi Seong-gye for help. “I will prepare the noodle dishes and you prepare the meat dishes,” Choe said to Yi. “No problem,” said General Yi and he set off with his crew, hunting for fresh meat.

It came to pass on this hunt that a roe deer had run down a hill so steep that the hunters couldn't chase it, and they had to go down and around by a longer route. Yi Seong-gye stayed on top of the ravine. As his hunting partners came around the bottom of the steep hill, suddenly they heard Yi Seong-gye's famous arrow whistle over their heads. The general then came plunging straight down the steep gorge on horseback, shooting at the deer as he rode by “like lightning” and dropping it dead. Yi then pulled up to his partners, laughing at his own exploits. The local notable who was with them was amazed and “kept praising Yi Seong-gye for a long time.”<sup>23</sup>

On another occasion, Yi joined King U for a hunt. This time, Yi said to his attendants that he would only shoot at an animal's spine when he came upon it—no other location. That day, the mythologizing *Taejo Sillok* reports that Yi Seong-gye shot down dozens of deer, and all of them were hit square in the back, just as he said. “Those who watched his marvelous archery skills could not help admiring him.”<sup>24</sup>

King U loved festive occasions and during this time in 1384 the King once set up an archery contest. One of the contestants was known as the best archer in Goryeo, an established court personality. Yi Seong-gye stepped up to challenge the champion. The target was “a bowl-sized yellow paper with a silver mark only a couple of inches in diameter placed in the middle. It was set up fifty paces away.” The contest became a grand court event, going deep into the evening. In the end, the King’s champion archer hit the target fifty times before missing. But Yi Seong-gye hit the silver mark every time he shot and far outdueled his opponent. He had earned the nickname some called him: “Shin-gung,” the “God-like archer.” For his marksmanship, King U awarded Yi with three fine horses.<sup>25</sup>

There were many more stunning displays of Yi’s martial prowess, according to the legendry of the *Taejo Sillok*. For example, one day while out hunting with royal family members, Yi shot a pheasant out of the sky. “Witnessing his feat, the two men dismounted their horses and congratulated Taejo, bowing their heads.” One royal relative asked for the arrow that Yi Seong-gye had used, so the General gave it to him with a smile. “There is nothing special about the arrow. It all depends on the one who uses it,” laughed General Yi.

Yi Chiran watched Seong-gye’s feats of archery amid the cliquish capital elites. He thought he saw signs of concern and envy among the bluebloods and became a bit worried. “It is not advisable to show such marvelous talent to the people too much,” he warned his General.<sup>26</sup>

Yi Chiran was right to be nervous, for as Yi Seong-gye’s power and popularity grew—together with his suspicious connection to the scholastic agitator Jeong Do-jeon—there were those in court who grew suspicious, jealous, and always wanted to bring the General down. On one occasion, some court ministers slandered Yi in King U’s presence, accusing him of being power-hungry and untrustworthy. But General Choe Yeong leapt up to put down these accusations forcefully, saying “Lord Yi is a cornerstone of our state. If the state is in danger, whom can you ask to deal with it?”<sup>27</sup> Still, there were those who grumbled about the powerhouse from the north and worried about the radical *sadaebu* at his side.

## Feuding Factions of Late Goryeo



*There once were two 1000-year-old foxes living on Mt. Baekdu. One fox began to run around the country and spread disease and doom. The other fox became a shaman, doing ceremonies for very rich people and taking all their money. Disease and doom were everywhere and the finances of the rich collapsed. A servant tracked the shaman fox to Mt. Baekdu, where it was piling up all the money. "Why are you taking all the money from the rich?" The servant asked. The fox answered: "Because the spirit of Mt. Baekdu told me to collect all the money until a new king emerges, so that he might be able to build a new palace and new kingdom."<sup>1</sup>*



These days were unsettled. Though Yi In-im's pro-Yuan faction had taken over Goryeo politics some years ago, the reality was that the Ming Dynasty in China was ascendant and Goryeo's court increasingly had to accommodate this fact. Though Goryeo had received many Yuan envoys in the first years after King Gongmin's assassination, by the 1380s there was no denying the victory of Ming forces in China. Ming had even taken control of all the Liaodong lands north of the Yalu River, including those where Yi Seong-gye had once recaptured an old Goguryeo fortress. Goryeo had retreated south of the Yalu after Yi Seong-gye's victory and Ming forces had filled the void.<sup>2</sup>

Now Ming began to demand robust tribute from Goryeo. In the spring of 1379, Ming envoys visited Goryeo and demanded regular tribute of 100 catties of gold, 10,000 taels of silver, 100 fine horses, and 10,000 roles of hemp—in addition to 1,000 fine horses as atonement for the earlier murder of Ming envoy Chae-Bin.<sup>3</sup> Though fulfilling these demands was difficult for Goryeo after constant invasions by Japanese pirates and Red Turban forces, Goryeo prepared large volumes of tribute and sent them north.

## THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

A number of Goryeo envoys reached the border of Ming (i.e., the Liaodong lands north of the Yalu), but the suspicious Ming kept turning them back (even after demanding tribute be sent), remembering Goryeo's history of interest in conquering these territories.<sup>4</sup> Several times, Zhu Yuanzhang charged that Goryeo's envoys were smuggling in Jurchen warriors "to see what's going on in my military camps." "Don't send people to come to trade and spy!" the Ming emperor ordered as he refused entry by Goryeo tribute missions.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Ming kept building up their own forces just north of the border. Goryeo became increasingly uneasy and kept sending hopeless envoys of peace and tribute.

Finally, at the end of 1383, Ming officials allowed a Goryeo envoy to cross the border. They informed this envoy that peaceful relations might be possible with Goryeo, but only for a hefty tribute. The Ming court demanded that Goryeo agree to back-payment of tribute for the previous five-year period that they had not been allowed to enter Ming—only then would Ming finally accept Goryeo sincerity. This level of tribute would have been immense, adding up to 5,000 strong horses, 50,000 rolls of hemp, and five years of gold and silver taels.\* Goryeo couldn't hope to mobilize this much payment, so the court offered instead to provide Ming with 3,000 horses, and a promissory note for all the rest to follow in later envoys.<sup>6</sup>

It was a dicey situation, partly because Ming officials found many of the horses offered in tribute to be dwarfish, weak things ("like donkeys")—hardly the war horses they were expecting.<sup>7</sup> A series of tense negotiations emerged about just how much tribute had to be offered, and of what quality.<sup>8</sup> Hoping for a breakthrough, in July 1384 the Goryeo Court decided to send one of their top scholars and diplomats, the aristocratic Jeong Mong-ju, to the Ming court on the occasion of the Emperor's birthday.

Jeong Mong-ju was known for his elegant refinement and silver tongue, which would hopefully serve him well as an

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\* A "tael" is a weight measure used across East and Southeast Asia. Its weight varied over time and was probably about 37.5 grams in Yi Seong-gye's time. The tael weight was standardized in China during modern times at 50 grams.

envoy to Ming. Scholastic firebrand Jeong Do-jeon was chosen as Jeong Mong-ju's partner, and the two men pressed on day and night as they rushed to the Ming capital so they could arrive by the Emperor's birthday on September 18.<sup>9</sup>

The eloquent Jeong Mong-ju was a big hit at the Ming court. He and Jeong Do-jeon returned to Goryeo in April of 1385 with good news. The Ming court had agreed to accept Goryeo's smaller tribute and would also agree to let Goryeo send regular envoys to China several times a year. Most importantly, ten years after King Gongmin's death, the Ming finally agreed to recognize King U as the legitimate King of Goryeo and to bestow a posthumous title upon King Gongmin. Goryeo could at last enter into full diplomatic relations with Ming. A great celebratory party was arranged that April to celebrate the felicitous news. Many of the Goryeo's finest elites, military commanders, and scholars toasted a new day in Goryeo, but King U only became drunk and searched for women to take to bed.<sup>10</sup>

The news was good, but receiving the Ming envoys later that year to deliver the Emperor's blessing to King U came with complications. For one thing, thawing relations with Ming meant accepting their growing troops on the border of the Yalu River, and completely turning away from Goryeo's old Yuan allies. Accordingly, when Yuan sent an envoy to Goryeo in October of 1384, it was turned away at the border. The envoy lingered at the border for six months, hoping to enter Goryeo, but in the end the hapless diplomat died without ever crossing the border.

Even as relations thawed, tensions remained high as the Ming envoy arrived to recognize the legitimacy of King U. When the Ming envoy arrived at the northern border in late summer of 1384, representatives inquired about the health of Goryeo's great generals, Choe Yeong and Yi Seong-gye. The Ming envoy's interest in meeting the two generals directly perhaps made the Goryeo court officials nervous, for they sent both generals away from the capital before the envoys arrived. King U's political position was weak; perhaps there was concern of military strongmen undermining the Goryeo crown, especially if they became close to Ming operatives. So both



## THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

Generals were sent away from the capital city in the fall of 1384 and were unable to meet the Ming envoy.<sup>11</sup>

Choe Yeong camped in the suburbs outside Gaegyeong, but the Goryeo court sent Yi Seong-gye all the way back to Hamhung. It just so happened that there was a growing military crisis in the northeast at that very moment, so there was reason to send him. One hundred and fifty Japanese pirate ships had just landed near the Hamhung coast and marauders were plundering the region. Local Goryeo forces resisted the pirates, but had “suffered an overwhelming defeat, and the enemy’s morale rose sharply.”<sup>12</sup> Volunteering to help his hometown, General Yi left Gaegyeong to its Ming reception and marched once again to war on the pirates.

General Yi arrived in the demoralized camp of Goryeo soldiers, Yi Chiran at his side. His first order of business was to raise the soldier’s morale. He pointed out pinecones on the high limbs of a tall pine tree, 70 paces away. He called out each small pinecone target in turn and hit it true, seven in a row. As the local soldiers cheered and stomped their feet, Yi Seong-gye blew his conch horn and headed out to fight the pirates.<sup>13</sup>

General Yi knew how to destabilize his opponents. Blowing his loud conch horn as he approached the Japanese forces, he marched slowly into the area, passing right in front of the Japanese pirates with his cavalry force of 100 men. The pirates were so nervous they couldn’t attack but simply took defensive positions. General Yi then sat down upon a chair right in the middle of the field. He told his troops to let their horses graze and to remove their saddles. While the horses were resting right in front of them, General Yi’s nonchalance must have unnerved the Japanese. Yi took out his bow and began to shoot at a dry tree stump, 100 paces away, hitting it three times in a row.

Then Yi told the pirates that he was a general of thousands of men. “You had better surrender yourselves quickly. Otherwise, it will be too late for regrets.” The enemy commander couldn’t decide what to do, so Yi coldly declared that the moment of surrender had passed: “it is the right time to attack.” In the subsequent battle, General Yi himself personally killed over twenty of the enemy, with his large arrows passing through even heavy armor. All the pirates were

either killed or captured. Once again, Yi was given reward: “50 taels of silver, a roll of fabric that was long enough to make five dresses, and a horse with saddle, as well as an honorable title that read ‘Merit Subject Who Subjugated Distant Regions.’”<sup>14</sup>

From one point of view, things were looking better in Goryeo. Japanese pirate attacks were declining, Yi Seong-gye’s army seemed unbeatable, and the Ming dynasty was reaching out to stabilize relations. But not everyone was happy with these developments. For one thing, some were upset at Ming’s constantly growing forces north of the Yalu. And for another, many old elites were unnerved by the way Yi Seong-gye was starting to shake things up politically.

In terms of the border situation, Ming troops had taken the initiative in absorbing all the Liaodong lands north of the Yalu by the late 1380s. Many of these lands were long ago part of Korea’s ancient Goguryeo kingdom, there were many ethnic Koreans living there, and Yi Seong-gye himself had recently won important battles north of the Yalu River. So some Goryeo officials chafed as thawing relations with the Ming led to a growing and uncontested Ming presence in these lands. General Choe Yeong, who always dreamed of making Goryeo a strong and respected nation, was among those who didn’t appreciate the Ming’s blustering claims to all of Liaodong.

Another source of unease for some in the Goryeo court was the rise of Yi Seong-gye, with his melioristic talk of such things as land reform and a merit-based personnel system. In 1384, Yi had submitted his radical set of Jeong Do-jeon-influenced proposals to stabilize the border, which included proposals to increase taxes on the wealthy, redistribute *gwonmun sejok* lands to poor farmers, promote only meritorious officials, and reduce expectations that villagers provide food and wine to travelling elites. Some of the established powers of Goryeo didn’t think much of these proposals, but as Yi Seong-gye’s stature grew, these reformist ideas gathered steam. Some of the worst of the *gwonmun sejok* families fiercely defended all their traditional prerogatives even as progressive fervor swelled the halls of Sungkyunkwan. Something had to give.

Then came the “Jo Ban Incident,” which clarified things in a hurry.<sup>15</sup> Jo Ban was a retired official of Goryeo, a respected

two-time envoy to Ming, who had helped to win Ming's approval of King U's accession to the throne, after many years of resistance. He was now retired and living on his rich agricultural lands in Baekche, far south of the capital. In the late fall of 1387, it seems a high official on the Goryeo court (Yeom Hueng-bang, Left Director of the State Finance Commission, and close Yi In-im ally) decided that he wanted to claim these rich lands for himself. He sent one of his servants with a group of toughs to drive the elderly Jo Ban off his land. Yeom Hueng-bang was counting on his connection to Prime Minister Yi In-im to let him get away with anything, even roughing up an old Goryeo notable. The servant who showed up on Jo Ban's lands in Baekche was described as a simple "ruffian of the streets."<sup>16</sup> He berated and abused Jo Ban as he tried to drive him off the land, secure in his own connection to an elite minister back in Gaegyeong.

The Confucian *sadaebu* in Gaegyeong howled about the injustice, and word of the incident reached the crown. Jo Ban was a respectable former minister of *Dodang*—how could he now be violently driven off his land by Yi In-im's foul allies? Even though King U was closely allied to Yi In-im, pressure mounted to do something about the injustice to Jo Ban and others. So in December of 1387 King U issued an order to provincial officials to compile the names of all those who were plundering the nation's storehouses, and illicitly reducing commoners to slaves on their ill-gotten lands.<sup>17</sup> It seems that some of the reformers' ideas had gotten to the king.

This royal order set loose a chain of events that would ultimately drive Yi Seong-gye marching to war on Ming China, less than a year later, which sealed the fate of the doomed Goryeo dynasty. It began when local officials refused to cooperate with the King's appeal for the names of malefactors stealing land and grain from the state, which makes sense because these same officials were some of the main culprits. Instead of cooperating with the King's reformist crusade, the same official who attacked Jo Ban earlier (Yeom Hueng-bang) sent his ruffians *yet again* to beat up Jo Ban and demand his lands.<sup>18</sup>

Jo Ban couldn't take it anymore. He retaliated by organizing a surprise attack on the local ruffian (Yi Gwang), burning

down his house and killing him in the process. Jo Ban felt he could rely on King U's land reform order, and his own former official status, to protect him from killing this low-level servant, but he was wrong. Back in Gaegyeong, Yeom Hueng-bang was furious and accused Jo Ban of treason against the state. Yeom called on his personal connection to high level Goryeo officials (for example, he was the son-in-law of Yi In-im's right-hand man, Im Gyeon-mi) and poor Jo Ban didn't have a chance. On January 1<sup>st</sup> of 1388, Yeom had Jo Ban imprisoned and accused of treason.

Jo Ban defended himself, denouncing the corruption of Goryeo elites. "They are great bandits because six or seven greedy tycoons release their slaves everywhere to take people's lands. These slaves harm and abuse people. How can it be considered rebellion against the nation when I killed one of these slaves?"<sup>19</sup> But it was no use: Yeom had Jo Ban arrested, together with his nephew, mother, and wife. Yeom ordered Jo Ban forcefully interrogated until he confessed his treason and gave up the names of other people who spoke poorly of Gaegyeong's officials.<sup>20</sup>

Gaegyeong's official interrogators prepared for torture. *Juri* was the most common form of torture, whereby the accused was strapped into a wooden chair and had two long poles inserted between his legs, crossed diagonally. Then, two strong men pulled or pressed down upon the poles in opposite directions, forcefully spreading the legs apart and often breaking or dislocating the leg bones. The *Koryosa* describes other torture techniques: "The thumbs of both hands were tied to a beam, the big toes were tied together, and a heavy stone was tied to it, and a charcoal fire was lit under it. Two people were ordered to take turns whipping the waist and back."<sup>21</sup> Other common torture included beating a person's lower legs until they fractured. The soles of feet were cut open. Thighs and knees were pressed between thick boards. Nose-cutting, foot-splitting, and ash-water waterboarding were common.<sup>22</sup>

On public display, Jo Ban endured whatever torture the magistrate doled out all day long, while he continued to curse corrupt elites and officials. "Why do you call yourself committed to the nation when you only love each other?!" he cried. But Yeom and the other ministers of Yi In-im's faction

were unrelenting. The public torture sessions went on and grew more painful, day after day. Public sentiments began to run high against the corrupt officials of Goryeo, openly meting out this brutality on a retired public servant.<sup>23</sup>

Jo Ban endured five days of torture, until finally Generals Choe Yeong and Yi Seong-gye had enough. They went together to King U to appeal for the torture to end. They both made the case for some necessary social reforms and pointed out the obvious corruption and horrible brutality of his top officials. Confronted by two immensely popular and angry generals, the uneasy King was persuaded.

On January 5<sup>th</sup>, he ordered the torture to stop. It was a surprise to Yeom Heung-bang, who had showed up that day, eager to oversee another long torture session.

Suddenly, the tables turned. On January 7<sup>th</sup>, after the torture had been stopped, King U gave medicine to Jo-Ban's imprisoned nephew and ordered his mother and wife released. He issued a royal edict that poor farmers had to be better protected by local magistrates. Taxes on their harvest were reduced and officials were required to ensure the people were always left with enough to feed their families. To cap the day's activities, King U also ordered a shocked Yeom Heung-bang—Jo Ban's relentless persecutor—to be arrested.

On January 8<sup>th</sup>, Yi Seong-gye and Cheo Yeong mobilized their troops in case the family of Yeom Heung-bang or any private forces of the Yi In-im faction tried to rebel. Then Yi and Choe set out together to eliminate "the whole gang of evildoers," capturing top ministers like Im Gyeon-mi, Yeom Heung-bang and Do Gil-bu, together with several of their associates and relatives. On January 11<sup>th</sup>, these three high officials were all executed. In the next week about fifty others were killed for state corruption or illegal seizure of local lands. Their assets were seized, and King U sent inspectors across the country to determine what lands might have been illegally stolen from people and to punish the malefactors. As reported in the *Taejo Sillok*, "The people across the country were overjoyed to hear the news, and they danced and sang in the streets."<sup>24</sup>

King U issued a proclamation naming meritorious retainers of Goryeo who helped in the purge of the

malefactors. Prominently featured were Generals Choe Yeong and Yi Seong-gye, who became joint directors of future personnel appointments.<sup>25</sup> Over the next two months, the King's land inspectors would conduct a nation-wide investigation of illegal seizures of land and goods, which would result in about 1000 executions. Finally, the Yi In-im faction had been dislodged in a bloody, nationwide purge. Ever the wily fox, Yi In-im himself escaped execution and simply retired from politics altogether, accepting exile with his brother. General Choe "has privately spared the old thief," some people complained. "The great thief...has escaped the net."<sup>26</sup>

The world of Goryeo politics had changed dramatically, but the break was never complete. Yi In-im, the corruption at the heart of *gwonmun sejok* politics for years, had survived. Though many corrupt local elites (*hyangni*) had been killed in the provinces, other questionable aristocrats in the capital survived—especially those known to Choe Yeong, who was himself a rich Goryeo patrician in the end. Many traditional capital patricians showed up on King U's new list of meritorious retainers, although they certainly had participated in the corrupt land schemes and sale of government positions. Bureaucratic positions were filled by some of these old offenders. Moreover, although many of the most corrupt local officials had been executed, the grand project of systematic land reform hardly moved forward at all.

Simply put, though progress was made, it wasn't a clean break with the past, and much of the old system survived. Perhaps more importantly, considering the likelihood of Yi Seong-gye's own growing ambitions, General Choe Yeong remained closely connected with many remaining elites in Goryeo court society, and had a more clear path to power and royal influence than did Yi himself. When Yi Seong-gye complained about the continued influence of corrupt old families like Yi In-im in Goryeo, the Koryosa simply says that "Choe Yeong didn't listen,"<sup>27</sup> In the aftermath, Yi Seong-gye would grow increasingly disenchanted with General Choe Yeong's more easy acceptance of Goryeo's surviving malefactors, and with Choe's tight connections to the crown. Distance began to grow between the two lions of late Goryeo.



## The Return from Wihwado



*There was once a time when Yi Seong-gye was young that he studied at the same school as Ju Won-jang (c. Zhu Yuanzhang). Both young students were strong, bold and ambitious. Over time, Ju Won-jang noticed that Yi Seong-gye was growing a fine, fierce beard, with three impressive strands (samwasu). Ju thought that Yi would become a powerful leader if he kept that beard, so he plotted to get rid of it. One night he waited until Yi Seong-gye became drunk and lost consciousness. Then he cut off Yi's beard and burned it in a fire. After that time, Yi Seong-gye's courage began to wither.*

*There was a time after that incident that the teacher of Yi Seong-gye and Ju Won-jang decided to test the courage of both young men. He took them into the mountains to an empty old house for the shamans and spirits. He asked Yi Seong-gye to put his hand through a dark window. Yi put his hand through the window, but something grabbed him, and Yi pulled his hand out fast, crying out in fear: "There's a ghost in there!" Then Ju Won-jang put his hand through the window, and felt his wrist grabbed as well. Ju Won-jang did not pull out his hand, but fiercely shouted out "Let it go!" His hand was let go and then another student from their school came out of the dark space, laughing. He had been grabbing his friends' hands in the dark.*

*The teacher asked Ju: "How did you know it was a person grabbing your hand?" Ju answered: "Because the hand grabbing me was warm." The teacher praised Ju Won-jang and said he was bold and would achieve a great thing.*

*After a time, both Ju Won-jang and Yi Seong-gye were travelling to China, though not together. Ju stopped by a tavern on the road and ordered a drink. The innkeeper told Ju that the drink was expensive and cost 1000 nyang. Ju didn't have any money at all, but he didn't care and drank up three whole bowls. When the side dishes were brought to him, Ju noticed that they were full of blood and severed fingers. He ate it all up. He said to the*



*innkeeper "Don't worry! I'll be back to pay for all this after I achieve a great thing."*

*Some time later, Yi Seong-gye showed up at the same tavern and ordered the same drink. The innkeeper said the drink would cost 1000 nyang. Yi Seong-gye grew worried and said: "I only have 500 nyang, so I guess I can only have half a drink." When the side dishes of bloody severed fingers arrived, Yi Seong-gye would not eat them.*

*As Yi Seong-gye was leaving on the road, an old man came up to him and said, "those drinks were sent by Heaven. Ju Won-jang drank three bowls without worry and ate everything, but you wouldn't even drink one bowl. You should not even dream about doing a big thing." When Yi Seong-gye turned around to look at the tavern, both the inn and the innkeeper had disappeared.*

*It also came to pass on their journeys that both Yi Seong-gye and Ju Won-jang came across a pond in the woods. An old man was nearby, and he said that whoever entered the pond would become a great leader. Yi Seong-gye approached, but there were blue and gold dragons playing in the pond. Yi grew scared and would not enter. Ju Won-jang was not scared, however. He entered the pond and played with the two dragons.*

*In later days, these two men became competitors who struggled to found their countries. But while the bold Ju Won-jang became the founder of the great country of Ming China (being called Zhu Yuanzhang there), the cautious Yi Seong-gye only achieved the much smaller country of Joseon.<sup>1</sup>*



Now came the momentous days of spring 1388 that changed the course of Korean history. From the accession of King U after King Gongmin's assassination to the events of 1388, Goryeo and Ming were in constant tension. The Ming court withheld recognition of King U as a legitimate monarch for ten years. They demanded execution of those who killed their envoy back in the days after King Gongmin's assassination. To

make up for such insults, Ming demanded huge amounts of tribute, far more than the famine-challenged and tax-bankrupt Goryeo could mobilize. Five thousand horses were demanded on one occasion, together with 40,000 bolts of cotton and 10,000 rolls of silk. When Goryeo did give some tribute, their horses were called weak and dwarfish. Their envoys were critiqued as being impolite, not well versed in Chinese, and more interested in self-enriching trading opportunities than in serious diplomatic discussions.<sup>2</sup>

Even as Ming finally announced they would recognize King U, after Jeong Mong-ju and Jeong Do-jeon's successful trip in 1384, Ming forces on the border swelled. In 1387, Ming had conquered Liaodong with 200,000 troops and proceeded to reinforce fortifications north of the Yalu.<sup>3</sup> Ming also demanded that its traders be allowed full access to Tamna Island (Jeju) to purchase horses at will.<sup>4</sup> Threats of border conflict and all-out war with Ming simmered and Goryeo's King U became ever more anxious. What if Ming troops invaded as Red Turban rebels had done before? What if he were killed by forces of international intrigue, like King Gongmin had been? "My father was harmed while sleeping at night, so I have to be firmly vigilant," King U resolved.

After the Jo Ban incident upended things, it didn't help that Choe Yeong and Yi Seong-gye rose to undisputed power, while King U's adopted "father," Yi In-im, was exiled. King U didn't know where to turn. During some anxious times in later months, he would stay up all night on a boat in the river, with a sword by his side.<sup>5</sup> He grew easily angered at any supposed slight to his authority, and had some attendants beheaded when they didn't show up to one of his parties. To anchor the General's loyalty, he pushed Choe Yeong to marry his daughter into the royal family, but a cautious Choe demurred and said that his girl was too low born for such honor.<sup>6</sup>

At this time, in the midst of the Jo Ban upheaval, the Ming Emperor made a move. Having handily defeated the Yuan in China, the Ming court now proclaimed that it would retain ownership of all Liaodong lands North of the Yalu River, though Goryeo also considered many of these lands rightfully theirs. Now the Ming Emperor was firmly declaring ownership of these lands and demanded hefty Goryeo tribute as a sign of

loyal acceptance. The *Dodang* councilors sat stunned as the Ming message was read out: The Ming demanded 1000 virgins, 1000 young boys, and 1000 eunuchs as immediate proof of Goryeo's sincere loyalty. A court messenger dashed from the *Dodang* hall to the quarters of King U, where he had locked himself away in anxiety. "The emperor is demanding tribute of 1000 women and men each!" the anxious messenger blurted out. Cornered, King U turned to his top general Choe Yeong and asked what to do. True to character, Choe quickly refused to even consider such a huge tribute. "We cannot use up our national power!" he cried.<sup>7</sup>

In response to Goryeo's resistance, in February of 1388, The Hongwu Emperor proclaimed his intention to establish a command post at Cheollyeong pass, far south of the Yalu River and deep in Korean territory, just 50 li from Gaegyeong.<sup>8</sup> Hongwu threatened to swallow up all the old Yuan lands north of Ssangseong (including Yi Seong-gye's old hometown territories in Hamyeong-do)—a direct attack on Goryeo's territorial integrity and independence.\*

Such a move was likely to provoke a Goryeo response, but Ming leaders had good reasons for their gamble—especially at this time of Goryeo's internal chaos over the Jo Ban Affair. Constant Yalu River border disputes made them ever suspicious of Goryeo's intentions in that region.<sup>9</sup> Just as Ming dreamed of taking over all that was once Yuan in Goryeo, so did Goryeo dream of rekindling Goguryeo claims over lands north of the Yalu. Expanding Ming control of the border area would restrain any dreams of Goguryeo redux. In addition, there were many Han Chinese living in these areas, including in Goryeo territories south of the Yalu, so the Ming had an ethnic draw to this strategic transit corridor running down the northern Korean peninsula. Goryeo sovereignty was weak in

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\* For detailed historical records on Ming's claim on Goryeo's lands north of Cheollyeong Pass, including Goryeo's military response (e.g., calling up soldiers, repairing northern fortresses, and ordering Yi Seong-gye to march north into war), see *Koryosa*, v. 33, 2.1388-4.1388 These entries can be accessed at the website below, and in subsequent entries over the next few months of *Koryosa* records.  
[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_033r\\_0010\\_0010\\_0020\\_0050](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_033r_0010_0010_0020_0050).

the relatively lawless areas near the Yalu and there were constant conflicts between Mongolian, Jurchen, Han, Japanese and Goryeo forces. At heart, Ming's threat to expand their military presence both north and south of the Yalu was an effort to stabilize this unresolved and fluid area and make a loyal people out of a wild territory.

For Goryeo, the Ming plan was an existential threat. Historically, whenever China had become a strong and unified country, it had invaded Korea, as in the Han, Sui, Liao, and Yuan dynasties in the past. It seemed that once again a Chinese dynasty was claiming loyalties of northern border peoples (the Jurchen) en route to a future occupation of Goryeo itself. Upon receiving the Ming's threat, Choe Yeong called an emergency meeting of *Dodang*. All the officials agreed: "We cannot concede these territories to the Ming."<sup>10</sup>

Subsequently, Choe Yeong met privately with King U and the unthinkable was discussed: war with Ming China. Choe proposed sending the Goryeo army north to cross the Yalu and pre-emptively invade Liaodong territories now occupied by Ming forces, and he wasn't in the mood to back down. When Yi Chasong, the Grand Lord of Kongsan, met with General Choe afterwards to advise against an invasion of Ming, Choe grew furious. He had the Lord beaten with a heavy stick and then killed. Others with similar opinion were sent into exile.<sup>11</sup> There was no one left to resist talk of war. Most of Choe Yeong's opponents had already been killed, jailed, or exiled during the Jo Ban incident. Terrorizing his opponents, Choe even had the small child of one critic thrown into the river to drown.

Only Yi Seong-gye had both a cooler head and the possible ability to resist General Choe's call for war. Yi sought ways to avoid a disastrous war with Ming, while still resisting their encroachment into Goryeo. During the build-up to possible war, Yi sent Park Ui-jung (a security council official) to the northern border in February of 1388, in an effort to convince Ming leaders to back off their plan to build a fortress at Goryeo's Cheollyeong pass. This messenger explained to Ming representatives that these lands south of the river were historically part of Goryeo and were simply too close to the Goryeo capital to allow them to be taken without conflict. Yi promised that Goryeo would respect the Yalu as the northern

border and urged Ming to reverse their Cheollyeong decree. The messenger Park Uijung soon returned with a reply from the Ming, who seemed pleased at Goryeo's offer to essentially renounce claim on all lands north of the Yalu. We can't reverse the decree already ordered, the Ming reply said, but we will be careful not to upset Goryeo. The Ming reply noted that the position of Goryeo was reasonable. They explained that for now Ming troops would only build a fortress north of the Yalu and would delay the Cheollyeong fortress project.

It was a good start to a possible diplomatic resolution to the situation, but General Choe Yeong would have none of it. When a Ming envoy came down from the Liaodong commandery to discuss the issue of a Ming fortress north of the river, Choe tried to have him killed.<sup>12</sup> For Choe, Goryeo had been too sorely insulted and wartime response was the only path. Moreover, if Goryeo succeeded in war, the lands of Liaodong itself might be claimed, as in Goguryeo of old. Goryeo, not Ming, would be the great power in the Northeast region—a goal long sought by General Choe Yeong.

Finally, there was also the issue of Yi Seong-gye's stubborn resistance to Choe Yeong's recent leadership, and the fact of General Yi's dangerously powerful northeastern army. Here was Choe Yeong's chance to order Yi Seong-gye's great army into a climactic battle. Either the undefeated Yi Seong-gye would win again and new lands would be opened to Goryeo's claim, thus winning Choe Yeong great acclaim for his gamble—or Yi Seong-gye would lose, and his army and popularity would be destroyed, leaving Choe Yeong the sole serious powerholder in Goryeo.<sup>13</sup> Now was Choe Yeong's chance to either win sweeping territory long desired by Goryeo, or perhaps put a damper on any dangerous aspirations by Yi Seong-gye.

So in March 1388, King U and Choe Yeong decided on a military attack on Ming forces north of the Yalu river, hoping to drive Ming out of the Liaodong peninsula altogether and reclaim traditional lands. It could be the second coming of Goguryeo, that ancient Korean kingdom that once governed much of (later named) Manchuria as well.

But there were many in Goryeo who were strongly against provoking a war with their powerful neighbor. If

Goryeo lost, it could be return to occupation and submission as in the days of vassalage to Yuan. Wouldn't it be better to develop pragmatic relations with the new power in Nanjing, perhaps even to enter into a tributary relationship with the rising Ming dynasty? Scared of announcing their bold and dangerous invasion publicly in the face of such certain resistance, King U first travelled to Haeju (a bit northwest of the capital) to meet Yi Seong-gye (now the vice-Chancellor of Goryeo), hoping to win him over to the idea.<sup>14</sup>

But General Yi was in favor of agreeing to the Ming's territorial demands north of the Yalu, in exchange for Ming not establishing a command post south of the river. This pragmatic policy would avoid devastating war and would stabilize Korean sovereignty over lands south of the Yalu, which were more easily defensible by Korean forces than Liaodong lands north of the river.<sup>15</sup> More than just a geopolitical debate about the balance of military power in the region, the debate concerned the overall direction of Goryeo society and court. General Yi was dismayed by what he saw as continued corrupt and indefensible behavior by many Goryeo elites, even after the purges of the Jo-Ban incident. He wasn't excited about fighting a war so that Goryeo's high government officials could keep selling government positions for personal gain, seizing land and property from commoners, and enslaving and trafficking Goryeo peasants.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond all these issues, Yi was concerned that invasion of Ming would be a military disaster, for his troops and his country. In their private meeting on May 31, 1388, Yi vigorously advised King U against the attack, "There are four problems in raising an army at the present time," Yi argued. "First, it is not advisable for a small country to challenge a large country. Second, it is also not a good idea to mobilize an army during the [hot, wet] summer. Third, the Japanese will try to take advantage of the situation during our military campaign as we send our army to a far-off land. Fourth, since it is the rainy season now, the glue put on the bows will be loosened, and the soldiers will be exposed to epidemic disease."<sup>17</sup>

At the end of the conversation, King U seemed well-nigh persuaded by Yi's reasoning. Yi Seong-gye then met with

General Choe Yeong and urged him to repeat this same reasoning to the King when they met privately. Choe promised Yi that he would do that. However, Choe visited the king alone that very night and once again urged only war. "I beg you not to listen to anyone [with a different point of view]," he implored the king.<sup>18</sup>

In their next meeting, General Yi Seong-gye was directed by King U to march his army north, cross the Yalu River, and lead the attack on Ming-held territory. Yi Seong-gye begged that at least the invasion should be delayed until the fall, so that there was time for the harvest to come in, and soldiers would be well supplied with food in the field. Moreover, the Yalu River froze over in the fall and winter, so it would be easier for troops to cross. But King U wouldn't listen to any of this reasoning. "I can't stop now because I've already called up soldiers," the King said.<sup>19</sup>

Then the King offered a warning to General Yi. "Didn't you see what happened to Yi Chasong?" King U asked, referring to the high official who Choe Yeong had beaten and killed for resisting the war.

"He left an honorable name behind," Yi coldly replied.

That afternoon, Yi returned to his soldiers in tears. As they gathered to hear their fate, his words were dark. "The catastrophe for the people has now begun."<sup>20</sup>

In April of 1388, King U and General Choe moved their base to Seogyang (Pyongyang), 340 li north of the capital city of Gaegyeong, so that they could oversee war preparations and the military departure. The Queen and crown prince (Chang) had already been moved into the Hanyang fortress south of the capital (today's Seoul).<sup>21</sup> Soldiers were conscripted across the peninsula. Even Buddhist monks were drafted into the growing invasion force. Half of the state's already overstretched coffers and the confiscated property of some of the disgraced and executed elites of the Jo Ban incident were used to pay soldiers and acquire military supplies.<sup>22</sup>

As the army formed, Yi Seong-gye was ordered to direct the right army while commander Jo Min-soo was given the left army. Yi couldn't have been too excited at his fellow commander, who didn't have a distinguished record. Back in one 1375 campaign against Japanese pirates around the Daegu

area, Jo Min-soo had lost all his battles. Because Jo Min-soo had the support of Yi In-im, King U had wanted to award him with clothes and fine liquor for these lost battles, but Kim Ja-su of the Office of Remonstrances pushed back. "How?" He asked. "Jo Min-soo doesn't have much merit due to his many defeats." For his honest assessment, the Remonstrator was sent to prison.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, while Yi Seong-gye's forces included his elite, private troops—well trained and loyal—Jo Min-soo's private forces were much less intimidating.

General Choe Yeong thought at one point to join these armies, commanding a center army of his own, but King U cried in desperation and fell to his knees. He grabbed Choe's ankles, calling him "Father," and begged him not to join the invasion. "If you go, whom should I discuss the affairs of state with?" the King lamented.<sup>24</sup> King U also feared that he might be attacked by court enemies without Choe Yeong around. So Choe agreed to stay beside the king in Seogyang while Yi Seong-gye prepared to go off to war.

It was certainly true that King U needed a stable force beside him, for he continued his erratic and emotional behaviors in the buildup to war. The King ordered the suspension of all Chinese music across the land and took to wearing only Mongol clothes. He suspended any use of the term "Hongwu," which was the title Zhu Yuanzhang had taken upon accession as the first Ming emperor. All this was reasonable, but he also played the Mongol flute at long drinking parties deep into the night and began to neglect other affairs of state. He was easily angered, once killing a person washing horses for no reason at all and cutting down a baby in the street who noisily surprised him. Both the *Koryosa* and the *Taejo Sillok* (both admittedly compiled by diarists of the anti-King U faction) note disparagingly that King U increasingly filled his days with "debauchery, playing the pipe, drinking, and womanizing. Even worse, he killed people recklessly." In the final days before the departure, U spent all his time boating, playing games on the river, and constantly playing whistles and flutes. He ordered piles of erotic pictures delivered to the palace.<sup>25</sup>

With an unstable and debauched royal commander, and fears of his impossible task, Yi Seong-gye must have had an



## THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

uneasy sleep the night before setting out for war with Ming. Perhaps he even thought of a children's song that was said to circulate during those days, offering a plea that General Yi could somehow save them from the coming war with China.

*Outside the Western Capital there is a fire.  
Outside Anju Fortress there is smoke and light.  
Between the two places, General Yi travels  
back and forth.  
One wishes he could save the people.<sup>26</sup>*

General Yi knew a catastrophe was coming, and it must have weighed heavy that he was the person ordered to set it in motion, even as the wreckage of Goryeo mounted everywhere. Suffering and poverty of common people had deepened in the years after the Red Turban invasions amid the deep corruption of the aristocrats. There were increasing numbers of wandering people, as more and more common lands were claimed by private elites. Families were known to sell off their children, and illegal slaughtering of the livestock of others was growing.<sup>27</sup> There was plenty of talk about how the corruption of the aristocrats was causing disharmony between Goryeo and Heaven—leading to punishments of drought, disease, famine, and now possible war.<sup>28</sup> General Yi saw all this, he had carefully listened to the scholars critique the moral and political decay of Goryeo, and now he was ordered by the King to heap yet one more disaster upon the backs of the Goryeo people.

As the Goryeo troops gathered on the morning of April 18, 1388, to begin their march north, King U was not even there to see them off. The King had gone on a boat ride and become exceedingly drunk the night before, and even at noon was sleeping it off. "So the commanders were unable to take leave of the King," the *Taejo Sillok* reports.<sup>29</sup> Just after noon, Yi's gloomy troops left the city and marched north without even a royal farewell. That same day, in Jinpo harbor (Jeolla province), about 80 Japanese pirating ships dropped anchor and began plundering the region far south of the capital.<sup>30</sup>

Yi Seong-gye and Jo Min-soo commanded armies of about 50,000 persons and 22,000 horses.<sup>31</sup> The march north must

have been a dramatic scene. Though weather was dour and anxiety high, Yi Seong-gye's personal troops rallied to his side, and thousands of elite warriors mobilized under the General's flag. The Joseon hagiography, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, tells it this way:

*While the submerged dragon had  
not yet taken wing,  
The people of the north submitted to him.  
Carrying bows and swords  
They served him on the right and on the left.*<sup>32</sup>

As for the villagers, *Songs of the Dragons* tells us that "Heaven sent a genius to save the people." Many people sang of General Yi's virtues as his troops passed by, hoping somehow the general might still save them all from war. They didn't know what was coming, "but Heaven told them in their dreams."<sup>33</sup>

Though Heaven may have whispered about a submerged dragon, the moment remained dire. For Yi's troops, it was a difficult journey north, through constant rain and mud. By the time Yi reached the Yalu River frontier on May 7<sup>th</sup> (three slogging weeks after leaving Seogyang), the rains continued, and the river was flooding. Disease was spreading through his weary troops, and many were deserting.<sup>34</sup> Back in Gaegyeong, Choe Yeong proposed leading a disciplinary team to hunt down deserters and kill them, but King U refused. Remember how King Gongmin was assassinated when you once left to discipline people on Tamna, U reminded the general.

Amid deserting and diseased troops, at the flood-raging river, Yi's men built rafts as best they could and began to ferry over. The Yalu was fierce and swollen and hundreds drowned, unable even to reach Wihwa island, a long flat bar in the middle of the river channel. For those that did reach the island, the rains continued. The troops gathered in the drench on the thin island sandbar, watched the river waters swell with bloated bodies of the drowned, and contemplated additional flooded river crossings to come.

Dispirited, General Yi sent a letter to his King on May 13<sup>th</sup>. "Let us quit this campaign," he begged. Our soldiers are drowning, and our bows are falling apart in the sticky summer

weather.<sup>35</sup> We will lose to the superior Ming forces and Goryeo will be worse off. But King U was preparing for a relaxing sojourn in the Seongju hot springs, so he hurriedly sent his cold reply—carry on.<sup>36</sup> Yi sent a second request for withdrawal, while his troops huddled on the thin sandbar, surrounding by ever rising waters. This request was received by Choe Yeong who sent back his own stony reply on May 22<sup>nd</sup>—carry on.

Yi was losing faith in these rulers. Looking at the hopeless situation and considering the faith that his troops put in him, General Yi could continue no longer. He considered resigning his post altogether and just returning home with the “troops of his standard”<sup>37</sup> to Hamhung, but that option wasn’t very promising. He would still be blamed for defying the King’s command and would hardly be safe simply by sitting still in the north.

Events were rushing forward, and Yi must have known all his options were troubled with unpredictable results: war on Ming, return as a traitor to Gaegyeong, or retreat to the northeast and await the royal rebuke. All paths out of the chaos were dark. We can call such occasions a “Machiavellian moment”—the past order has already collapsed, but a new order has not yet arisen.<sup>38</sup> Such historical convergences are leadership moments, times when people are face-to-face with profound instability and the choices of the leader can create or destroy great value.<sup>39</sup> The banks of the Yalu River in May of 1388 were just such a time and place. A choice had to be made.

On May 22, General Yi gathered 1,000 of his private troops and prepared for a possible withdrawal. Immediately, his fellow commander Jo Min-soo panicked. It appeared Yi Seong-gye might be resigning from his Goryeo post altogether and marching back home to Hamhung. General Min-soo came to Yi Seong-gye in tears.

“If you leave, what should we do?” he wondered, begging Yi to stay with the armies.

“What makes you think I would leave?” Yi Seong-gye replied. “Stop saying that.”<sup>40</sup>

Instead of leaving, Yi Seong-gye ordered all the officers of Goryeo’s invasion force to gather close. There in the rain on

Wihwa island, with flood waters rising all about, General Seong-gye spoke to the men in earnest.

*If we invade the borders of China and incur the wrath of the Son of Heaven [the Chinese emperor], we will immediately bring about catastrophe to our country as well as our people. Based on reason and common sense, I tried to persuade the government to withdraw from this military campaign before it was too late, but the King does not realize the magnitude of what he is doing, and Choe Yeong, old and senile, pays no attention to my plea. Would you join me in seeing and persuading the King, personally explaining the potential problems with our military action, and finally removing the wicked people surrounding the King and bringing peace to people's lives?<sup>41</sup>*

The General was inviting his troops to refuse the royal command, turn around, follow him to Gaegyeong, and demand personal audience with the King. They would “see and persuade the King” and remove the “wicked people” who surrounded him. To a man, Yi’s gathered officers replied with their support. “The security of our nation and people solely depends on you. How can we dare not follow your orders?”<sup>42</sup>

Yi Seong-gye then rebuked the King’s order and turned his army around. As the troops ferried back across the river to Goryeo lands, General Yi watched from atop a hill, astride his fine white horse, holding his bright red bow with white feather arrows. According to the *Taejo Sillok*, thankful soldiers looked up at the general and said to one another: “There has been no man like him, and there will be no man like him hereafter.” As the army regrouped under General Yi’s banner on Goryeo lands once again, amid the relentless rain, the river flood waters behind them rose even higher and wholly submerged the island on which they had just stood.<sup>43</sup>

The seismic news radiated south as he marched: General Yi had turned his army around and was headed to see and

persuade the King! With him was General Jo Min-soo who joined for the return to Gaegyeong. The sons and husbands of Goryeo were returning from the brink of disastrous war, and the people gathered all along the road to cheer and sing. They offered wine and drink, and their lines were endless.<sup>44</sup> Yi ordered his troops to treat all the people well and to protect their crops. "If you touch any property belonging to people, even a cucumber in their fields, I will punish you according to law," he warned.<sup>45</sup>

Yi's army moved at full speed, returning to Gaegyeong four times faster than his long march north, moving at the breakneck army speed of 40 kilometers a day.<sup>46</sup> Royal panic unfurled. Gaegyeong was exceptionally vulnerable, partly because on May 22<sup>nd</sup> (the same day Yi Seong-gye had turned his troops around), most of the capital city's own army had been sent south to battle a Japanese pirate invasion. Ironically, these pirates had first landed in Jinpo on the very day General Yi began his march north, back on April 18<sup>th</sup>. Now in late May, an angry King U had just sent many of his capital commanders south to battle the pirates. He was upset at them for feigning illness and not joining Yi Seong-gye's Ming invasion force, so he sent them after the pirates instead.<sup>47</sup> Yi Seong-gye might well have been told this fact by the messenger who had arrived with Choe Yeong's denial of withdrawal on May 22<sup>nd</sup>. Whether Yi knew of Gaegyeong's unique vulnerability at this moment or not, the General sped south immediately upon hearing Choe's refusal.

As Yi Seong-gye charged south towards the undefended capital, General Choe rushed to the Seonju hot springs to inform the king of impending disaster. King U and General Choe quickly gathered all their treasure and what few soldiers they had and raced back to the capital. As they moved south to Gaegyeong, King U ordered the royal treasure rooms and storehouses opened so they could lure and pay soldiers. Choe issued a proclamation offering gold, silk, and high title to anyone who would join in defense of the King. Messages were sent to the provinces, ordering soldiers to rush to Gaegyeong.<sup>48</sup> But there were precious few to answer the call. Most soldiers had already been sent north with Yi Syeong-gye and Jo Min-

soo, or south to fight Japanese pirates. Moreover, there was little will to fight the undefeated and popular Yi Seong-gye.

Only a few hundred people responded to Choe Yeong's call to action, mostly enslaved servants and municipal officers.<sup>49</sup> All that remained to mobilize were the old and weak, the enslaved and untrained. When the sad King marched into his capital city on May 29<sup>th</sup>, he had only fifty cavalymen at his side.<sup>50</sup> The army of Yi Seong-gye was only three days away, singing as they came.

Yi's army grew stronger as it moved south. Within a few days of his turning around, 1,000 more elite troops raced across the northern provinces and joined Yi's troops. It seems likely that Yi had sent word of his possible return to the capital and had asked his northern allies to stand ready. So when the general turned his horse's head, they were there. His army included strong Jurchen captains like Yi Chiran and Cheo Myeong, who had sworn fealty to Yi Seong-gye since the days of the Liaodong campaign. It included Mongolian leaders like Jomu who had come over to Yi Seong-gye's faction. Common farmers with unique fighting skills like Kim In-chan and Unchang had flocked to the banner of Yi Seong-gye when witnessing his martial success. They helped lead divisions by General Yi's side.<sup>51</sup> The legends would later grow that giving such a strong army to Yi Seong-gye was dangerous from the beginning—it was like watering a dragon.<sup>52</sup>

Yi's other family members also moved quickly. King U had tried to keep Yi Seong-gye's children and wives under close watch, as a check on any rebellious ideas, but it didn't work. As soon as Yi Seong-gye turned his troops around, his two older sons (Yi Bang-woo and Yi Bang-gwa), as well as the son of Yi Chiran, fled the vicinity of King U and made for the troops of Yi Seong-gye. King U had kept these Yi family members close to him in the hot springs, but just before the King heard news of General Yi's rebellion, these family members had managed to waylay some local magistrates on the road, steal their horses and ride off towards Yi Seong-gye's army.<sup>53</sup>

Another of the General's sons, Yi Bang-won, raced to Pocheon (about 100 li east of Gaegyeong) where his mother (Lady Han) and stepmother (Lady Kang) maintained separate estates and where Lady Kang was raising her two young boys.

King U's forces were also rushing to Pocheon to take the Yi family hostage against the coming troubles. Yi Bang-won arrived first and gathered his family. He placed young Bang-beon and Bang-seok (his stepbrothers) on a horseback and held the reins tight as the family fled for safehouses further north and east, towards Hamyong province.<sup>54</sup>

Choe Yeong sent soldiers to track them down, but it was hopeless. Too many people in these northern lands supported the family Yi and helped them as they fled, day and night. They kept off the main roads and travelled hidden trails. They slept in the fields, for fear of capture.<sup>55</sup> After several days of flight, the family arrived at the house of Hanchung, a supporter in the northeastern town of Icheon, where they would be safe for the remainder of the coming events.<sup>56</sup>

On June 1<sup>st</sup>, Yi Seong-gye arrived at the gates of Gaegyeong. He camped his troops about 10 li from the city and sent a note to King U, demanding that Choe Yeong be sent out to face the music.

King Gongmin served our great nation with intelligence and did not intend to sacrifice his soldiers. But now Choe Yeong does not intend to serve our great nation. In the hot summer, when the soldiers were requisitioned, [Korea] lost its farming spirit, and the Japanese invaded and killed the Korean people and burned our warehouses. If Choe Yeong is not removed now, the Shrine of the Ancestors will be in jeopardy.<sup>57</sup>

A desperate King U refused, crying, and holding onto General Choe inside the palace, begging him from protection against Yi Seong-gye. An assault on the city seemed inevitable. The families of Gaegyeong doused their lanterns that night, and children were told to keep quiet.

On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, the forces of Yi Seong-gye and Jo Min-soo surrounded the city. There were a few hundred guards on the walls, but they had to be nervous, facing the undefeated Yi Seong-gye. The defenders had built barricades of carts, rocks, and furniture as best they could, but that didn't promise much

protection against the coming assault.<sup>58</sup> On the morning of June 3<sup>rd</sup>, Yi had his troops call out with one voice, demanding the King to offer up Choe Yeong. General Choe did not come.

“Blow the conch to vibrate heaven and earth,” General Yi commanded. The horns were brought to the east gate and blown until the stone walls vibrated and the soldiers inside fell into panic. Soldiers on the wall began to abandon their posts, while others opened the Gates to Yi Seong-gye. Yi Seong-gye later described how the common people of Goryeo pulled carts aside to make a path as he entered the city. His soldiers were given alcohol and food by the gathered people, “and the elderly and weak climbed onto the castle walls and cheered.”<sup>59</sup>

In subsequent skirmishes, Yi’s troops easily advanced. One after another, the high places of the capital city were captured, and Yi’s bright yellow dragon banners were unfurled on all the hilltops. Atop a final hill, Yi had his army sound the conch horns—a sign that General Yi had won in battle once again: “the dust overflowed the sky, and the earth shook.”<sup>60</sup>

General Yi then began his walk through the captured Gaegyeong, heading to the palace where the King, Queen, and General Choe had fled to the royal garden. The Joseon historians tell us that the common people were ecstatic at these developments. They were happy to have avoided war, and Yi Seong-gye was beloved. A popular song was said to have broken out in the streets: “The shepherd wins the country,” the children sang.<sup>61</sup> People gathered in the streets, cheering. “With baskets of food and jugs of broth, they lined the road to gaze up at him.”<sup>62</sup>

The Confucian thinkers had a way of describing this moment. When the people suddenly move from one leader to another, it is a sign that the “Mandate of Heaven” has shifted, and a regime change is in the stars. Surely, Jeong Do-jeon and the scholars of Sungkyunkwan must have been pondering this possibility as the people welcomed Yi Seong-gye to Gaegyeong.

At the palace, Choe Yeong and King U had retreated to the octagonal pavilion in the back flower garden. But the garden walls were assaulted. King U took General Choe’s hands, weeping hopelessly. Choe bowed twice to his king and went out to meet Yi Seong-gye.<sup>63</sup> It was a bittersweet meeting between the two old generals who had so often been allies.



Choe Yeong was a titanic force in Goryeo's political world. He had fought in 27 different battles of note, including assaults on enemy fortresses and defense of his own fortresses against brutal enemy sieges.<sup>64</sup> He had fought off the Japanese pirates for decades, standing firm even when shot in the face with arrows.<sup>65</sup> He had drove the Red Turban rebels out of Gaegyeong and fought off endless waves of Jurchen raiders. Choe Yeong came from old money, but he avoided most of the corruptions of the *gwonmun sejok* and was known for his personal honesty and frugality. As his father taught, Choe looked upon gold as if were stone. He accepted no bribes and had few extravagances. His house was small, and he wore simple clothes. He was thought incorruptible, was called the "Shield of Goryeo," and was much beloved of the people.<sup>66</sup>

But at the end of things, Yi Seong-gye had no choice but to exile the beloved general who had ordered Goryeo's troops to their doom and who protected a debauched king. General Seong-gye spoke sadly to the defeated General Choe, who he had once fought beside in many Goryeo campaigns. "It was not my intention to bring about this disturbance. It was inevitable because you not only acted against a great cause but also threw the country and the people into crises and troubles until their complaints and resentment reached Heaven. Farewell, farewell." Standing face-to-face, both great generals wept and Yi Seong-gye then banished Choe south, to the Goyang area.<sup>67</sup>

Immediately after the capture of Choe Yeong, the scholar Yi Saek (director of the Confucian Academy) arranged to meet with Yi Seong-gye. At Saek's request, General Yi agreed to remove his troops from the city, restoring some decorum and dignity to the capital. His troops would camp outside the city for a time, under strict orders to respect nearby property, while General Yi resolved the question of what to do about King U, hiding in his palace.

In one final effort to preserve his throne, King U sent eighty armed eunuchs that very night to kill Yi Seong-gye in his Gaegyeong house as he slept. But the eunuchs found only an empty house, for the General slept with his army in the field.<sup>68</sup> This kind of incident fueled the fire of those like Nam Eun and Jo In-ok, radical *sadaebu* who urged Yi Seong-gye to immediately kill King U and take the throne for himself. But

this was not the path Yi Seong-gye walked. Instead, General Yi claimed his rebellion was simply to rectify the corruption and errors of the current king, and avoid war with Ming, not to overthrow the 500-year Goryeo dynasty.

So it developed that Yi Seong-gye won the city, but not the crown. Instead, he deposed the 23-year-old King U, and banished him to Ganghwa island, where the Goryeo court had once governed in exile during decades of Mongolian assaults. In King U's place, General Yi recognized U's 7-year-old son, Chang, as the new Goryeo king. Chang was a descendant of King U, and thus his accession secured the dynastic Goryeo line. But since the new king was but a boy, the conquering generals had essentially put themselves in the position of regents—with a close watch on Goryeo's politics.

Admittedly, the boy-king was not Yi Seong-gye's first choice, as Yi wished a more complete break with the era of U. He supported a different royal Wang relative to take the throne, one not descended from King U nor close to those old politics. But the allies of Jo Min-soo (the other general of the Wihwado excursion) supported King Chang's accession. This faction of Jo Min-soo was more closely connected to the old Gaegyeong elites (featuring those such as Yi Saek), who supported Chang as someone unlikely to cause trouble to their power since he was closely connected to many in the old Yi In-im faction of the *gwonmun sejok*. General Min-soo was in a strong position with these powerful capital allies and Yi Seong-gye saw little option but to agree to elevating Chang as the new king of Goryeo.<sup>69</sup> It would stabilize the moment.

In any case, Yi Seong-gye retained his hands on power. Soon after his accession, in late summer of 1388, the 7-year-old King Chang named General Yi Director of the Office of Personnel Appointments and Royal Seals, as well as supreme commander of the armies in multiple provinces.<sup>70</sup> Yi Seong-gye had triumphantly returned to Gaegyeong with his instantly legendary *Wihwado Hoegun* ("Return from Wihwado"). He had overthrown the notoriously erratic and licentious King U and had ushered a new King onto the throne of Goryeo. As for General Yi himself, his own stature and power continued to swell magnificently in the capital city. Grandfather Yi Chun's white dragon dream prophecy was proving true after all.



### “Fish in a Cauldron, Gasping for Breath”



*When he was just a boy, Yi Seong-gye liked to play “police and robbers” with his friends. Seong-gye especially liked to play the magistrate. One time, young Seong-gye told his friends to gather the next day at exactly the same time to continue their game, and said that he would be a stern magistrate and would punish anyone who was late.*

*One boy showed up late the next day and said he couldn’t help it, because his mother was combing his hair. Yi Seong-gye said that it didn’t matter: “You were late, and I must cut your head off, according to the law.”*

*Yi Seong-gye pulled out a small sword and cut off the head of his friend.<sup>1</sup>*



The triumphant return of Yi Seong-gye to Gaegyeong meant that the reformist ideas of Sungkyunkwan’s scholars were given new life. Jeong Do-jeon now sat at the right ear of the ascendant Yi Seong-gye. The once ignored Nam Eun, full of energy for radical reforms, was suddenly at the center of things. The scholarly heavyweight Cho Chun had been exiled by Yi In-im for speaking out against corruption, but now was brought back into Gaegyeong. He had spent four long years in the political wilderness, “studying the scriptures,” but now the once-exiled radical scholars were coming back into power.<sup>2</sup>

As for the relationship with Ming—who now occupied China’s “brilliant center” of Confucian influence so admired by Goryeo’s scholars—Yi Seong-gye sent word to Ming that King U was overthrown, and all talk of war was over in Goryeo. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, Yi Seong-gye had Chang issue a royal proclamation to begin using the name “Hongwu” once again for the Ming Emperor. Officials were ordered to wear Ming uniforms again,

not Mongol robes. Conscription of soldiers and construction on forts along the northern borderlands was called to a halt. All Ming talk of installing a fortress in Cheollyeong Pass also ended.<sup>3</sup>

In July, Yi Seong-gye oversaw the delegation of an envoy to the Ming, led by the well-respected scholar Yi Saek and including his own son, Yi Bang-won, who served as secretary. The envoy admitted the crimes of King U in planning an invasion of Liaodong and announced the accession of King Chang in his place.<sup>4</sup> This envoy returned eight months later, in March of 1389 with a circumspect, but promising, reply from the Ming court.

To begin, the Ming's communique was openly critical of the military deposition of King U and the subsequent rise of boy-king Chang. "The throne is [now] held by a king pretending to be a Wang,"<sup>5</sup> the Ming's communication ominously noted, referring to the old rumors that Monk Sin Don and the servant Banya were actually U and Chang's forebearers, not King Gongmin. This situation was unwise, the Ming court felt, and not in accord with Korean tradition. Still, the letter concluded that all these affairs were ultimately Goryeo's business, after all, and the Ming court didn't feel the needed to dive into the situation all that much.<sup>6</sup> Most important, there was no implied Ming military threat and no mention of the proposed Ming fortress at Cheollyeong Pass—the issue that had precipitated Yi Seong-gye's march north was now moot.

While drinking at a tavern with the Goryeo envoys, one Chinese official even shared his exceptional respect for Yi Seong-gye's military prowess. "Though Choe Yeong had a hundred thousand troops under his command, Yi [Seong-gye] disposed of him as easily as catching a fly."<sup>7</sup> It seemed that Ming would rather avoid war with Goryeo's seemingly undefeatable Yi Seong-gye. Though not wholly supportive of affairs in Goryeo, these communications from Ming were certainly good news for Yi Seong-gye and the bubbling forces of Goryeo reform. It seemed their powerful neighbor would remain north of the Yalu and would let Korean affairs unfold in their own way, south of the river.

For some time after King U's deposition, it wasn't at all sure how these affairs would ultimately resolve in Goryeo's capital. It was an open question as to exactly how far Yi Seong-gye would go in challenging the foundations of the Goryeo dynasty. Though Yi Seong-gye certainly supported the forces of reform, he did not (openly, at least) seem eager to take on the mantle of a revolutionary, seeking a thorough and bloody transformation of Goryeo politics and society.\* Instead, he pursued what could be called a soft landing for the socio-political changes to come, working to win over or defeat his opponents over a period of months and years.<sup>8</sup>

This was a pragmatic approach. Yi Seong-gye had risen to the heights of power, but the roots of a 500-year dynasty are deep, even one in terminal collapse. Though the national relief at avoiding war with Ming was real, and though there was plenty of populist discontent with Goryeo elites, there remained a reflexive worship of the ancient Godfathers of Goryeo. Yi himself always seemed to balk whenever the mind-boggling idea of putting an end to the 500-year Goryeo dynasty was raised by his allies. In this climate, General Yi worked hard to chart a course between the radicals who kept pushing him to terminate Goryeo and take over the throne and the old Goryeo loyalists who seemed poised to mount their own reaction against the Yi camp for any misstep, such as threatening the foundations of the Goryeo dynasty itself.<sup>9</sup>

What emerged in the 1388-1392 period of dynastic transition was a long series of factional struggles, whereby old Goryeo loyalists struggled to retain position and limit reforms, while the pro-Yi Seong-gye radicals sought to purge opponents and push new ideas—all in the context of an enduring Goryeo crown. A parade of names, factional disputes, exiles, and impeachments washed over the Goryeo court as it struggled to find a new center of gravity.<sup>10</sup> People who didn't support Yi Seong-gye's *Wihwado Hoegun* went underground in the days

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\* For example, historical records of the time show several times when Yi Seong-gye claimed he was ill and requested to be allowed to retire back to his hometown area of Hamhung. The *Koryosa* says these requests were denied by the Goryeo King. See *Koryosa*, 6.1388. [http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_033r\\_0010\\_0010\\_0060\\_0140](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_033r_0010_0010_0060_0140)

after his return, but often reappeared thereafter, finding a new place in the insular world of Goryeo politics. The landscape had changed, of course. Sometimes the old elites had to change colors to survive, and some of the influential families now agreed to bow down to the Confucian scholars, but these elite families weren't destroyed after all, and it wasn't wise for anyone to ignore their continued power.

In these struggles, there were two main factions: the moderates who embraced limited social reforms but also sought to preserve the Goryeo dynastic line at all costs, and the radical young turks who dreamed of changing the world and sought even the accession of Yi Seong-gye to the throne. As things unfolded, Jo Min-soo (the other general of the *Wihwado Hoegun*) and Jeong Mong-ju (a leading *sadaebu*) became leading voices of the moderates, while the *sadaebu* Jeong Do-jeon and Cho Chun became leading voices of the radicals. While Jeong Do-jeon and Cho Chun had strong followings amid the radical reformers, no Confucian *sadaebu* (save perhaps Yi Saek) had more influence than the moderate Jeong Mong-ju (who was descended from a wealthy and well-established family of Goryeo). Furthermore, Jo Min-soo was named the Prime Minister under the new King Chang, so the moderates certainly had a strong position in the days after the *Wihwado Hoegun*. It wasn't at all clear that some of the more radical ideas of the reformers would actually be implemented.

### *The Cho Chun Land Proposal*

The question was put to the test two months after the ascent of seven-year-old King Chang, when the world-changing faction of Jeong Do-jeon and Cho Chun unexpectedly posted an appeal for nation-wide land reform. Striking while Yi Seong-gye's sword was still hot, the radicals proposed to return many *gwonmun sejok* lands to state ownership and to restrict inheritance of other lands.

With so many powerful families claiming land rights and high taxation on the harvest, farmers could never improve their situation, Jeong Do-jeon argued. "Even though they worked hard and diligently all year round, they still did not have enough to eat." Instead, rich families just take away all

the harvest, “until the poor became unable to support themselves and were eventually forced to abandon their land and become vagabonds. It was these people who turned to petty occupations and, in extreme cases, even became thieves and bandits.”<sup>11</sup>

Cho Chun’s radical land proposal sought to do away with Goryeo’s increasingly dysfunctional system of a few powerful families claiming a private right to tax vast swaths of land, and to enslave those unable to pay the taxes. Currently, too many rich families claim vast lands, even when they hold no government posts nor serve in the military, Cho Chun observed. They “wearing silk robes while enjoying good food, they sit and enjoy their profits,” even as much of the country and the public treasury starves.<sup>12</sup> “Politics must begin with justice in land distribution,” Cho Chun argued. “The length or brevity of a country’s fate depends on the pain or joy of people’s lives, and the pain and joy of people’s lives depends on whether the land system is fair or not.”<sup>13</sup>

As a solution, Cho Chun proposed an immediate halt to all private collection of taxes on Goryeo lands. Instead, for three years all taxes would only be collected by the central state, thus helping to fill state coffers for important purposes like paying officials and soldiers and providing food to people in crisis. Second, during this three-year period, there would be a national land survey to register all arable lands in Goryeo and identify the lands that had been illicitly stole from local farmers or improperly converted into private holdings by affluent *gwonmun sejok* families

Third, under a principle that only the state actually “owns” most lands, the temporary right to tax or farm these lands would be redistributed to the people, according to a rational system. Most notably, taxation rights on land would not be returned to households who no longer earned those right through specific government service, but would be distributed to current state ministers, scholar-officials, and military officers, as payment for their service. These rights would revert to the state on the completion of one’s service.<sup>14</sup> As Cho Chun described it: “If you are not an official or soldier, you should not keep land. And we must set strict limits to prevent land recipients from being passed down after people



die. Only then can the people start a new life and our nation's finances be covered."<sup>15</sup>

Other proposed changes were that no plot of land could have more than one owner, in terms of taxation rights. Tax rates would be capped about no more than about 10% of the harvest.<sup>16</sup>

These reforms would dramatically reduce the tax burden on many Goryeo farmers. Moreover, they would systematically shift economic power away from traditional, landed aristocrats and towards the newly emerging intellectual class of neo-Confucian *sadaebu*, who would now be granted small land holdings and taxation rights, providing economic foundation for their work. Middle-class *sadaebu* and middling farmers would gain new power in Goryeo, at the expense of landed aristocrats.

Cho Chun's reformist partner Jeong Do-jeon wanted to push the reform even further and abolish not only private taxation rights, but private land holdings altogether. Jeong Do-jeon proposed nationalizing all land and redistributing most of it in small equal plots to all the farmers of Joseon, so that every family owned small, equal plots of arable land. According to Jeong Do-jeon, his more radical plan would insure everyone had some land to cultivate and would tear down the idle rich of Goryeo. There would be "no excessive differentiation between the rich and the poor and between the strong and the weak."<sup>17</sup>

These land reform proposals were a dramatic attack on the economic foundations of *gwonmun sejok* power. In Jeong Do-jeon's plan, all land rights of the wealthy would disappear forever, as land became equally distributed. Even under Cho Chun's less dramatic plan, most aristocratic land rights would disappear for three years and be strictly curtailed thereafter.

The shocked Goryeo aristocrats dug in and entrenched behind the moderate voice of Jo Min-soo, the Prime Minister, seeking to slow the rushing river of change. Jo Min-soo was himself a rich landowner with many enslaved servants. With his recent rise, he had even started expanding these holdings, and didn't mind watching his allies continue to pursue their own acquisitions of land and slaves. Cho certainly understood

the concerns of the acquisitive *gwonmun sejok*, for he was one of them.<sup>18</sup>

Jo Min-soo offered a counterproposal to Cho Chun’s plan. To reduce the problem of multiple parties claiming the right to tax farmers on a given plot of land, Jo suggested that the number of landowners able to claim taxing rights over any given parcel of land should be restricted to only one or two, but that most existing land/taxing rights should be preserved. This plan would be an improvement in many farmers’ situation (reducing their taxes by about half) but was a far less dramatic solution than Cho Chun’s plan to nationalize and redistribute taxation rights on all Goryeo’s lands (or Jeong Do-jeon’s idea to redistribute all land holdings equally). Prime Minister Jo Min-soo worked to get the young King Chang to issue a statement in support of his moderate counterproposal. Cho Chun’s radical plan would be too difficult for officials and the influential families to live under, announced King Chang in supporting Jo Min-soo’s plan, so we must allow most existing land rights to remain in place.

In was in the midst of these contentious struggles, as the *sadaebu* stepped up their critiques of the wealth and corruption of old Goryeo elites, that Yi Seong-gye weighed in by ordering the execution of General Choe Yeong, who had previously been imprisoned in exile. General Choe was a member of the old elite, and his family was exceptionally wealthy, even if he personally was an honest and spartan warrior. In the unstable days after the *Hoegun*, the memory and living force of this man—thick and reliable as an old bull, and completely loyal to Goryeo of old—was dangerous to the Yi Seong-gye faction. So in December of 1388, as the dust from Cho Chun’s contentious land proposals was swirling, the 73-year-old General Choe Yeong was ordered taken out of his cell and executed.<sup>19</sup>

When the fate of Goryeo’s old bull was learned, merchants everywhere closed their shops. Those on horses dismounted, kneeled, and bowed by the side of the road. Wailing was heard from everywhere, “from street children to alley women.”<sup>20</sup> It didn’t matter that doomed Goryeo was so thoroughly corrupt, or that many people were glad of the reform efforts. And it didn’t matter that General Yi Seong-gye was widely popular.

Choe Yeong was beloved, and even the poor peasants tilling their fields of grass wished they could give something to help the doomed old General. In his retelling of this incident, Kim imagines how “the grasshoppers hoped that if there was a place to live in a cabin and if they could just eat rough rice with their families, they would do that so that even a country that had seen nothing but tyranny and exploitation would survive for one more day.”<sup>21</sup>

Yi Seong-gye’s order was a shot across the bow of the old Goryeo elites, letting them know he was serious about reforming the old order. But it was deeply unpopular move. In their grief, some people spoke ill of Yi Seong-gye. Certainly, many of the old elite did. Yi was called bloodthirsty, power-hungry, out for the crown. This uncertain moment of high stakes saber-rattling became a dangerous time for Yi Seong-gye when some of the old guard decided things were getting out of hand, and it was time to reverse the Yi Seong-gye revolution. Subsequent events of the brewing counter-revolution became known as “The Kim Jeo Incident.”

### *The Kim Jeo Incident*

The incident began on November 11, 1389, when Kim Jeo had a secret meeting with the deposed King U on Ganghwa Island, where the King was exiled. Kim Jeo was a nephew of the imprisoned Choe Yeong and no fan of Yi Seong-gye. On Gangwha Island, the two men talked conspiracy against General Yi.\* In the end, King U gave Kim Jeo a fine sword and desperately urged him to gather his associates, sneak into Yi Seong-gye’s mansion, and slay the General. “I can’t just stay

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\* Some later observers argue that many of the events of this “Kim Jeo Incident” were fabricated or greatly exaggerated by the Yi Seong-gye faction in order to undermine General Yi’s opponents and advance their own cause. See, for example, Lee H., “Developments in the political situation in the Late Koryo Dynasty and the Incident of Kim Jeo.” There are limited historical records, so the incident is cloaked in fog. The story told here adheres to the events shared in the *Koryosa* and the *Taejo Sillok*, though these documents admittedly were crafted by later historians of Yi Seong-gye’s own court (after he became King Taejo).

here and die without doing anything,” a weeping King U bemoaned, before urging the assassination. “I’ve always been on good terms with Kwak Chung-bo. I want you to plan with him the removal of Yi. Then my wish will be fulfilled.”<sup>22</sup>

Kim Jeo agreed to the dark task and went straight to Kwak Chung-bo\* (a mid-level military officer) to plan the assassination. But Kwak thought better of it and ran straightaway to General Yi to alert him to the conspiracy. So on the evening of November 12, when Kim Jeo snuck into Yi Seong-gye’s mansion, the General was ready. Prepared household guests of Yi Seong-gye fell upon the intruders as soon as they entered the house. Before he could be captured, one of the assassins (Jung Deuk-hoo) stabbed himself in the neck and died, but Kim Jeo was taken alive.

Kim Jeo was immediately taken to prison and torture began, so as to extract the names of co-conspirators. During this torture, King U was moved to a more remote place of exile, in Gangneung on the east coast, while the newly installed King Chang was also taken into custody and taken to nearby Ganghwa island—the whole royal family was now under suspicion. King U’s father-in-law, son-in-law and nephew were all incarcerated and later exiled.<sup>23</sup>

Dark clouds gathered over the unfortunate young kings. During his torture, Kim Jeo confessed to the crime and gave up the names of many others, including government ministers and top military officials. Byun An-yeol, Yi Rim Wang, Wang An-deok, Woo Hong-soo, Woo In-yeol, Wu Hyeon-bo: all were named under torture.<sup>24</sup> These men and many more were arrested; some of them were members of very wealthy families. Dozens of people thought hostile to Yi Seong-gye’s faction were expelled from the capital, including powerful people like Yi Saek (the cautious overseer of Sungkyunkwan Academy), Jo Min-soo (the Prime Minister and top Goryeo General), and Byeon An-yeol (an influential minister of *Dodang*).<sup>25</sup>

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\* Kwak Jung-bo was the officer who had captured Cheo Yeong in the palace, during the assault on Gaegyeong’s palace after the *Wihwado Hoegun*. He was a supporter of the *Wihwado Hoegun*, though not of the proposed land reforms that followed.

The most powerful opponents of Yi Seong-gye's faction had been purged, others were cowed into retreat, and the floodgates to the coming Joseon Dynasty began to open. Just a few days after the assassination attempt, Yi Seong-gye summoned several top allies to join him at Heungguksa Temple. This was an important temple located just outside the great Southern gate into Gaegyeong, which often hosted birthdays for the Kings of Goryeo. On November 14, 1389, under tight security provided by Yi Seong-gye's soldiers, nine men gathered at Heungguksa to discuss the fate of Goryeo.<sup>26</sup>

A few proffered that the time had come to end the Wang<sup>\*</sup> dynastic line and crown Yi Seong-gye as King, but the *Taejo Sillok* says that Yi would not hear of that.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps he maintained some loyalty to the Goryeo dynastic line even now, or perhaps he felt the time was not yet ripe for a dramatic termination of the venerable dynasty. Or perhaps General Yi was more supportive of terminating the Wang dynastic line than the *Taejo Sillok* later admitted, so as to present him as less of a power-hungry schemer. In any case, the Yi Seong-gye faction needed a strategy to depose the sitting king without appearing again to be disloyal traitors to Goryeo.

A solution was found by revisiting the old rumors of King U's paternity, once again. Wasn't King U born of monk Sin Don and his servant, Banya? In that case, neither King U, nor his son Chang, were descended from the Wang royal line, and neither were real Goryeo Kings. They were accused as imposters, bringing trials and tribulations ("evil after evil")<sup>28</sup> down on Goryeo. The nine men of Heungguksa agreed that the time had come to "abolish the false and restore the true."<sup>29</sup> In other words, they would eliminate the false kings of U and Chang and restore a true descendant of the Wang line to the throne. There was little evidence to sustain this serious charge, but it was a politically expedient way to advance the faction of Yi Seong-gye and became a more generally accepted interpretation over time due to most historical records of the time being produced by the Yi Seong-gye faction.<sup>30</sup>

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\* All Goryeo kings, for nearly 500 years, had come from the royal Wang clan—founders of the Goryeo dynasty.

The nine lords of Goryeo settled on Gongyang as their royal candidate. Gongyang was an undisputed seventh generation descendant of a previous Goryeo king (King Seongjong, r. 1083–1094) and was already 45 years old, so he would be more prepared to lead than the eight-year-old King Chang. Gongyang had a reputation as being good tempered and docile,<sup>31</sup> so he seemed a good choice for these fiery times. Moreover, he was related by marriage to Yi Seong-gye. Gongyang's niece had married Yi Bang-beon, the eldest son of Lady Kang (Yi Seong-gye's second wife). Having an uncle to his son on the throne of Goryeo likely helped reassure Yi Seong-gye as to the future direction of the monarchy.

As he was pressured into the throne, the good natured Gongyang knew hard times were coming. He later recalled how in these days “the fate of the Royal Wang clan became that of a fish in a cauldron gasping for breath.”<sup>32</sup> The new King wept upon his accession and wrote that “I couldn't sleep due to anxiety and worry.”<sup>33</sup> The unpleasantness began with having to order the sorry denouement of many of Goryeo's old notables, allegedly associated with the Kim Jeo plot to assassinate General Yi. Many once powerful elites were imprisoned, tortured, or exiled while several of those named by Kim Jeo were executed.<sup>34</sup>

As for Prime Minister Jo Min-soo, Yi Seong-gye's old ally in the *Wihwado Hoegun*, he lost his place as Prime Minister and Governor of multiple Goryeo provinces. As a critic of Cho Chun's land reform plan, and one of the *gwonmun sejok* families with great holdings of land and enslaved persons, Jo Min-soo was impeached for embezzlement after the Kim Jeo incident, while also charged with conspiring against Yi Seong-gye. He was ultimately exiled “to a faraway place.”<sup>35</sup> His land and enslaved servants were seized by the state. In his place, Gongyong appointed Yi Seong-gye the Grand Chancellor (Prime Minister) of Goryeo. When Yi Seong-gye refused the appointment, the King named a Yi Seong-gye associate as Chancellor and Yi Seong-gye as Acting Chancellor.<sup>36</sup>

Another grim task remained for the new King. At the end of 1389, the Yi Seong-gye faction concluded that the two former Kings, U and Chang, must be executed. King Gongyang was forced to issue an edict ordering the (alleged) pretenders

killed, proclaiming that: “Unfortunately, when King Gongmin passed away without a son, Yi In-im wanted to control the government, so he falsely claimed the child U was Wang and made him King.”<sup>37</sup> Soon thereafter, the two deposed Kings—father and son—were beheaded by allies of Yi Seong-gye.\* King Chang was just 8 years old. The family members were said to weep day and night and had no will to eat for the next ten days.<sup>38</sup>

While killing the old kings, Goyang also announced the names of nine “Meritorious Retainers,” all entitled to Goryeo’s highest honors. These retainers were the nine men of Heungguksa, who had brought down King Chang and installed King Gongmin: Jeong Do-jeon, Cho Chun, Sim Deok-bu, Ji Yong-ki, Park Wi, Jeong Mong-ju, Seol Jang-soo, Sung Seok-rim, and Yi Seong-gye.<sup>39</sup> Yi Seong-gye was granted twenty enslaved persons and a fief of one thousand households, with rights to privately tax three hundred households. His parents and wife were granted titles of nobility. His descendants were exempted from having to take the civil service examinations to receive government appointments. His sons, daughters, nephews, and nieces were all promoted by several ranks in state title and were permanently granted pardons when convicted of certain categories of crimes in the future. He was also granted the right to personally appoint seven government functionaries and ten private soldiers to serve him daily.<sup>40</sup> Yi Seong-gye was also named Director of the newly created Office of Royal Lecturers and commander of the armies in eight provinces. All the other nine meritorious retainers were given land and titles as well. These were the new Godfathers of Goryeo, all closely aligned with the rising dragon, General Yi Seong-gye.

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\* The *Koryosa* records that Yi Seong-gye himself argued against these executions, claiming that the old Kings were now powerless to do further damage. But these historical records were produced by later allies of the Yi Seong-gye faction, so Yi Seong-gye’s (possible) own role in these executions might have been downplayed in the interests of legitimating his later rule. See *Koryosa*, v. 34, 12, 1389. [http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0110\\_0060](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0020_0110_0060)

In the aftermath, with many Yi Seong-gye opponents exiled or executed, dramatic new reform plans once again gathered steam. At the close of December 1389, Cho Chun again pushed forward a long list of reforms: a centralized military of trained and paid soldiers, better training of envoys, expansion of schools, limitations on usury, lower and more fair taxes, higher penalties for government corruption, a crackdown on brothels, and restrictions on Buddhist monks thought to be corrupt. Traditional provincial governors (with power gained largely through family heritage and local wealth) were stripped of some of their powers in favor of centrally appointed officers, more likely to have passed the central service exams and more loyal to the Yi Seong-gye faction.<sup>41</sup> Personnel reform was advanced to make more appointments based on merit or high achievements (e.g., through centrally administered exams), rather than through bribery or elite connections. A nationwide land survey was announced to facilitate the redistribution of taxing rights away from the *gwonmun sejok*. Provincial land inspectors were dispatched. Some of these reforms would even challenge the rewards just granted to the nine meritorious retainers, but Yi Seong-gye supported them all. “Consequently, the whole country was overjoyed, and the hearts of the people turned to him further.”<sup>42</sup>

But still, the foundations of Goryeo survived, a Wang king was on the throne, and many old aristocrats remained. After Gongyang became King, some of the peripheral members of the Kim Jeo faction even found their way back into government position, tying their fortunes to alliance with King Gongyang.<sup>43</sup> For example, after Gongyang ascended to the throne, Yi Saek was brought back into government (after being exiled during the Kim Jeo incident) and became the governor of the Panmunjom area, near today’s DMZ. Jeong Mong-ju was another moderate who remained popular and who always balked at the most ambitious reform plans coming from the Yi Seong-gye camp.

The case of General Byun An-yeol is indicative of the continuing instability between different factions. Although Byun An-yeol was named by Kim Jeo as a conspirator during torture, he was a powerful military man who escaped the



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death penalty for some time.<sup>44</sup> Like Jo Min-soo, he was particularly dangerous to Yi Seong-gye because he had thousands of his own private troops. Flaunting his resistance to the Yi Seong-gye faction, he even wrote a poem on the heels of the Kim Jeo incident, professing his eternal loyalty to old Goryeo. He called it “*Haega*” or “Song of Invincible Loyalty.”

*Even if a hole is pierced in my chest,  
And my heart is threaded with a rope,  
Dragged back and forth,  
Pulled back and forth,  
And my body becomes ashes,  
my strong will towards my beloved will never  
bend.*<sup>45</sup>

Even after the King Jeo incident, and even with such open defiance of the Yi Seong-gye faction, Byun An-yeol survived for some time, together with a great many other elites and officials attached far more to Goryeo *as it was* than to Goryeo *as dreamed of* by Yi Seong-gye’s radicals. The *Koryosa* compared Byun An-yeol to a villainous fox, slinking about in holes, but always avoiding death and causing danger to the Yi Seong-gye faction.<sup>46</sup> Yi hadn’t ended the Wang line after all, or burned down its court, and Goryeo still survived in myriad minds and magistrates.

It drove General Yi to sadness and a nostalgic loneliness for simpler days in his Hamhung home. He spoke often of retiring from everything. In March of 1390, Yi Seong-gye withdrew entirely from public life for a short time, complaining of illness.<sup>47</sup> He cloistered in his Gaegyeong home with Lady Kang.

According to the *Taejo Sillok*, King Gongyang wouldn’t hear of Yi Seong-gye’s retirement. Considering Yi Seong-gye was enthroning and dethroning kings at will, it’s hard to understand why Gongyang would feel this way. Perhaps Gongyang felt that he had been brought into power amid violent circumstances with Yi Seong-gye’s support and surely didn’t want to be abandoned to whatever wolves would rise up if General Yi disappeared. Moreover, it may have seemed wise to keep the powerful general in the capital city where he could

be closely watched, rather than allowing him to return with his troops to his northeastern power base. Or perhaps the story of Yi Seong-gye’s virtuous desire to return home, and Gongyang’s insistence that he stay on to serve in the capital, were both fabrications by the Yi Seong-gye faction that later produced the *Taejo Sillok*. In any case, the *Taejo Sillok* reports that after a month of recuperation from his illness, Yi Seong-gye was called back by the King and ordered to return to work at court. To welcome Yi back, King Gongyang offered a long memorial to General Yi’s great merits and achievements.

“You are the bravest among all the army commanders and hold a higher rank than anyone else at court, but you are not conceited about your honor and position,” the King noted. Moreover, you love to read the Confucian classics. You are disciplined and seek honest advice from “men of talent and wisdom.”

Gongyang described how General Yi always advised good policies, like land reform and prohibitions on buying and selling government offices. You always try to help the struggling little people, Gongyang praised. You have defeated the Japanese pirates and the northern raiders and protected our country. “Being endowed with both learning and military arts, you are qualified to assist the king; disregarding the personal affairs before the national crisis, you are a minister who can save the country; and born with special talents provided by Heaven and your ancestors, the safety and danger of the country became your responsibility!”

Having said all that, the king bestowed Yi Seong-gye with new royal rewards: 100 *kyol*\* of farmland, a royal horse, 50 taels of white gold, 5 rolls of fine silk, a golden belt, and a fine banquet in his honor. “Ah! This reward is too little to repay for your outstanding service! You saved the people, revived the royal house, and rescued our country. How can I possibly repay you for such great service?”<sup>48</sup> It was the spring of 1390.

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\* The “*kyol*” was a measurement of land needed to produce 100 “loads” of grain. The measurement varied based on the fertility of the land, typically ranging from about 6-25 acres per *kyol*. See Hunt, J.H. “Land Tenure and the Price of Land.” In *The Korean Repository*, volume III, p. 317.

*The Yoon I & Yi Cho Affair*

While Gongyang held General Yi tight, others did not. Yi Seong-gye always had to be wary. Some of the most notorious malefactors of the Kim Jeo incident (most notably Byun An-yeol) had escaped punishment and it grated on the General. Around the same time as Yi's return to court, Gongyang planned a trip to the coast to inspect warships, but there was concern that he would use his time away from the capital to meet with anti-Yi forces. When Shim Deok-bun, one of the "nine meritorious retainers of Heungguksa," supported the trip it made Yi Seong-gye suspicious, even of this close ally. Shortly after this coastal trip, King Gongyang expelled a Yi Seong-gye ally from the capital, which led Yi's allies on *Dodang* to demand a new round of interrogation and punishment of those like Byun An-yeol, who had escaped responsibility for the Kim Jeo incident.

Byun An-yeol was arrested and accused of treason that spring. Threatened with death, Byun seemed ready to admit conspiracy and give up names of his allies but ended up quickly executed before any of this information could be extracted.<sup>49</sup> Broader investigations, torture, and exile of accused counter-revolutionary forces continued.<sup>50</sup> Enemies were everywhere, and it was impossible to know who to trust or how much of it all was perhaps instigated by the Yi faction to support his continued ascendance.

Then, in May of 1390, a Goryeo envoy arrived back from its trip to Ming, carrying shocking news. The venerable Jo Ban\* was a member of this envoy. On returning to Goryeo, he reported that he had witnessed some members of the trip trying to convince Ming rulers to invade Goryeo to overthrow King Gongyang and Yi Seong-gye.<sup>51</sup> The facts of the matter are obscure, so it's unclear whether the anti-Yi faction was truly scheming to eliminate Yi Seong-gye, or a pro-Yi faction was inventing these allegations so as to create cause to punish

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\* Jo Ban was the retired minister of the "Jo Ban Incident" several years previously, when his land was illegitimately seized by corrupt officials of the Yi In-im faction, thus leading to their unexpected purge.

those opposed to Yi's ascendance. In any case, the allegations were that some members of King U's old royal faction were reaching out to Ming leaders with lies, in order to undermine Yi Seong-gye. They told Ming rulers that Yi Seong-gye and Gongyang were plotting to invade China. They reported that General Yi was waging a bloodbath in Goryeo, killing all his opponents (when in fact most of his opponents had only been exiled). They urged Ming to send an army to Goryeo to make things right. Two envoys named Yun I and Yi Cho were alleged by Jo Ban to have presented all these accusations in a memorial to the Ming court, which mentioned notable persons like Yi Saek (of the Confucian Academy), Yi In-im (the old malefactor who ruled as regent under King U) and Jo Min-soo (co-commander of the Wihwado excursion) as supporting the charges against General Yi.

It must have been particularly demoralizing for Yi Seong-gye that Shim Deok-bu's name showed up as a conspirator. He was one of the nine meritorious retainers of Heungguksa, now discovered perhaps to be mobilizing against General Yi. Also, Jo Min-soo and Byun An-Yeol, with their thousands of private troops, seem to have been involved. Numerous alleged conspirators were imprisoned, either in Gaegyeong or Chongju, and interrogation and torture began. Jo Min-soo was sent to the east coast town of Samcheok, under exile. One of the principal accused persons (Yun I) starved himself to death, one escaped before torture began, and the highest ranking officials like Yi In-im weren't tortured at all, but others were subject to leg-bending, knee-presses, and flogging, in pursuit of confessions and the names of conspirators.<sup>52</sup>

Not everyone believed Jo Ban's charges that so many of Goryeo's luminaries had conspired with Ming to bring down Yi Seong-gye. Several people argued that it was all a fabricated conspiracy so as to eliminate the opponents of the Yi Seong-gye faction. Many of the alleged conspirators (like Jo Min-soo, Park Wi and Shim Deok-bu) had previously been close allies of Yi Seong-gye after all, so why would they now conspire in this way? One accused conspirator (Kim Jin-yang) argued that “even a three-year-old child thinks that the incident of Yoon I and I Cho was a false charge by Jo Ban.” For such comments,

this official was impeached and dismissed from office.<sup>53</sup> The accusations and torture sessions continued.

But then, in the midst of the late May torture sessions, heavy rain poured down upon Chongju where many of the accused were incarcerated. The rains were followed by a great flood. Prisoners barely escaped with their lives by fleeing cells and climbing into nearby trees.<sup>54</sup>

In the wake of this dramatic flood, the court moderates pushed to stop all torture sessions. They said the flood had upended things, so let's just acquit or exile anyone who hadn't already confessed and end the whole affair without more drama and torture.<sup>55</sup> King Gongyang told Yi Seong-gye that the accused had already suffered enough. One has starved to death, he said, and a few have already confessed and will be executed. As for the rest (including important persons like Yi Saek, Saek's son Jeonghak, Jo Min-soo, and some security council ministers), let's just forgive some and exile some.<sup>56</sup> The Confucian scholar Jeong Mong-ju also spoke up in support of wholesale amnesty for all these anti-Yi conspirators, as a gesture of good will.<sup>57</sup>

Such appeals to amnesty after a nasty weather event were somewhat common in Goryeo, as court dignitaries would often argue that heaven itself seemed to be angry at the excessive disharmony caused by torture and executions down on earth. The *Koryosa* recounts hundreds of cases of people released from custody after a natural disaster. So it was in this Yoon I/I Cho case. Court officials implied that Heaven itself was upset at the ongoing conflict between the Yi Seong-gye radicals and the Jeong Mong-ju faction of moderates, so King Gongmin agreed to drop remaining cases against all accused conspirators.<sup>58</sup>

Yi Seong-gye was grievously wounded by it all, especially the lack of support by those like Jeong Mong-ju and Shim Deok-bun, who were both members of the Nine Meritorious Retainers of Heungguksa. The whole fellowship of the nine was falling apart. And then there was the involvement of Yi Saek and Jo Min-soo as well. It seemed people were allowed to attack General Yi at will.<sup>59</sup> In fact, within a few months after closing this case and after all the accused had been released, *another* case of conspiracy was discovered with some of these

same characters again trying to raise an army against Yi Seong-gye.<sup>60</sup>

King Gongyang again proposed forgiving and releasing all those involved with the case, but Yi Seong-gye's supporters in the Office of Investigations would not allow it this time. A leading conspirator (Cho Yu) was hanged, and the King ordered a number of other military commanders to surrender their official seals.<sup>61</sup> Dark whispers continued that Yi Seong-gye was power-hungry and was manipulating the King. Whenever the Office of the Censorate called for stricter investigations or punishments of Yi's opponents, many would say Yi Seong-gye was behind things, pulling all the strings.<sup>62</sup>

It all drove Yi Seong-gye to nostalgic despair. At least that's how the *Taejo Sillok* reports it, though of course these later records had motivation to present Yi Seong-gye as retiring and virtuous, rather than rapaciously power-hungry. At the end of 1390, the records say that General Yi made several appeals to be allowed to retire. He was 55 by now, exceedingly weary of war and palace intrigue, and spoke constantly of resigning his position and returning to his Hamhung home. He sent numerous requests to King Gongyang, requesting that he be allowed to resign from all his posts and return north. Yi said he wished to emulate the examples of Zhang Liang and Yan Ziling: influential officials and intellectuals of Chinese dynasties who had turned away from public position. Zhang Liang refused to join the emperor's royal court, left state affairs, and retired to his private fishing platform deep in the shady mountains to pass his remaining days. Like Zhang, “I would be grateful if Your Majesty would let me live out my days at home,” Yi requested, time and again.<sup>63</sup>

Fearful of letting Yi Seong-gye escape to the northeast, King Gongyang always refused. Instead, he tried to win Yi's favor by giving him new authority (or perhaps was pressured to do so by the Yi faction). In November of 1390, Yi was promoted to Chief of the State Finance Commission. Then in December, after another of Yi's threats to resign, Gongyang promoted him to Chancellor and General of all the armies of Goryeo.

Yi tried to resist. “I entreat Your Majesty to accept my sincerity and release me from the heavy burden of respon-

sibility,” he repeated. “No,” said King Gongyang. Remain in your post. “Your will is stronger than the wind or frost, and your personality more splendid than the Three Lights (*samgwang*), or the Five Sacred Mountains (*Wuyue*)...A man of talent is needed to subdue disturbances and straighten out the affairs of state.”<sup>64</sup> The *Koryosa* reports that these back-and-forth sessions between the King and his general sometimes ended in both of them weeping over the fragile political situation.<sup>65</sup>

Yi bemoaned the King’s constant refusals. “Whenever Your Servant received your replies rejecting his request, his fear and shame deepened,” Yi lamented. Furthermore “[Your Servant’s] health has been poor for years and occupying a high position has caused his condition to worsen severely...I earnestly beseech you to generously take pity on my difficult situation and grant my resignation. Then I will be able to recuperate in a quiet place.”<sup>66</sup>

But Gongyang simply wouldn’t allow the General to leave the capital and return to his northeastern military base. Instead, the King sought to tie Yi ever closer to his throne and promised that he would severely punish any future conspiracies against the General. “I want you to hold onto your post and carry out your duties according to my wishes,” the King noted. “If anyone criticizes you, explain your actions. If you are sick, get medical treatment. It is not really necessary for you to resign and live in seclusion in order to have the life that you want. Since you already declined [your promotion] three times, I want you to calm down a little.”<sup>67</sup>

## Radicals on Fire



*There was once a man who had a dream in which a Yellow Dragon living in the village pond appeared and told him that an enemy Blue Dragon from the West Sea was trying to take away the village pond where it had lived for hundreds of years. The Yellow Dragon asked the man to help him fight the dangerous Blue Dragon. When this man woke and later went to the village pond, he found the two dragons entangled in a fight, so he shot and killed the enemy Blue Dragon.*

*That night, the Yellow Dragon appeared in the man's dream and said that as a reward, the dragon would let the village use his pond water to turn nearby waste lands into fertile fields. In the days to come a large rainstorm made the pond overflow, and water from the dragon pond poured out, turning dry lands into green, fertile fields of rice, feeding all the people.<sup>1</sup>*



While government elites fought hand-to-hand combat over personnel and power, the broader struggles over policy and ideology were always there. Amid all the jockeying for political position and proper punishments, the Confucian *sadaebu* were not about to allow their dreams of a new world simply to evaporate in the murky retrenchment of the pre-revolution crowd. While old Goryeo elites conspired to cut the legs out from under Yi Seong-gye, some of the radicals stepped up with a drama show of their own. In September of 1390, amid the cacophony of constant factional struggle, the scholars took to the public square one night, built a mound of all the land records of Goryeo's wealthiest families, and set the whole



thing ablaze.<sup>2</sup> They were laying down a fiery marker demanding their radical land reform project.

At the heart of the scholars' radical reform project was Cho Chun's aforementioned land reform proposal—the test case for opening a new era with the rise of Yi Seong-gye. While Goryeo's farmers starved or were enslaved, Goryeo's land distribution had become exceptionally imbalanced and the ideologues of the Yi Seong-gye faction sought to rectify it. As Cho Chun said when posting his first appeal, immediately after the *Wihwado Hoegun*.

The success of our nation depends on addressing the agony and joy of the people...Poor people, who have no place to appeal, are scattered everywhere and dying in streams and pits. When people pay their grain for taxes, they borrow it from someone else, and the debt is not repayable even if they sell their wives or sell their children, and their cries are heard in Heaven.<sup>3</sup>

Cho Chun's land reform proposal promised to do away with all that by repossessing many land titles from the richest families, redistributing them more equitably, and substantially reducing the private taxation practices of the powerful *gwonmun sejok*. Cho Chun was a member of a splendid old family himself—the Pyongchang Cho, a clan of powerhouse aristocrats—but his Confucian studies had led him to seek a balanced path of equitable social relations rather than simply holding on to his old family wealth.<sup>4</sup>

To launch this grand reform project, a nation-wide land survey was launched in 1388, soon after Yi Seong-gye deposed King U. As the land survey was completed throughout 1389, about 500,000 arable plots of land were identified. Although the most radical reformers, like Jeong Do-jeon, wanted to distribute this land to the common people in small, equal plots, more realistic plans were pursued. So that the social foundations of Goryeo wouldn't be destroyed altogether, it was determined that most of the arable plots had to be

redistributed to existing local officials, military officers, and meritorious retainers to support their work and achievements. There were also about 170,000 plots reclaimed from *gwonmun sejok* families by the state, so that the state could collect taxes to pay public servants and soldiers, conduct public works and war repairs, finance ship and fortress projects, and distribute public welfare.<sup>5</sup> A lesser amount of land was distributed to grieving widows, corvée laborers and small farmers.

Though this distribution wouldn't result in Jeong Do-jeon's perfect egalitarianism, even the most radical found it a huge improvement on the current situation. Jeong Do-jeon later described the goals of this land reform project, supported strongly by Yi Seong-gye.

[We] established court land, military provision land for state use, and office land for civil and military officials. Also, off-duty military men residing in the capital as guards for the royal court, widows remaining faithful to their deceased husbands, government workers in the local magistracies, postal station workers, and river ferry workers, as well as commoners and artisans performing public duties, have all been granted land. Although the distribution of land to the people may not have reached the standard set by the ancient sages, the new land law has restored equity and balance. Compared to the evil system of the former dynasty, the new land reform has brought infinite improvement.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, all of this was vehemently opposed by the powerful families who stood to lose substantial land rights with even these limited land reforms. The national land survey threatened to expose their corrupt wealth and outright criminality, and the economic foundations of their immense power seemed to be crumbling. The *gwonmun sejok* pushed back throughout the spring of 1389, arguing that the socio-economic foundations of Goryeo should not be discarded so easily. These were

influential, well respected old families, and their long court experience gave a persuasive sophistry to their claims.

In April of 1389, the wealthy Yi Saek (who had recently escaped responsibility for the Yoon I/Yi Cho Ming envoy affair) stood up against the changing times, dazzling people with an argument about how “the old law cannot be changed too rapidly.”<sup>7</sup> The opponents proposed that instead of eliminating land titles, Goryeo should simply reduce taxation. Goryeo could eliminate multiple tax claims on a single plot of land, with a policy of “one rice paddy, one owner,” and most existing land titles could be preserved.

On *Dodang*'s council of mostly wealthy landowners, all the red-robed elites bobbed their heads in support of Yi Saek's idea. Only eight or nine of the 53 officials who discussed the matter ended up supporting Cho Chun's radical land redistribution plan—everyone else lined up to support the protection of existing land rights.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, to protect their economic interests, the old elites pushed a plan to only allow the government to take half of their lands' tax revenues for the next three years, rather than all revenues.<sup>9</sup> The King was disposed to agree with this overwhelming sentiment of his Privy Council. As King Gongyang backed away from Cho Chun's social revolution in the first half of 1389, the *gwonmun sejok* must have breathed a sigh of relief. Their land rights seemed well-nigh protected.

But the radicals had risked it all to support Yi Seong-gye's march back from Wihwado and weren't about to stop now. Dismayed at the course of *Dodang* politics, and surely upset at the constant anti-Yi conspiracies driving their hero to despair, several *sadaebu* broke into the hall of records in September of 1390. The radical Jeong Do-jeon was foremost among them. He gathered all the land records he could find, denouncing them as corrupt papers granting the *gwonmun sejok* families title to vast lands across Goryeo. He piled them into a huge mound in the public courtyard, and then set the whole thing ablaze.<sup>10</sup> Constantly feeding more land records into the flames, the fire was said to burn for days in the Gaegyeong square. As *gwonmun sejok* families gathered and wept at the fire, Jeon Do-jeon shouted out that land reform was coming to Goryeo, like it

or not: the new day dawning with the *Wihwado Hoegun* could not be stopped!<sup>11</sup>

As fire lit the sky, the old elites must have feared what was to come. Three preceding Goryeo kings had been murdered. The once-obscure soldier from the north had taken over the heights of military power from the wealthy old aristocrat Choe Yeong. The radical Jeong Do-jeon, with just middling family background, was challenging the aristocratic scion Jeong Mong-ju as voice of the *sadaebu*.<sup>12</sup> And now land records were burning in the public square. As Kang Jae-eun observed, this episode dealt “a crushing blow to the economic foundation of the pro-Yuan faction that had become great landowners through joint possession of land and slaves, and shook the very foundation of the Goryeo dynasty which relied on the economic support of the great landowners.”<sup>13</sup>

The flames certainly frightened King Gongyang. With the three previous kings having each been executed, the anxious monarch fretted about what was to come. Tensions and conspiracies racked the court. The end of days seemed upon Gaegyeong. Seeking any avenue of escape, King Gongyang even toyed with the idea of closing down Gaegyeong altogether and moving the entire capital south, to Hanyang (today’s Seoul).<sup>14</sup> The good energy of Gaegyeong’s bygone days seemed to be entirely drained, so perhaps a new location with a new community of supporters would have better *ki*\* and could restore the magic of the Wang dynasty. As the land records burned in Gaegyeong, King Gongyang wept over his fate. On September 21, he packed up his things and moved the whole court to Hanyang for a trial run.

Yi Seong-gye was asked to follow, but he would not. Instead, he said that he would head to some hot springs for a time, as he was again feeling ill. Dismayed with the King’s odd retreat to Hanyang, Yi Seong-gye then proffered his complete retirement once again on November 1<sup>st</sup>, claiming he had lost all energy and was weary of all the slander and intrigue.<sup>15</sup>

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\* “*Ki*” means the “life energy” that adheres to auspicious places and runs through certain routes within the earth. It is a critical aspect of long-existing Korean philosophy and practice of geomantic *pungsu* (in Chinese, *feng shui*)

General Yi repeated what he had said so many times before: "Being sick and lying in bed, it is difficult for me to see you...I feel extremely sorry."<sup>16</sup>

Yi Seong-gye also told some of his closest and most radical supporters, like Jeong Do-jeon and Nam Eun, that it was time for him to step down. "With your support I have done my best to help the royal house, yet the slander against me never ceases. I am afraid that we may not be able to endure this. So I have decided to return to the [Northeast Region] to avoid potential disasters." General Yi ordered the members of his household to get ready to move.<sup>17</sup>

Jeong Do-jeon was aghast. He argued passionately that the General had to stay in Gaegyeong. The *Wihwado Hoegun* could not be taken back and Yi Seong-gye had to see the grand dream through.

The future of the country and people depends on you alone. How can you then make a decision so easily? I believe your decision to leave is no better than to stay in the royal court. If you select men of benevolence and establish rules and discipline by removing wicked people, the slander against you will automatically disappear. If you withdraw yourself to a remote corner of the country, on the other hand, the slander against you will spin out of control and bring calamity upon you.<sup>18</sup>

No matter how he wished to leave, Yi Seong-gye could not forsake the constant appeals of the scholars for his return to politics. The king also called General Yi back to court, reminding him that he was Supreme Chancellor and general of all the armies of Goryeo. So Yi Seong-gye remained in the capital after all. Perhaps King Gongyang hoped to keep General Yi close, as a bulwark against raging winds, but there was no denying the world was changing. All the property records of Gaegyeong had went up in flames and the radical *sadaebu*

preached of social reforms to come.\* The King had fled to Hanyang for several months and even threatened to decamp there permanently. Yi Seong-gye's old Hamhung home was a retreating memory as his Gaegyeong position ossified. In a sad development, Yi Seong-gye's first wife, Lady Han from Hamhung, passed away during these days.

The world was changing, and on the sacred mountainsides, thousands of people began having strange dreams of where it all might end.

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\* Following the burning of the land records in the fall of 1390, a land reform act (the Gwajeon Act) passed in 1391. It took taxation rights away from many *gwonmun sejok* families and distributed them to up-and-coming officials of the new reformist faction. These new taxation rights were allocated as income support, based on whether one was a current public servant or not, rather than being held and passed down by old *gwonmun sejok* families, even many years after their retirement from public service. With taxation rights shifting from landed aristocrats to up-and-coming bureaucrats and scholars, the foundations of Goryeo's financial and economic system were being rebuilt. See So, S., "*Yeomalseoncho Jeonjegaehyukui Yeoksaseok Seonggyeoke Daehan Jaegeomto*" ["A Review of the Historical Characteristics of Land Reform in Late Goryeo and Early Joseon"].



## Millenarian Dreams



*The prophets say that a time will come when all people have forgotten the Dharma. Violence will be everywhere, and the world will be without teachers, morality, or enlightenment. At that time, Maitreya will appear, and he will bring the new Dharma. Maitreya is the next Buddha, who resides in Heaven but who hears the prayers of people in their meditations and their dreams. The coming of Maitreya heralds a golden age of miracles and peace on Earth, and no person will be left behind.*

— *The Story of Maitreya*<sup>1</sup>



Beyond Gaegyeong's internecine court struggles for position and power, there was the broader world of Korean society, filled with those who looked to Yi Seong-gye as a source of social change more than as an avenue to personal power. In the workaday streets and fields, Yi Seong-gye represented hopes that perhaps a new Goryeo might emerge with more just social arrangements. Famine might disappear, taxes and magistrates could be less oppressive, constant wars and invasions might end. For the scholars of Sungkyunkwan as well, Yi Seong-gye represented an opportunity to advance the Confucian dream of the Great Learning whereby families, communities, and entire kingdoms could become stabilized by a harmonized commitment to learning, propriety and virtue. And for some Buddhists, Yi Seong-gye represented an opportunity to transcend the corruption of old Goryeo and find purification in an impending utopia, waiting to be born. All these hopes and dreams of a new world to be achieved, somewhere beyond all the sorry bloodshed of the doomed Wang kings, wrapped themselves around the personality that was Yi Seong-gye at the time of Late Goryeo's collapse.



Echoes of those millenarian hopes of late Goryeo dreamers were discovered more than 500 years later, in 1932, by a woodland crew building firebreaks on Mt. Geumgang near Korea's eastern coast. This modern crew unearthed a stone casket containing an inscribed reliquary set holding several Buddhist relics (*Sarira*). The reliquary set included nine well-crafted bowls and containers made of silver, bronze, and white porcelain. Among the items was a thin cylinder of silver and glass, which was placed inside an egg-shaped pagoda of silver and gold and featuring images of the Buddha. This small pagoda was placed inside an octagonal house made of silver and bronze, which was then placed into a white ceramic bowl. On the thin glass cylinder was inscribed the names of General Yi Seong-gye and his wife, Lady Kang. On the other objects were inscribed the names of many of their associates: "noblewomen, monks, high-ranking officials, and the person who is believed to have overseen the production of the reliquary set."<sup>2</sup>

The whole collection was buried more than 500 years previously and appears nowhere in the remaining public records of the time. It appears that the collection had been buried in something of a hidden ritual—open to many true believers but possessed of a dangerous inner meaning that couldn't be fully expressed at the time. The artistry and location of these items, together with the inscriptions on them, reveal that these relics were all produced by Korea's Jogye order of Buddhism, a group of meditative monks dedicated at the time to a Maitreya self-purification movement featuring transcendental dreams and prayers about a better world to come, through revolutionary upheaval and washing away of all the world's wicked people.<sup>3</sup> It was this same millenarian philosophy of violent rebirth through the coming of the Maitreya Buddha that had inspired much of the Red Turban movement in China, through the teachings of the "White Lotus" society.

In the 1370s and 1380s, Yi Seong-gye spent a lot of time with the monks of this Maitreya movement. Yi had long been quite devoted to Buddhism and had once went out of his way

to save a copy of the *Koreana Tripitaka*\* from being destroyed in conflicts with Japanese pirates.<sup>4</sup> Once in power as King, he commonly asked monks to read him sutras from the Tripitaka, he had a pagoda built to preserve the Tripitaka, he ordered prayers composed for its publication, and he made special trips to observe thousands of soldiers transporting wood block carvings of the Tripitaka to new monasteries.<sup>5</sup>

Before he became King, Yi Seong-gye visited with Buddhist spiritualists in meditative retreats several times in temples, mountains, and caves across the peninsula. In his meditations, Yi Seong-gye had many strange dreams in these late Goryeo days. His dreams were most vivid when he stayed in the caves or temples of Jogye Buddhism, which at that very time had become infused with all sorts of dreams about the reappearance of a heavenly deity who would soon arrive to purify and save this corrupt world. This moment of Korean Maitreya Buddhism held that the corrupt old world was ready to slough off and a new purified world was on its way. The Maitreyan Buddhists prayed for the arrival of the “future Buddha,” who would soon arrive to revolutionize the world and save all its suffering souls.

This movement was strongest in spiritual epicenters like mystical Geumgang mountain, where divine spirits were thought to mingle with mortals, and which was often frequented by General Yi Seong-gye.<sup>6</sup>

In between his military campaigns, and near the time of his rise in the late 1380s, Yi Seong-gye would often visit this coastal mountain, attending temple and participating in the monk’s meditative traditions. On Mt. Geumgang, General Yi spent many days and nights talking with monks like Naong (some reliquary inscriptions call Yi a disciple of Naong), Heung Yeongtong (who stayed near Yi Seong-gye for decades and died in 1395 when falling from a horse riding home from Yi’s

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\* The *Koreana Tripitaka* is a Korean collection of the *Tripitaka*—the Buddhist Canon—carved onto thousands of wood blocks and stored at various Korean monasteries over the years. The copy of the *Tripitaka* that is stored today at Korea’s Haeinsa temple is the world’s oldest complete collection of the *Tripitaka* and has been inscribed on UNESCO’s Historical Memory of the World Register.

birthday party), Park Ja-cheong (who helped craft the Sarira reliquary discovered in 1932 and who would one day craft the stone guardians at Yi Seong-gye's burial mound), and Monk Muhak (who would become Yi Seong-gye's royal preceptor and helped Yi select Hanyang as the new capital when he finally became king). For years, Yi Seong-gye visited with these monks of Geumgansan.<sup>7</sup> He learned about other-worldly Maitreya Buddhism and pondered what it could mean in the here and now.

Yi also told the monks about his own strange dreams. He dreamed of flowers drifting from the sky. That seems to portend ripe fruit, ready to be picked, the monks said. He dreamed of a broken mirror falling to the ground. That is like a flash of beautiful sunshine, even though things break, the monks said.<sup>8</sup> He had dreams of a beautiful Phoenix rising up amid rainbows—a suggestion of royalty in Goryeo's land of the Phoenix Throne.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1370s, when meditating on Mt Geumgang, Yi Seong-gye once asked Muhak to interpret a particularly vivid dream of his. In the dream, Yi was running out of a burning house, carrying three rafters on his back. Monk Muhak said it must be a dream that Yi was living in a collapsing world (the burning house) but that he would save things by becoming a King (the three rafters represent holding up the house, while also representing the three strokes in the Chinese character for king).

This was a portentous dream to experience, right here at the epicenter of Maitreya millenarianism. Dreams like this, as interpreted by respected spiritualists like Muhak, could not be dismissed as mere dog dreams or meaningless banter for the dinner table. No, a dream like this, occurring at a time of national crisis and coming to a great general, is the stuff of legend and collective hope. A dream like this, interpreted by monks and whispered in evening candlelight by the people, becomes reinterpreted as a collective dream, spread through oral tradition as a public hope for a new world to come, expressing itself in the august dreams of the great hero.<sup>10</sup>

In 1391, following Yi Seong-gye's return from Wihwado, these dreams began to take flight as never before. This is the meaning of the Sarira reliquary discovered in 1932. According

to inscriptions found on that reliquary, it was buried in a ceremony of Maitreya Buddhism. This ceremony was prominently attended by Yi Seong-gye and Lady Kang, who placed their names upon the central cylinder in the collection. In May of 1391, just months after the Goryeo land records had been burned in the square and anxious King Gongyang had decamped to Hanyang, “10,000 people” gathered at temple to pray for the arrival of a new world.<sup>11</sup> This was a Maitreya ritual, and though “ten thousand people” were surely not present, a good number of close associates of the family Yi were there.<sup>12</sup> It was on this occasion, at the auspicious Mt. Geumgang, that the Sarira reliquary set was sanctified and buried in a votive offering. On one of the porcelain bowls was inscribed this text, calling for a new world:

*More than 2,400 years have passed since the Nirvana of the Buddha...[Today] Yi Seong-gye and ten thousand people together make a vow, wishing to deposit [this] together in Mt. Geumgang, awaiting the appearance of Maitreya in the world to the people, to aid and propagate the true transformation and together attain the Buddha dharma. That this wish is firm, the Buddhas and patriarchs vouchsafe.*<sup>13</sup>

It was signed by General Yi himself, his wife Lady Kang, prominent Buddhist monks, several officials, and many women of noble families.<sup>14</sup> They all promised the same: “I will wait for the world of virtue to come, and I will open it again, and worship the Buddha.”<sup>15</sup> The votive was placed into its many layered container of silver, gold, bronze and porcelain, put in a stone casket, and buried with a most sincere hope for a future revolution.

The reliquary wasn’t discovered for 541 years, but its hopes worked their way into the world long before that. Occurring in the midst of late Goryeo’s dynastic collapse, these prayers and dreams were as much political as religious. We see in this event the dreams of a new world—a new dynasty—taking flight in the Yi Seong-gye faction, together with the

growing political will to make it be.<sup>16</sup> The revolutionary implications of the Maitreya movement were well understood by established authorities in both Yuan and Goryeo and Maitreya ceremonies were often banned in both countries,<sup>17</sup> which may be why Yi Seong-gye's Maitreya event may have been hidden from his contemporaries, and appears in no remaining historical records.

The low political world of Goryeo court politics may have been filled with crass intrigues of all those seeking power without purpose, but there was something else happening in the mountains among the Maitreya monks. Here, Yi Seong-gye's mind could take flight and was filled with visions of the generous and virtuous Buddha who promised to redeem the broken world of politics without soul, power without purpose. Here General Yi could dream of building a new and better world, and he could dream together with the ten thousand people. As celebrated in Yi Seong-gye's posthumous lyric myth—*Songs of the Dragons*—"Ah! Our kings gather the minds of thousands before they reach the throne...so we can see in advance that there is no limit to all things that are everlasting and supported by Heaven's will."<sup>18</sup>

## Base Blood and Counter-Revolution



*Hong Gildong had many skills and a refined character. But he was base-born of a lowly servant, so he could never rise in society or government. Hong despaired and wished that he were born of “a true man” in this world. “Then I would go forth to become a general and rise up as a high minister. I would wear a moon-sized insignia of a commander on my waist and sit upon a high seat from which I would order a thousand men and ten thousand horses to conquer the east and subdue the west. In such a way I would do great service to the country and achieve glory. I would then be elevated to become the loftiest of men below the king. And as a high minister I would work for the country with utmost loyalty so that my name would become renowned for generations and my portrait memorialized in Girin House.”*

*But ministers are born only from a special blood, as Hong well knew. “I have been born into a situation in which I am barred from following my ambitions, and I cannot even address my father as Father and my older brother as Brother.” He wept like rain and fell into lonely grief.*

— *The Story of Hong Gildong*<sup>1</sup>



About the same time that Yi Seong-gye was at the Geumgangsan temple, dreaming of a new world, King Gongyang was spending his days in retreat at Hanyang, dreading his return to the turbulent capital. After a month in Hanyang to kick off 1391, the King headed back to Gaegyeong. He must have felt like he was heading back into the tiger’s cave, and he took a slow eight-day journey for the short trip. On his way, he attended a Buddhist temple (Haemsa), staying

up all night in incense-filled prayers with the Queen and crown prince. He was preparing to formally name the crown prince upon his return to Gaegyeong, solidifying his own power as the legitimate king of Goryeo.

Fearful that such developments signaled a shift in power away from Yi Seong-gye and towards the Goryeo throne, Jeong Do-jeon spoke up as soon as King Gongyang returned to Gaegyeong. He criticized the expense of Gongyang's journey to Hanyang and called once again for serious punishment of men like Yi Saek and Wu Hyeon-bo, who had conspired against Yi Seong-gye. In the spring and early summer of 1391, Jeong renewed complaints against many of the Goryeo loyalists and anti-Yi conspirators of the Yoon I/Yi Cho affair who had "escaped the jaws of death" and were now returning to government influence.<sup>2</sup> He specifically targeted Wu Hyeon-bo, arguing that he was involved in both the Kim Jeo and the Yi I/Yi Cho incidents and must be punished. Yi Seong-gye weighed in, supporting Jeong Do-jeon's charges. Under growing pressure, by the end of June, Wu Hyeon-bo was exiled to Cheorwan as punishment for a crime that had previously been forgiven after the Chongju flood. "I had better go back to a place where I can live comfortably," said Wu as he left.<sup>3</sup>

Jeong Do-jeon's *sadaebu* colleague, Jeong Mong-ju (pen name: Poeun) was exceedingly upset to have these old issues being brought up again—after all, Poeun was the one who led the way to release and forgive most of the conspirators of the Yoon I/Yi Cho incident the previous year. Poeun was a moderate, always looking to find a middle way to hold the elites of old Goryeo together with the reformers of Yi Seong-gye, but Jeong Do-jeon was the radical who had completely given up on Goryeo after his ten-year exile. While Poeun kept looking for ways to save Goryeo with moderate reforms, Jeong Do-jeon (pen name: Sambong) argued that such efforts were useless, akin to "pouring wild ginseng and deer blood into a person's mouth at the end of his life."<sup>4</sup> Now, as Poeun continued to support even those who conspired against Yi Seong-gye, while Sambong petitioned for renewed rounds of punishments, the thirty-year friendship between the two scholars was fracturing. A great expanse was opening between

the scholarly titans of Goryeo; trying somehow to stand on a bridge in the middle became deadly dangerous.<sup>5</sup>

While Sambong and Poeun faced off, so did King Gongyang and Yi Seong-gye. Gongyang wanted to keep Yi Seong-gye in Gaegyeong but was worried over his loyalty. Yi Seong-gye dreamed sometimes of a better world to come, but he thought just as often of retirement to Hamhung.<sup>6</sup> The summer of 1391 thus featured many private meetings between King Gongyang and Yi Seong-gye, with each reassuring the other of their intentions, often over long drinking sessions.<sup>7</sup> In July of 1391, at one of their good-will drinking parties, King Gongyang once again begged General Yi to remain at his post and bestowed the General with a new horse and saddle, a ceremonial robe, a new hat, and the finest quality hat string featuring the jeweled beads so popular among Goryeo elite. General Yi was happy with the gifts and tried on the robe right then and there, pleasing the King.<sup>8</sup>

While the suspicious King and weary General slowly circled each other in palace drinking parties, the tigers outside bristled and grew ready to pounce. In the summer of 1391, Jeong Mong-ju felt that the Goryeo court was growing weary of Jeong Do-jeon's constant attacks on Goryeo elites and saw an opening for a counterattack. On the heels of Wu Hyeon-bo's exile, Jeong Mong-ju raised an appeal with the *Dodang*, in July of 1391. We can't keep revisiting these old cases and exposing people to new terror and punishment based on the mood of the day, Poeun argued. Instead, the King should preside over one *final* discussion of five sensitive incidents involving Yi Seong-gye. Sixty people commonly accused as being involved in these issues should be investigated and determined guilty or not-guilty, *once and for all*, and they should never be brought up for investigation again.<sup>9</sup> Some of these sixty people had already been executed or had died in prison, but a final investigation would at least settle their record for posterity and would be helpful for their families. The five investigations were to determine, once and for all:



## THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

- Those who had blocked accession of Gongyang as “the true” king of Goryeo;
- Those who joined in the Kim Jeo incident;
- Those who tried to overthrow Goryeo’s Wang dynasty altogether;
- Those who were involved in the conspiratorial envoy to Ming (the Yoon I/Yi Cho affair);
- Those who were involved in Buddhist conspiracies against the crown (e.g., Yi Seong-gye’s Maitreya ceremonies?).

The *Dodang* council supported this idea, and it was determined that the King would investigate and issue a final ruling on all these cases. This development was a direct response to Jeong Do-jeon’s constant rallying and renewed assaults against Goryeo’s old loyalists and revealed the deep and growing divide between the Poemun and Sambong factions, even among the Confucian *sadaebu*.<sup>10</sup>

During the investigations of these sixty people, it quickly became clear that most would be acquitted. Old conspiracies against Yi Seong-gye would be buried for good, and many of the Goryeo loyalist would return to government service. The genie of dynastic revolution would be back in the bottle, old opponents of Yi Seong-gye would be politically protected henceforth, and the dreams of the radical *sadaebu* would be nicely domesticated.

But Jeong Do-jeon loathed to let go of the genie. “Corrupt officials are the great vermin of the people’s heart,” he once wrote. “Rip up their roots and do not let them spread.”<sup>11</sup> Instead of accepting the final retrial of the sixty, therefore, Sambong continued to constantly denounce some of the most influential “fierce tigers”<sup>12</sup> of old Goryeo, including even his old mentor, Yi Saek of the Confucian Academy. Several times in the spring and summer of 1391, he sent requests to *Dodang* and the King, recounting lengthy allegations of treason by various notables and requesting the execution of both Wu Hyeon-bo and Yi Saek (former director of the Sungkyunkwan Confucian

Academy).<sup>13</sup> Late in the summer of 1391, he raised yet another appeal charging that several court officials as being “the most flagrant of traitorous ministers,” and calling for exiles and executions.\*<sup>14</sup>

It was all too much for the ministers of *Dodang*, many of whom were exactly the old, wealthy elite so often targeted by Sambong. Some of the ministers charged that General Yi Seong-gye was pushing Jeong Do-jeon to make all these charges and offered harsh words about the general’s questionable loyalty to the King. The general grew depressed and considered just returning home to the northeast, as harsh critiques against Jeong Do-jeon grew.<sup>15</sup> One conservative minister (Kim Jin-yang) warned Jeong Mong-ju that “if you don’t pull out the roots of the grasses and eliminate Jeong Do-jeon’s words, the evil will grow again...the root of the evil will be eradicated only when Jeong Do-jeon and his associates are executed.”<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, in September of 1391, just as Jeong Mong-ju was settling almost all of the sixty cases brought up for re-hearing (almost all of the accused were found not guilty and set free), he also brought up one more interesting case for consideration: the case of his old friend, Sambong.

It is interesting that Jeong Do-jeon keeps attacking the Wu Hyeon-bo family, Jeong Mong-ju observed. When we dig into the records, don’t we find that this was the very family who had long ago pointed out the low-born origins of Jeong Do-jeon? Is this why Jeong Do-jeon keeps attacking these loyal servants of Goryeo so unfairly and relentlessly? He has been

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\* Jeong Do-jeon’s castigations of “corrupt officials” could be quite severe. A typical critique, written in later years, was as follows. “They are grasping and collude together; they are jealous and dangerous. The poison of their avarice and brutality swells the winds of denunciation. They use litigation as the gate to wealth and jail as the bureau for riches. They are happy in the use of extraordinary punishments and seize beyond regular taxes. They consider compassion and approachability as appeasement and oppressive extraction and viciousness as putting things in order.” See Jeong Do-Jeong, “A Literary Mirror to Order the World (1395),” in Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age.*, p. 177.

“harboring a wicked heart on the inside while pretending loyalty on the outside,”<sup>17</sup> the critics charged. This improper and vindictive behavior is to be expected, said *Jeong Mong-ju*. For Jeong Do-jeon is indeed descended of base blood. His maternal grandmother was an enslaved person, and he has tried to hide this fact from everyone. “His lineage is not clear,” concluded the posted accusations.<sup>18</sup> “Jeong Do-jeon raised himself from humble status and took a high position, so he tried to remove the record and hide his humble roots, but he could not do it alone, so he made many people guilty of the crime by joining his deception.”<sup>19</sup>

The charges of low birth were dramatic and upended everything. Base blood was in the water, and censors and ministers alike circled to argue that Jeong Do-jeon’s constant accusations against Goryeo elites must have been driven by his low-born, jealous heart. He was hopelessly tainted to the core, born of a slave.<sup>20</sup> Jeong Do-jeon was imprisoned and ten days of accusations and impeachment by the sharks of *Dodang* went on. He should be executed for his deception, argued some. In the end, Jeong Do-jeon was once again simply exiled from Gaegyeong. In October, the radical scholar was once again fired from his government post, stripped of his rights as a meritorious retainer, and exiled far south to Naju. Sambong had been exiled there before. His two sons also lost their government posts.<sup>21</sup>

In the fall of 1391, Jeong Do-jeon was hauled out of Gaegyeong in the wooden cage of exiled criminals, even as the moderates and Goryeo loyalists slowly filtered back in. Almost all sixty of those retried for anti-Yi conspiracies were found not guilty; many returned to their government posts.<sup>22</sup> Jeong Mong-ju was putting the final touches on proposed changes to the criminal code that would limit the ability of the Yi Seong-gye faction (or anyone) from bringing people up on old charges or accusing them multiple times.<sup>23</sup> A number of other radicals began losing their posts with the exile of Jeong Do-jeon, and a growing number of Goryeo loyalists began to return to government life.

It was a bitter time for Jeong Do-jeon. The world was in upheaval, his cause seemed to be slipping away, and he was once again banished from it all. “Everything is changing,” he

wrote in a personal reflection. "World history is changing, and the people keep moving. If anyone you meet asks about me, tell them I am too sick to recite poetry." He wrote several other sad poems of exile.

*When I look to the north, it gets further away.  
When I look to the south, my steps get slower.  
Already I have been alone.  
How can I say farewell again?*

*The pear flower shines brightly.  
The bird is playing in the sunshine.  
I am sitting without thought as a recluse,  
Looking at a single blade of grass,  
Emerging alone in the garden.<sup>24</sup>*

General Yi had dreamed of Maitreya in the promising spring of 1391, but with summer's end those dreams went into exile with Jeong Do-jeon. In mid-November 1391, a frustrated General Yi resigned from government once again. The counter-revolution was gaining steam.



### What Shall it Be? This or That?



*In those days before becoming King, Yi Seong-gye made pilgrimages to all the great Sanshin (Mountain spirits) and requested their support. The White-Head mountain of the far north (Baekdu) offered support for the coming of Yi Seong-gye. So too did Namhae Yong-wang or the Dragon King of the South Sea. The Sanshin of Seoreoksan supported Yi Seong-gye, and so did the spirits of Namsan, Gwanaksan, and Bulguksan. All 12,000 peaks of Guemgansan celebrated Yi Seong-gye, for he carried the Mandate of Heaven. All the mountain spirits of Korea recognized and supported the coming King.*

*But not Jiri-san Sanshin (The Spirit-Queen of Mt. Jiri.) Mt Jiri was home of the earth mother of all creation, Mago Halmoni, who gave birth to all things. Also living at Mt. Jiri—or perhaps they were one—was the spirit of Queen Yuksuk, the mother of Taejo Wang Geon, founder of the Goryeo Dynasty. Alone among all the mountain spirits of Korea, Jirisan Sanshin would not bow down to the new king of Joseon. No matter how Yi Seong-gye entreated the mountain spirit, the mother of Goryeo would never take his side.*

*While all the other mountains celebrated Yi Seong-gye's Mandate of Heaven, the mother sanshin of Jirisan alone had a loyal spirit and remained forever banished from the new King's hall of heavenly supporters.<sup>1</sup>*



Responding to General Yi's mid-November resignation, Cho Chun and other supporters planned a big memorial in the spring of 1392 to honor the General and rally his popular support. Hearing of this effort, Jeong Mong-ju made plans of his own to get the General out of town and keep him on the

sidelines. It so happened that the Crown Prince, Wang Seok, was just then returning from an envoy visit to Ming and was nearing the northern border. In March of 1392, General Yi was ordered to leave Gaegyeong to travel north to meet the Crown Prince and escort him back to the capital. This trip would keep General Yi out of the capital city for a while, undermining the efforts of his allies to rally his support.

As Yi was travelling north, he spent some time hunting near the island of Byeonkran-do in Haeju, on the west coast. An accident occurred and the aged General fell off his horse, badly injuring himself. He ended up bedridden in a healing house on the island.

The *Koryosa* reports that when Jeong Mong-ju heard of the accident, he “showed signs of joy.”<sup>2</sup> Now was the moment! With Yi Seong-gye injured and out of action, Jeong Mong-ju issued an appeal in early April to torture and further punish Jeong Do-jeon and other supporters, in preparation for their inevitable denouement. Jeong Do-jeon was imprisoned in his place of exile.<sup>3</sup> While the great general lay bedridden, dozens of his supporters were put under military arrest or house detention. Supporters of these actions were many of those who had just returned from their own exile, following Jeong Mong-ju’s retrial of the sixty, including Jeong Do-jeon’s great enemy Wu Hyeon-bo. Though Yi Seong-gye issued a demand from his sickbed to release Jeong Do-jeon from jail, it was simply ignored.<sup>4</sup>

King Gongyang supported Jeong Mong-ju, and the shrewd scholar acted fast. Within a week of General Yi’s hunting accident, Cho Chun and Nam Eun were exiled and Jeong Do-jeon was recommended for execution. Before going further, a few weeks after Yi’s fall from the horse, Jeong Mong-ju decided to visit General Yi in Byeonkran-do and assess the real state of his health. It seems likely that worse may have been planned than a simple health check-up, for all of Yi Seong-gye’s top supporters were being arrested and slated for exile or execution, and now a capital detachment was rushing to the General’s sickbed. Yi Seong-gye was in a dangerous place.

At this time, Lady Kang visited with a shaman down in Gaegyeong and received a dire prophecy. It is as if your husband has “climbed to the top of a 100-foot-high pavilion

[and] suddenly lost his footing,” the shaman warned. “He is deadly danger.”<sup>5</sup> Lady Kang anxiously told Yi Bang-won (Yi Seong-gye’s ambitious son, from his first wife) of this prophecy and asked for help.

At the time, Yi Bang-won was isolated in a small hut, mourning the recent passing of his mother (Lady Han of Hamhung), but he sprang into action. Yi Bang-won rushed to his father’s side on the island, arriving shortly before Jeong Mong-ju had planned his own suspicious journey. Bang-won told his father of the desperate events in Gaegyeong and warned him of his life.<sup>6</sup>

For the longest time, the General just lay weary and quiet, but then he finally agreed to leave the island. In mid-April, General Yi Seong-gye was snuck off Byeonkran-do (perhaps hidden in a woman’s palanquin) and spirited secretly into his Gaegyeong house. The next day, the Ministry of Justice confirmed the coming execution of Jeong Do-jeon, Cho Chun and Yoon So-jong—the most important officials of Yi Seong-gye’s faction. But then like a lightning bolt came the shocking news that Yi Seong-gye was somehow back in the capital! Everyone froze. No executions moved forward. A fretting King Gongyang immediately sent a get-well gift to General Yi’s house. Jeong Mong-ju couldn’t eat for three days due to his immense anxiety.<sup>7</sup>

Yi Bang-won took the initiative and called a family meeting to decide what to do about Jeong Mong-ju’s conspiracy. “The people of the country know [my father] is loyal to the royal family, but now he is criticized by Jeong Mong-ju.” Bang-won complained. No matter how friendly Yi Seong-gye had been with Poemun (Jeong Mong-ju) in the past, those days were over. The scholar should be arrested and punished, Yi Bang-won argued. “The situation is very dangerous!” Bang-won exclaimed to his father. “What are you going to do in the future?”

But Yi Seong-gye was equanimous. “There are thousands of people who live and die daily,” he reflected. “Since life and death depend on the will of Heaven, I have no choice but to accept what is given to me.”<sup>8</sup> Yi Seong-gye refused to consider any kind of attack on the great scholar, and instead berated Bang-won for leaving the house of mourning for his deceased



mother. Immensely frustrated, Yi Bang-won grew desperate, felt cornered. His family name and the fate of his father was on the brink of collapse, but no one would act to stop it. A dark will gathered in his mind.

But still he wavered. Perhaps if Poeun really understood how dangerous his own situation had become, perhaps then the scholar would finally agree to join the cause of Yi Seong-gye. The familiar legends about these days say that Yi Bang-won arranged to meet with Poeun over a meal and share a drink together. Before their meal, he offered Poeun a poem he had written, and wondered how the scholar would reply.\*

So the General's son and the loyal scholar met for drinks. There was much to toast for Poeun's long life of achievement. In 1360, he had passed the qualifying exams in literary and classical studies three times in a row. In 1362, he became the Minister of Censorship. In 1363, he fought beside Yi Seong-gye in the northern campaign. In 1366, he was a lecturer in the Confucian Academy (Sungkyunkwan). In 1372, he was a successful envoy to Ming and survived thirteen days of drifting in the ocean after a shipwreck. In 1376 he helped direct Sungkyunkwan. In 1377 he fought against the corrupt Prime Minister Yi In-im and ended up exiled. In 1380, he had fought with Yi Seong-gye against the pirates at Hwangsansan. Through the 1380s he taught and directed at Sungkyunkwan, and from

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\* This dinner and poetic exchange between Yi Bang-won and Jeong Mong-ju is well-known and young Korean students to this day often are asked to read and memorize the poems. But there is a good chance the story of the poetic dinner is apocryphal. The historical record is mixed on that point and mention of the dinner and poetic exchange only appears in records quite some time after the event. For one argument that the poetic exchange and other circumstances of Jeong Mong-ju's death have not been remembered accurately, see Kim, I., ["A Study about the Truth and Myth of Jeong Mong-ju's Death"]. Other scholarship argues that events occurred much along the lines shared in this book. One scholar argues that the original poem was recited orally, so it is not surprising that the written version only shows up in later records. See, for example, Hong, S., "*Poeun Ueongmongjuui Yeongu*" ["A Study of Poeun Jeong Mong-ju's 'Danshimga'"].

1388 to 1391 he had helped advance the cause of Yi Seong-gye after the *Wihwado Hoegun*.

But now, the famous scholar had become dangerously divided from the great general and the cliff edge loomed. This warning is the message Yi Bang-won shared when he offered his bit of poetry to the top scholar of Goryeo. Yi Bang-won had often been called on by his father to lead poetry sessions at dinner parties like this, and so he offered his old friend Poen a poem for thought, now famously known as the *Hayeoga*.

*What difference does it make, this way or that?  
The tangled vines of Mansusan\* in profusion grow  
entwined  
We too could be like that, and live together a hundred  
years.*<sup>9</sup>

Yi Bang-won was urging Jeong Mong-ju to realize that even though the walls of his beloved dynasty might crumble and lay amid twisted vines on Mansusan (a mountain just beyond Gaegyeong's walls), there remained the ability to still live well by intertwining with the new world that was emerging. He was imploring Poen to abandon his loyalty to Goryeo once and for all, and wind together with the Yi family like twisted vines, so that they all could live in peace and prosperity going forward. Either that or face the consequences. In fact, the opening lines of his poem can be translated alternatively as the blunt question: "*What shall it be: this or that?*"

Poen then offered a poetic reply of his own—the famous "*Danshimga*" of an eternally loyal servant to the realm.

*Though I were to die and die again, still die a  
hundred times,  
And my bones all turn to dust, my soul remains  
or not,  
My single-minded heart toward my love shall  
never perish.*<sup>10</sup>

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\* Mansusan is a mountain outside the west gate of Gaegyeong (Goryeo's capital), so Yi Bang-won is speaking of the twisting vines consuming the crumbling Goryeo dynasty.

Yi Bang-won had his answer. Jeong Mong-ju would never agree to work against the Goryeo dynasty, no matter if he died a hundred times. Moreover, the influential scholar was systematically eliminating all Yi Seong-gye's strongest allies. The Yi family was in a corner. But with General Yi back in the capital, Poeun must have felt a bit in a corner himself. As Jeong Do-jeon and other allies of Yi Seong-gye remained on death row, and Yi Bang-won was darkly threatening Jeong Mong-ju, the scholar decided to pay a visit to the General's house to assess exactly where he stood.

Meanwhile, Yi Bang-won had decided on his own that the time had come to act: Poeun had left him no choice. Before Poeun showed up at his father's house, Yi Bang-won reached out to close associates and explained the dire situation. Yi Seong-gye is a loyal servant to the royal family, Bang-won said. "All the people of the country know that he has merit, but he can't continue to be an innocent child. If he is slaughtered with his hands tied, they will surely turn his story upside down and give him a bad reputation."<sup>11</sup>

Bang-won turned to Yi Chiran, Seong-gye's adopted brother, and asked for help in assassinating Jeong Mong-ju. "How can I do something [your father] does not know about?" Yi Chiran asked, challenging Bang-won to remain loyal to his father's wishes to protect Poeun. Bang-won angrily recoiled, arguing that punishment of Jeong Mong-ju was the *real* loyalty to his father. "Mongju and his clique tried to destroy our family. How can we just sit and wait for disaster? I believed I could be more filial to you by [killing him]."<sup>12</sup> Yi Bang-won left Yi Chiran to his loyalty, gathered others to his side, and planned the deed. "I will do it myself," the son of Yi Seong-gye resolved.

When Poeun arrived at Yi Seong-gye's house one April evening in 1392, the General received him as always: "with dignity and virtue."<sup>13</sup> Everything was as it always had been, and Poeun must have been reassured with the General's warm welcome. Outside the house, however, Yi Bang-won's assassins gathered.

On the streets, the tigers lurked as Jeong Mong-ju made his way home on horseback. On the Sonjuk bridge, four assassins emerged from the shadows, gathered around the

scholar, and took out their weapons. Jeong Mong-ju rebuked them and flogged his horse to flee. But one of the assassins hit the horse's head and brought it to the ground. As the horse fell, Poeun jumped up, but it was hopeless. He was surrounded and savagely beaten to death with clubs and an iron ball on a chain.\*<sup>14</sup> Poeun's head was cut off and displayed in the street, together with a sign reading "*Made Empty Talk, Led Astray, Plotted Against the Government Ministers, and Caused Disorder to the State.*"<sup>15</sup>

There were four assassins of Jeong Mong-ju: Cho Yeong-kyu, Cho Yeong-moo, Ko Yeo-yeo, and Lee Bu-yi. Yi Bang-won had directed the whole affair. He was just 26 years old when cutting down Goryeo's 56-year-old philosopher of state.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Jeong Mong-ju's family was enslaved and all their property was confiscated by the state.<sup>17</sup>

General Yi Seong-gye was greatly dismayed upon learning of Jeong Mong-ju's assassination. "Everyone knew that our household's root was filial piety," Yi berated his son. "But you killed a minister at your own discretion, as you wished. People will think that I failed to recognize this act. Now that you have conducted such an undutiful act like this, I feel like drinking poison and dying."<sup>18</sup>

But Bang-won replied pragmatically. "With Jeong Mong-ju and his followers plotting against us, was I supposed to just sit and wait for disaster to befall us? My action was motivated by my filial concern. We must, in any event, call our loyal troops and have them make ready for any possible disturbance." Ever careful, Seong-gye agreed to contact his troops now that the deed was done. He also had his allied commander Hwang Hui-seok go to the king to impeach Jeong Mong-ju as a plotter and to demand the release of Cho Chun, Nam Eun and Jeong Do-jeon.<sup>19</sup>

Though Yi Bang-won's actions may have preserved Yi Seong-gye in power and saved the General's supporters, his father would never fully forgive the brutal act. He only saw that a much-beloved Goryeo scholar had been murdered, thus

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\* The popular scholar's red heart bled so much on Sonjuk Bridge that to this day when it rains, legends say the bridge becomes dark red with stains where his blood fell.

tarnishing the reputation of the family Yi. Simmering anger and regret over the incident likely played a role in General Yi requesting resignation from government several times in the coming weeks, though King Gongyang turned him down.<sup>20</sup> The whole assassination affair was a serious episode, deeply alienating Yi Seong-gye from his fiery son.

Angry as General Yi was, there was no denying the effectiveness of Bang-won's actions. The half-century-old Goryeo Dynasty symbolically ended with Jeong Mong-ju's death on the bridge, for the moderate faction of Goryeo supporters never recovered. Jeong Mong-ju's two sons were killed, his family was thrown down, and all their wealth confiscated. About thirty allies of the Jeong Mong-ju faction were exiled. Goryeo moderates were in panicked disarray and could do nothing as Yi Seong-gye's allies began taking over core government positions in the weeks after this assassination. Yi Chiran was given a high military position. By the end of April, Yi Seong-gye was back at the forefront of Goryeo government and had taken a position as Chief Chancellor of *Dodang*. The radicals were brought back from exile. Rescued from the edge of the executioner's blade, Jeong Do-jeon entered Gaegyeong again on June 10<sup>th</sup>.

Though the radical Jeong Do-jeon had won his battle with the moderate Jeong Mong-ju, the people always remembered the blood-red heart and loyalty of Poeun: "The Last Man of Goryeo." Even the Yi family Hagiography (*Songs of the Dragons*) admitted how "they saw his red heart from the beginning, and in the end his was still a red heart; so who would not remember that?"<sup>21</sup> But Sambong, not Poeun, was the scholar who would build the new world in the end—the undeviating gardener who cleared away the deadwood of history. "If you want to plant a new tree, you have to cut away all the thorns," Sambong wrote. "When you eliminate the thorns, that's when the beautiful orchard flowers can bloom."<sup>22</sup>

## Standing Before the Phoenix Throne



*“Thus it is that when Tian (Heaven) means to place a great burden of responsibility upon a man, it always first steeps the aspirations of his heart in bitterness and labors his muscle and bone. Starving his frame and flesh, depleting his person, obstructing his every plan: these are means to motivate his heart, strengthen his endurance, and expand what he is capable of doing. Only after persisting in error can a man correct himself; only after his mind is pressed and his thoughts thwarted can he create a new way; only when his face is flushed with expression and sound busts from his mouth is he understood. When within a state there are neither families that set standards nor gentleman who offer admonishments, and abroad there are no enemies and external threats, that state will generally perish. Knowing this one realizes that we thrive in adversity and perish from comfort and pleasure.”*

— Mencius<sup>1</sup>



When Jeong Mong-ju fell on Sojuk Bridge, Goryeo turned upside down. Anti-Yi conspirators were exiled, executed, or went underground, while the Yi Seong-gye faction rose to dominate government. Within a month of *Jeong Mong-ju's* death, on June 9<sup>th</sup>, Wu Hyeon-bo's entire family was purged. Wu Hyeon-bo, his five sons, seven relatives and thirteen supportive officials were all exiled. Yi Seong-gye accused them of working together to plot his demise, and he personally had them banished, without even talking to the King. These people “have committed many crimes and received excessively generous pardons,” in the past, General Yi complained, “Therefore, I dare to do things first and talk about them later.”<sup>2</sup> Even as the counter-revolutionary faction was banished, King Gong-

yang angrily summoned radicals like Jeong Do-jeon and Nam Eun to his chambers to explain Yi Seong-gye's impertinence.

Five days later, on June 15<sup>th</sup>, Yi Bang-won offered his own baleful counterreply to the King's anger. He gathered 52 government officials, military commanders, and Confucian scholars in the family gardens to discuss the future of Goryeo and the crown.<sup>3</sup> Other supporters of the Yi Seong-gye faction offered formal appeals to the King, charging that he was too often ignoring justice to help his rich supporters, and complaining that "His Highness has disappointed the hearts of many people by bending the law."<sup>4</sup> Jeong Do-jeon was giddy with such developments, praising how the rich and powerful Yi Seong-gye had given himself over to the cause of a better world. The elevation of Confucian *sadaebu*, land reform, punishment of corrupt officials, and all the other dreams of a new world suddenly seemed within reach. Jeong Do-jeon's long-awaited revolution seemed nigh at hand.

In late June, the beleaguered King Gongyang sent an envoy to Ming, desperately pleading for Ming support in finally investing him as legitimate King of Goryeo. The Ming court had delayed such a move for three years. Now it was too late: Gongyang's gambit would be the last envoy Goryeo ever sent to Ming.

Indeed, what was left for King Gongyang? State coffers were dry, all the best land was held by corrupt elites, the people were abandoning him, and his allies were executed, exiled, or in hiding. "There are three treasures of the King: land, people and politics" wrote Jeong Do-jeon. "But if the land and the people are gone, what will you do politics about?"<sup>5</sup> On July 5<sup>th</sup>, long before the Ming envoy could complete its journey, the isolated King Gongyang tried to buy time. He summoned the Royal Secretariat (staffed by Yi Bang-won) and the court's Master Calligrapher (Jo Yong-gi). He ordered these officials to help him write up a proposed pact with Yi Seong-gye, stating that the two leaders would swear to fully support the other and that neither King nor general would ever rise in conspiracy against the other again. "How can I ever forget your virtues?" King Gongyang wrote in the proposed pact, which he had printed up and posted about the capital.<sup>6</sup>

But General Yi didn't think much of this pact and never did sign it. "What shall I say?" Yi disdainfully asked. "He had no choice but to offer this."<sup>7</sup> The court historians of the *Taejo Sillok* shared this assessment: "The king failed to repay the chancellor [Taejo] for enthroning him as king; not only that, he even tried to harm the chancellor. He has lost the Mandate of Heaven and the hearts of the people. The pact he made, which sounds pathetic and lame, has become useless."<sup>8</sup>

An anxious King Gongyang then visited Yi Seong-gye in person on July 12, again begging for the mutual commitment pact. King Gongyang offered to voluntarily abdicate, as long as he could transfer the throne to another member of the Wang line and keep the Goryeo Dynasty alive. Yi Seong-gye refused this offer.

On that same day, several of Yi Seong-gye's strongest supporters met with the Queen Dowager (the executed King Gongmin's mother). They lay out their collapsing faith in the current King, Gongyang.

*The present king is benighted. He has lost the way of a monarch, and the hearts and minds of the people have already left him. He is unable either to preside over the Altars of Earth and Grain or to rule living souls. Hence, we request that he be deposed.*<sup>9</sup>

Seeing the writing on the wall, the Queen Dowager could do nothing but agree. The gathering storm of officials then paid their visit to King Gongyang. Upon seeing that tides had turned in favor of his deposition, the King wept and prostrated himself, complaining that he never wanted to be king in the first place. Bemoaning his inadequacies, Gongyang abdicated his crown and departed for Wonju—about 280 li (140 kilometers) east of Seoul. He was soon followed by the Queen and crown prince. That very day, two of Gongyang's sons-in-law were beheaded outside the city gates, while his father-in-law was exiled.<sup>10</sup> Goryeo's 34<sup>th</sup> and final king was now banished from the palace. Thereupon, the gathered officials slowly carried the abandoned royal seal to the door of the Queen Dowager, where they delivered it unto her.



## THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

The final days of Goryeo were at hand. A few days after the abdicated King retreated to Wonju, on the 16<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh lunar month, a grand procession of ranking officials and scholars gathered to solemnly convey the royal seal to Yi Seong-gye's private house. Villagers filled the roads to the watch the seal pass by and wonder on what was to come. At his house, General Yi was sitting down to a simple dinner of rice and water, with his Consort Kang and many wives of his kinsmen. These women became alarmed at the coming of the procession and scattered through the house.

Yi Seong-gye closed the gate against the procession and would not allow them to enter. The procession remained at the gate all day, imploring the General to open the doors, but to no avail. The *Taejo Sillok* records what happened next.

*Toward evening, Pae Keungnyeom and others pushed open the gate and entered the inner yard. As they placed a royal seal on the floor of the large hall, Taejo became alarmed and immediately lost his composure. He held onto Yi Cheonu and barely managed to walk out the door of his sleeping chamber. The hundred officials assembled in rows and bowed to him. They beat drums and shouted, "Long live the king!"<sup>11</sup>*

Yi Seong-gye was agitated and denied that he could accept such a thing. The officials disagreed and vigorously denounced the corruption and decay that the Goryeo dynasty had fallen into. They recalled the vicious tyranny of King U and how he had killed so many innocent people. They praised Yi for avoiding war with the Ming dynasty when he turned his troops around on Wihwa island. "This is how we call you to be king. Military matters are extremely complicated and important, so we can't wait another day. Take the throne and live up to the expectations of God and men!"

"But the king must do a thousand things," Yi Seong-gye exclaimed. "How dare I do this when I am a man of little virtue?"<sup>12</sup>

When he tried to leave the assembled crowd, the ministers surrounded Yi and again implored him to march to the royal hall and ascend the throne. "The august son demurred three times," proclaims *Songs of the Dragons*,<sup>13</sup> but finally, the weary General acceded. "How could I have imagined that I would see the events of this day?" Yi wondered. "Should I have been in good health, I could have run away on horseback. However, just now, I suffer from ailing hands and feet to such a degree that I am unable to move my body freely. I want you to assist me, all working together to help me overcome my deficiencies in virtue and ability."<sup>14</sup>

It was three months after the murder of Jeong Mong-ju. On July 17, 1392, Yi Seong-gye proceeded to the royal throne hall, where all the high officials stood costumed in their ranks to greet him at the palace gate. Yi Seong-gye dismounted his horse, walked into Gaegyeong's Sachangung palace, and prepared to take the throne. However, instead of rising to sit upon the throne on high, as expected of any new King, an uneasy Yi "received the felicitations of his ministers while standing in front of the pillars." Though now king, Yi Seong-gye was not yet ready to sit on the throne.\* King Yi mentioned his recent injuries from falling from the horse and begged all the ministers to help him in governing.<sup>15</sup>

The 474-year-old Goryeo dynasty had come an end. Reflecting on the final King's abdication, The *Koryosa* records the melancholic mood of the times.

When political affairs became disorderly, the hearts of the people naturally abandoned [the Goryeo dynasty], and the mandate of heaven naturally disappeared, causing the 500-year-old royal shrine and shrine of the gods to suddenly perish without receiving the ancestral rites. It is sad.<sup>16</sup>

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\* King Taejo would not actually climb to sit upon the throne for three weeks after becoming the king. He finally sat upon the throne on August 11th, after a great deal of bowing and prostrating supplications by his ministers. *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.8.11).

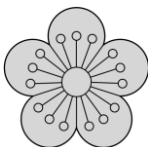
## THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

Melancholic or not, Goryeo had passed, and a new King was now at least *standing* before the throne. King Yi—who would later be named King Taejo, the Grand Progenitor of a new dynasty\*—ordered his ministers to carry out what tasks they had and returned to his own home for the evening. In a thousand years of Korean history, from 918 to 1910, a change in dynastic lines only happened a single time—that moment when General Yi Seong-gye stood before the Phoenix throne, ended the Goryeo royal line, and became King Taejo of the Joseon dynasty to come.

The next day, after a long and debilitating drought, the rains came.<sup>17</sup>

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\* The title “Taejo” (“Grand Progenitor”) was bestowed upon Yi Seong-gye posthumously. We will refer to Yi Seong-gye as King Taejo henceforth in this book.



## THE KING OF JOSEON

*Ah! The mighty wind blows,  
scattering the flying clouds.  
After I unified the realm,  
I returned home.  
How can I assign  
my fierce warriors  
to guard the four corners  
of our nation?*

— Liu Bang, *Song of the  
Mighty Wind*



## The Crown Prince of Joseon



*Back when tigers used to smoke, the god-man Dangun came down to earth beneath a birch tree, and he became crowned king. Dangun set up his capital at Pyongyang and named his land Joseon—the first kingdom of Korea. He ruled Joseon for 1,500 years, before returning to Mt. Baekdu where he became a Mountain God. Many Korean kingdoms rose and fell since those days: Goguryeo, Silla, Baekche, Balhae, Goryeo. Dangun's kingdom of Joseon became ancient and was called Gojoseon, meaning "Old Joseon."<sup>1</sup>*



With a new king at least standing by the Phoenix throne, the poets and prophets spread the word. At least that's how the myth-makers of the *Taejo Sillok* record it. On the day King Taejo ascended to the throne, an old man was said to have arrived with an ancient scroll, once hidden on Mt. Jirisan. "The shepherd will come down on a pig and correct the Samhan River,"\* the prophecy read.<sup>2</sup> Hidden books were brought out of the Astronomical and Meteorological Observatory and shown to the world. One ancient text predicted that in these days a new start, or "morning freshness," would come to Korea. A more recent book predicted that "the Wang clan is finished, while the Yi clan rises."<sup>3</sup> Jeong Do-jeon authored many poems and songs around this time. One was called "Dreaming of a Golden Ruler," which told the tale of how Yi Seong-gye had once in a dream received a golden ruler from a divine being.

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\* As a once-obscure man from the north, Yi Seong-gye was sometimes thought of as a humble shepherd rising to a high place; 1392 was the Chinese Year of the Pig. The "Samhan River" refers to the ancient Three Kingdoms Period of Korea, which culminated in the development of the Goguryeo, Silla, and Baekche kingdoms ruling the peninsula.

One was called “Receiving the Precious Secret Scrolls,” and another was titled “Song of Driving out Nahachu.” One poem simply praised the new King’s wisdom, being titled “Opening Channels of Communication for Good Advice.”<sup>4</sup> You are like the rising sun, said the scholar Jeong Do-jeon to the new King Taejo. “Your brilliance shines broadly and dispels the darkness, and the myriad things are illuminated. Such is the purity and brilliance when a sovereign begins his rule. The multitude of evildoers were foiled, and the myriad laws are all renewed.”<sup>5</sup>

Censorate officials noted how Yi Seong-gye had been humble and never sought the crown, but that “the thousand people” had gathered under his banner nonetheless and so the crown was won due to the Mandate of Heaven. “How many times did you ask for permission to resign as chancellor and retire to your home for rest after redistributing all your houses and lands to your sons and sons-in-law?” the Censors asked.<sup>6</sup> They commended how when Yi Seong-gye finally did agree to take the throne, “the markets were not closed, and soldiers did not have their weapons stained with blood, and instead the court was bright, cleared of all its anomalies, and the people were delighted.”<sup>7</sup>

Some of the old bluebloods didn’t quite agree with such praise and were heard complaining to their wives and concubines about Yi Seong-gye’s lowborn, northern background. The new King simply laughed, saying that one’s *ability*, not background, determined the Mandate of Heaven. “The current Emperor of the Ming used to be an ordinary person but has gained the empire. Why should I bother myself by the remarks of such people concerning my background?”<sup>8</sup> A notice of Taejo’s ascent was quickly sent to Ming, criticizing King Gongyang’s hapless rule. The notice also characterizing Gongyang’s son (the Crown Prince Wang Seok) as “so foolish and ignorant that he led a dissolute life by drinking and womanizing. Furthermore, he tried to harm honest people by gathering petty people all about him.”<sup>9</sup>

The new officials of King Taejo’s Censorate advised that many allies of the former King Gongyang needed to be denounced, tortured, exiled, or perhaps even executed. By the end of Taejo’s first weeks on the throne, 56 supporters of

Gongyang or Taejo critics had been arrested and punished for conspiracy. Most were ordered to endure 100 floggings and then go into exile, but the floggings were so severe that eight people died while being beaten.<sup>10</sup>

Several old opponents who had escaped punishment for the Yoon Yi/I Cho incident (i.e., lobbying Ming to invade Goryeo so as to throw down Yi Seong-gye) were hunted down for retribution. For example, a minister named Sungjin had been appointed Commissioner of the Security Council in 1392, but after King Taejo's accession he was exiled to Naju and then beaten with a heavy paddle until he died. Similarly, Yi Saek's son (Chongbak) had been imprisoned for the Yoon Yi/I Cho incident but was later released after the flood in Chongju. He was now rearrested, sent into exile by King Taejo, and then hunted down and strangled to death.<sup>11</sup>

As for his supporters, King Taejo now elevated many of them to "Meritorious Retainer" status and awarded them with land, title, treasure, and enslaved servants.<sup>12</sup> On September 16, 1392, 52 founding contributors to the new regime were recognized. Jeong Do-jeon was the very first name on the list, a first-rank Meritorious Retainer.<sup>13</sup> Being on the Meritorious Retainer list came with substantial reward, as King Taejo sought to build his political base with dependable supporters. Some retainers were granted fiefs of hundreds of households, or "tax villages" from which the retainer could keep all the tax revenues. Hundreds of *kyols* of land and dozens of enslaved servants were granted to first-class retainers like Jeong Do-jeon or Cho Chun.<sup>14</sup> Enfeoffment titles were granted to all retainers, as was immunity to certain prosecutions. All these benefits were shared with close family members (parents, spouses, and children) and could be passed down for generations.<sup>15</sup>

These merit subjects were an important part of King Taejo's political base and represented newly dominant forces in Korean politics. The anti-Ming faction that had once been so closely aligned with the Yuan was now displaced in favor of those wishing to find friendship and accommodation with the Ming dynasty. Confucian scholars and ambitious social reformers were becoming an important force, while old *gwonmun sejok* families were on their heels. King Taejo's



fellow military commanders and other warriors from the northeast were now important government officials and dominant military leaders, balancing out the long dominance of southern Korean elites.<sup>16</sup>

Many of these new “meritorious retainers” were previously without great wealth or notoriety, and several had been on the margins of Goryeo’s political life. Twenty-three didn’t have a clear birth year (a sign of lower-status birth), twenty could not account for a meritorious ancestor, seventeen had Chinese surnames, some were common farmers, and three were recently naturalized immigrants.<sup>17</sup> All of them were now the foundations of a new nation. At a special banquet held in their honor in the Royal Council Hall, King Taejo conferred on these merit subjects a permanent state stipend. He also gave them belts decorated with gold and silver, together with fabric for making the required robes of court officials. For his two new chancellors, the King offered court hats with strings of jade beads.<sup>18</sup> It was a happy time, and some of the retainers became a bit giddy and indiscrete during the feast, which featured plentiful wine and dancing *kisaeng* (courtesans). One official caught sight of Seol-mae, one of the deposed King Gongyang’s favorite *kisaeng*, and dangerously remarked that “Seol-mae is going to have breakfast in the same house, but with a new man.”<sup>19</sup>

Ten days after being so honored, on September 28, 1392, the 52 meritorious retainers gathered for another grand banquet. Their children, brothers, and sons-in-law all joined as well. At this banquet, the retainers created a “mutual assistance association for loyalty and filial piety,” and swore a sacred oath to each other and to the new King.

[We] dare to make an announcement manifestly to Heaven and Earth and all the spirits...We respectfully believe that Our Majesty responded to the will of Heaven and followed the hearts of the people until he received the Mandate of Heaven, and we subjects cooperated in solidarity and finally achieved a great goal together...

However, men of antiquity warned that there are many who start well but few who finish well. All of us who have worked together must serve the king with sincerity and associate with one another with trust.

We should neither harm one another for wealth and honor, nor avoid one another for self-interests, nor act upon listening to slander, nor become suspicious because of trivial mistakes in words and facial expressions, nor pretend to be pleased while hating behind the back, nor feign to be in harmony while secretly alienating the other. When one of us makes a mistake, we should correct it. When we have doubts, we should ask. If we are sick, we should help each other. If we have a problem, we should save each other. We will keep this pledge for generations, down to our descendants. If it happens that we break this pledge, the gods will punish us.<sup>20</sup>

It was an auspicious start to the new regime, but there was something odd. Among all the meritorious retainers swearing mutual loyalty there were none of the grown sons of King Taejo. The morally scrupulous new King had refused to name any of his own sons as meritorious subjects with special rights, even excluding the three sons who had stood closest to him during his rise and fought beside him in many life-and-death battles (Yi Bang-gwa, Yi Bang-gan, and Yi Bang-won). Some of Taejo's top advisors worried that this was not an equitable arrangement and didn't align with the new royal status of these sons who had fought hard to achieve the new world. "We urge you to bestow more lands upon them," they said to the King.<sup>21</sup>

But Taejo didn't want to give more rewards to his children. He remembered his own hard days up north, where he grew up out of public view, and thought his sons could do the same. "They will not suffer hunger and cold" because they

already hold title to some lands, King Taejo said. “If I give them extra lands, people will certainly say that I give my sons preferential treatment.” Furthermore, state lands were limited and Taejo didn’t want to give them out recklessly. When advisors kept pressing to give the princes more lands, the king grew nostalgic about his own harsh youth. He quietly remembered how “In olden days when I was a subject, I was also bestowed with lands. The lands were mostly barren and useless, but I did not mind.” Taejo was upset that now his sons expected more and better rewards than he once had, but in the end the King gave in and awarded greater land titles to his now royal children.<sup>22</sup>

There was one other troubling family matter. In August of 1392, at the same time that King Taejo left his grown sons of Lady Han off the Meritorious Retainer list, he named the new crown prince. The decision was a shock to everyone.

Lady Kang became General Yi’s second wife in 1376. The General was 41 years old and his new wife just 20. They would have three children together—two sons and a daughter. Though General Yi was deeply devoted to his second wife, tradition dictated that the children of his first wife (Lady Han, who he had married twenty years ago) would always have priority over his three later children. Moreover, Yi met and married his second wife many years after the first.<sup>23</sup> This meant that all the sons of his first wife were much older than those of Lady Kang, and as such were the expected heirs to the Phoenix throne of Joseon. Moreover, the two sons of Lady Kang were just 10 and 11 years old when Yi Seong-gye took the throne of Joseon, while the older sons of Yi Seong-gye had fought beside him during all his struggles against the failing Goryeo dynasty. Surely it would be one of the older Yi boys who would inherit the regal mantle once their father moved on.

Immediately upon ascending to the throne, Yi Seong-gye turned to the issue of naming a crown prince.<sup>24</sup> He did not want to die unexpectedly without leaving a clear heir to the throne and sought to end speculation and politics around this sensitive issue. Choosing the oldest son as crown prince would adhere to custom in the Goryeo dynasty—as well as match Confucian expectations that first sons had special obligations

to carry on their ancestral line. But this general custom was not a hard rule and had been violated many times by previous monarchs of Goryeo and by the Yuan dynasty in China as well. Moreover, these were not normal times but were turbulent moments of a new dynasty, so rules were fluid.

When the King called in advisors to help him on this issue, they all agreed that although the usual rule was to appoint the oldest son as royal successor, the natural challenges associated with dynastic change meant that the king should select his most meritorious son as successor, rather than just look at age. "When the world is at peace, the first born should be chosen. When the world is violent and confused, the man with the most merit should be chosen. So think carefully three times."<sup>25</sup>

The King thought carefully. Three of the six sons of his first wife, Lady Han, were not serious considerations as crown prince. The eldest, Bang-woo, remained loyal to Goryeo and had become a dissolute alcoholic. As his father-in-law was King Taejo's old enemy Yi In-im, Yi Bang-woo fell into despair as Yi Seong-gye grew ever more disloyal to Goryeo. "I knew my place early and hid my life. I wanted to bury my traces," Yi Bang-woo wrote. He surrounded himself with bowls of liquor. "He drank a lot every day...He worked hard, drank soju, and fell asleep."<sup>26</sup> The simple-minded third son (Yi Bang-ui) mostly enjoyed light-hearted conversation over good food and drinks and didn't like talking about current affairs and politics at all.<sup>27</sup> The sixth son died young. That left three princes of Lady Han: Yi's second, fourth, and fifth sons (Bang-gwa, Bang-gan, and Bang-won). All three princes were deeply involved in their father's rise to power, with service in military roles and involvement in many court plots and imbroglios.<sup>28</sup>

The most ambitious of all was Yi's fifth son by Lady Han—Yi Bang-won. He was a skilled warrior and a talented scholar, having passed rigorous civil service exams in 1382 and 1383.<sup>29</sup> "It is you who will accomplish my will!" His father once exclaimed long ago in Hamhung, when Yi Bang-won received news of high marks on the Civil Service Exam and promotion into government service. Bang-won had deep political experience and resembled his father in courage and ambition, having raised his own private army and he earned praise for

leading soldiers in battles at his father's side. He would be a natural choice to be named crown prince.

There was also the option of Yi Bang-gwa, King Taejo's elder son of Lady Han, and also distinguished in military service. Choosing the oldest as crown prince had the additional benefit of adhering to established custom. The middle son was the least interested in politics and showed no special ambition for the throne, so he seemed out of the running. But surely it would be either Yi Bang-gwa, the elder, or Yi Bang-won, the most achieved and ambitious.

While discussing these crown prince candidates with his advisors, there Taejong Sillok reports an occasion where King Taejo's second wife, Lady Kang, burst into tears. She had been eavesdropping in the room next door. In tears, Kang cried out and begged her husband to appoint one of her own young boys as Crown Prince.<sup>30</sup> King Taejo adored Lady Kang, all the more since his first wife had died a few years earlier, and he ultimately agreed to her wishes, which had the additional benefit of naming a crown prince who was not tainted by involvement in the violence of Yi Seong-gye's coup d'état, as his older sons were.

He ordered Cho Chun to write down the name of Yi Bang-beon, his oldest son by Lady Kang to be named crown prince. But Bang-beon was known to be emotional and had a fierce temper. Moreover, Bang-beon had recently married the deposed King Gongyang's niece, so he had family ties to the old dynasty. Cho Chun could not imagine such a crown prince and he refused to write down this name. He just bowed before the King, prostrated upon the floor, and would not touch his calligrapher's brush. Thinking it over, King Taejo agreed, and decided instead to name ten-year old Bang-seok as Crown Prince, the second son of Lady King. Cho Chun picked up his brush.<sup>31</sup>

Just one month after taking over the throne, King Taejo announced his shocking decision. His youngest son of all—the ten-year-old Prince Bang-seok—would be crown prince. The shock in the court was palpable, and the three stunned sons of Lady Han were immediately sent on dispersed missions far away from the capital so they might blow off steam.<sup>32</sup> In

Gaegyeong, all the high court ladies organized a great feast for Lady Kang in celebration.<sup>33</sup>

It was a completely unexpected development, and scholars continue to debate what could have motivated such a surprising decision. Perhaps the King simply loved his second wife so deeply that he felt moved to appoint one of her children as the crown prince. There was also the fact that King Taejo was highly suspicious of the headstrong ambition of Yi Bang-won and had been somewhat alienated from this son since Bang-won orchestrated the murder of scholar *Jeong Mong-ju*. There was also the influence of Jeong Do-jeon, who was close to King Taejo and who became a personal tutor to the newly named young crown prince. Perhaps Jeong Do-jeon believed this young prince was the most removed from the tainting political struggles of Taejo's coup d'état and would have the most public legitimacy in the end. Moreover, the prince's youth meant he might be most malleable and best able to be properly educated by sage Confucian scholars.

Whatever the reason, animosity now simmered between the sons of Lady Han and the sons of Lady Kang (which now included the young crown prince). But there was little that the elder princes could do while their father remained healthy and Lady Kang served as queen. Their own mother, Lady Han, had died years previously. The Han princes waited and stewed.<sup>34</sup>

In other matters, the year ended beautifully for the family Yi. On November 22, 1392, a message arrived from the Ming Emperor observing that the rise of King Taejo seemed to be the Mandate of Heaven. "The situation is not different from Wang's when he took over [Goryeo] a long time ago," the Emperor wrote. "It is impossible unless the Lord on High willed it that way. The officials and the people of Korea have already begun to follow Yi and are doing fine without having the disasters of war and this is the will of the Emperor Above." In the palace hall, all the officials in their silk robes bowed down and congratulated King Taejo on this fine missive from Ming.<sup>35</sup>

The final entry in the *Taejo Sillok* for the year 1392 tells of a grand year-end celebration. All the Dynasty-founding Merit Subjects gathered and held a banquet. "One after another, they wished the King a long life, raising their drinking cups. They

enjoyed themselves to their hearts' content and went home." That same day, the Japanese kingdom of Ryuku sent a congratulatory letter to King Taejo, offered tributary gifts, and returned several Korean captives to their homes.<sup>36</sup>

The very next day, the first day of 1393, opened the same way. King Taejo stood facing the direction of the Chinese Emperor and led all the officials in a New Year's congratulatory ceremony. For the first time in the new era, everyone dressed in beautiful robes made in China. Gifts were presented to King Taejo. The *Dodang* council gave a nice memorial to the king's virtues. All the provincial officers presented letters of felicitation and gifted local products. One provincial officer gave a painting depicting various kings throughout history as they studied government affairs. The Governor of Gyoju-Gangneung Province gave a painting of a Chinese General admonishing his King for not studying Confucian texts enough. One officer presented a live tiger.

Then everyone sat down to a fine banquet. Left Chancellor Cho Chun raised his chalice and offered a toast to the king: "On the morning of New Year's Day, with a heart filled with joy, we wish Your Majesty to live a Thousand Years!"

"*Cheonse!*"\* All the officials called out. "Long Live the King!"

Everyone drank their wine, prostrated themselves before the king, and sat down to eat. It was a fine banquet, followed by a late-night display of fireworks. The King then pardoned thirty people who had resisted his rise to power, including Wu Hyeon-bo and Yi Saek, allowing them to live wherever they chose.<sup>37</sup>

There was other good news early in 1393. In February, an envoy arrived from Ming agreeing with King Taejo's proposal to abandon the title of "Goryeo" and to rename the Korean nation. Two weeks after King Gongyang was dethroned, Yi

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\* "*Cheonse*" means "one thousand years" in Korean, and is a phrase used to wish someone a long and successful life. Throughout the Joseon dynasty founded by King Taejo, this phrase was often used to wish Kings a long life, rather than the similar "*manse*" ("ten thousand years!") cheer, out of deference to the Ming Emperor who had special entitlement to the *manse* cheer.

Seong-gye had said the Goryeo name would be preserved, but he quickly changed his mind on that point. In late 1392, he sent an envoy to Ming led by the Jeong Do-jeon, who Taejo had named the Supervisor of Personnel Appointments and Royal Seals and also elevated to a member of *Dodang*.<sup>38</sup> Jeong Do-jeon's envoy offered 60 horses in tribute and requested Ming advice about a proposed name change for Goryeo.<sup>39</sup>

Taejo proposed two names to the Hongwu Emperor: Hwaryeong or Joseon. "Hwaryeong" referred to the hometown area of Yi Seong-gye, while "Joseon" harkened back to the ancient Korean kingdom also named "Joseon" (now called Gojoseon, or "Old Joseon"), once centered in (later named) Manchuria and the far northern areas of the peninsula. It was welcome news that Ming agreed with the dynastic name change, finding "Joseon" an especially appropriate name. "The name Joseon is beautiful and its history is old," said the Ming's letter of approval. "The nation will prosper in generations to come if this name is taken as the foundation and a model"<sup>40</sup>

For his part, Jeong Do-jeon agreed. This name hearkened back to the old Korean kingdom of Gojoseon ("Old Joseon"), which ruled during days of Confucian dominance of China during the Zhou dynasty. Jeong believed those days could come again. "Politics and enlightenment flourished and manners became proper," due to Confucian influence back then, Jeong argued. Because we are now turning again towards Confucianism, "the name of Joseon will become known throughout the world in the future."<sup>41</sup> The Ming Emperor had earlier sent an envoy accepting King Taejo's accession. Now came word that renaming the country would also be acceptable to Korea's powerful neighbor. The peninsula had a new nation—Joseon—and a new dawn.

With softening heart, King Taejo issued yet another general amnesty. "Since it is necessary to show benevolence at a time when we make a fresh start in administration, all crimes (except capital punishment, by either beheading or hanging) committed before the early morning of [February 15, 1393] will be forgiven, regardless of whether the guilty were sentenced."<sup>42</sup>

But in the King's own family, other hearts were hardening.





## Of Politicide



*One day, while napping on the mountain, Yi Seong-gye was visited by a mountain spirit. The mountain spirit told Yi that he was surrounded by bad energy and in danger. A red dragon is coming to fight you, and the only way to defeat it is to shoot right between certain scales.*

*Yi Seong-gye listened carefully to the Sanshin. When the red dragon came to destroy him, he shot a poison arrow between its scales, and it died and disappeared altogether. The dragon left its blood behind in a red pool.<sup>1</sup>*



Following the violent destruction of Goryeo's 500-year dynasty, Taejo's legitimation challenges were serious. Supporters spoke of the Mandate of Heaven, but in the cold eyes of many, Yi Seong-gye wore the mantle of a violent traitor. Though the new King had been a popular general, saved the country from war, and rose to power amid a widely felt social crisis, he had also killed several of Goryeo's most beloved leaders and deposed the kings of a deeply rooted dynasty.

General Choe Yeong—"the shield of Goryeo"—had been executed. The scholar Jeong Mong-ju—"The Last Man of Goryeo"—had been savagely beaten to death on a Gaegyeong bridge, leaving behind a poem of his blood-red loyalty. Many lesser officials had been tortured, exiled, and executed. Though King Taejo had ordered most of his opponents simply flogged upon his accession, at least eight were beaten so badly that they died.<sup>2</sup>

Then there was the sad case of Dumon-dong, an obscure mountain village of loyal Goryeo *sadaebu* (scholar-officials) that King Taejo could not abide. With the fall of Goryeo's kings, about one hundred loyal Goryeo *sadaebu* had retreated deep

into the mountains near Gaegyeong and formed a closed collective village. These loyalist Goryeo scholars locked themselves away from the affairs of the world and spent their days studying the Confucian classics and remembering the old days.

When King Taejo heard of it, he grew angry, claiming these students were turning their backs on his new order and were a dangerous example to others. Taejo offered these scholars good government posts in his new order. “Think of the future to come, not just the past,” he implored. But the loyal scholars refused and would not leave their village. One of the sages of Dumon-dong was actually an old childhood friend of Yi Seong-gye’s—Do Eung. King Taejo offered his friend a government post on five separate occasions but Do Eung would not bend and remained inside the mountain village.<sup>3</sup>

Taejo’s son, Yi Bang-won, urged that all the scholars should be dragged out and killed. King Taejo agreed that allowing the disrespectful scholars to stay would do serious damage to the new dynasty. So Taejo sent Yi Chiran and a platoon of soldiers to Dumon-dong. “If you don’t leave the mountain, we will set your village on fire,” the scholars were warned. But they wouldn’t leave and would not bow to the new King. So Taejo’s soldiers surrounded the village and set the whole place on fire. Dumon-dong was swallowed up and all the scholars were incinerated.<sup>4</sup>

The wave of exiles and executions, the high-profile deaths of Choe Yeong and *Jeong Mong-ju*, the incineration of the scholars of Dumon-dong: these were dramatic signs of the violent foundations of the King Taejo era. They presented a serious legitimation challenge. Feeling the cold eyes of the people fall on him after the fires of Dumon-dong, King Taejo saw the hard truth. “Now I see it is more difficult to win the hearts of the people than to win the Dragon Throne.”<sup>5</sup>

Some of the most dramatic violence was the murder of two previous kings of Goryeo, to make way for the Yi Seong-gye endorsed enthronement of King Gongyang (the final king of Goryeo). King U and King Chang (father and son) had been killed, and the murder of the very young King Chang was especially likely to have prompted bad will across Goryeo. The issue of the murdered Kings was so sensitive to King Taejo that

as his court scribes prepared the official records, he once demanded to review those sections.

It was a grave violation of protocol for a king to review the court records while they were being finalized. In order that history could be recorded “with a straight brush”<sup>6</sup> (i.e., accurately, without fear or favor of royal pressure), these records were kept locked away from a sitting king. The court diarists advised King Taejo that their records needed to be kept secure from royal intervention, so as to ensure honest history.<sup>7</sup> But still Taejo demanded to see what the diarists had written about the touchy issue of the preceding royal executions.

Shocked, the historians wondered why in the world the King would want to do that. Was he trying to change the record? If the king can review things, “how can a historiographer dare to grab a brush and write history as he witnesses it?” one scribe asked. The historian prostrated himself before the King. He implored Taejo to please not review the draft records. But King Taejo’s will would not be turned. He insisted he wouldn’t demand inappropriate changes and demanded to see the drafts. He explained that he simply wanted to be sure that some obscure early events from the start of his dynasty were correctly recorded (including such matters as who ordered the Goryeo Kings killed). So the drafts were turned over to the king for review.<sup>8</sup>

Upon his review, King Taejo did discover some allegedly incorrect records. One court historian had written that Taejo was responsible for the death of King U and King Change, when actually King Gongyang had ordered their death (though Gongyang was clearly under pressure by Yi Seong-gye to give the orders). Because of this alleged “error” in the record, King Taejo had the historian (Yi Haeng) flogged with 100 strokes, confiscated all his properties, stripped his office, and sent him into exile.<sup>9</sup>

In the subsequently “corrected” records, King Taejo is presented as resisting many calls to execute the doomed Kings of Goryeo, but only going along in the end due to ministerial pressure. For example, here’s how *The Taejo Sillok* presents Taejo’s final communication with the doomed King Gongyang. “You may have been unaware of what happened,” wrote Taejo

in a final missive to Gongyang, “but the censors and other officials in charge of the law submitted no fewer than twelve joint memorials insisting that you and your family be brought to justice. Now all the officials, both high and low, have joined them in submitting memorials. So I have no choice but to grant their request, I want you to know this fully.” King Taejo’s supposed reluctance was likely cold comfort to the former King Gongyang, who Taejo then had strangled to death, along with his two sons.<sup>10</sup>

It wasn’t just these four Goryeo kings that faced their demise—doom came to the whole Wang royal family, as to some other influential clans. Several leading Goryeo families—entire descent lines—were removed from political power altogether. Four leading ministerial families that had risen to prominence in the late Goryeo era were completely eliminated from political positions. Among these notable families was the Haengju Ki clan, family of Empress Ki of the Yuan. This clan does not show a single family member in government power for centuries after the rise of King Taejo.<sup>11</sup>

But could King Taejo really destroy the taproots of old Goryeo? Did he have it in him to wage stone-cold politicide—seeking out and eliminating the royal blood line that had ruled his country for nearly 500 years?<sup>12</sup> At the start, he wavered. King Taejo moved to control—but not eliminate—the members of the Goryeo royal line. Three days after his ascension, on August 8, 1392, Taejo ordered most members of the royal Wang family living in Gaegyeong to be relocated to Ganghwa island, site of the old government in exile during the days of Mongol invasions. Other elite Wang family members were moved to Koje island, at the southern tip of Korea.<sup>13</sup> Regarding Wang descendants not closely tied to the preceding Goryeo royals, Taejo proclaimed amnesty: “allow the remaining descendants to go wherever in the provinces they will, and allow their wives and male servants to live together as before.”<sup>14</sup>

The Wang royal family had lost their power, and now many were exiled to islands, but storm clouds were gathering and worse was yet to come. Many advisors to King Taejo urged him to end the Wang line once and for all. Advisors shared incidents of exiled royal family members sending enslaved

servants back and forth across the land, sharing messages, and perhaps fomenting rebellion. The *Taejo Sillok* reports the whispers to the King. “You must insist on eliminating them all,” was one early advisement.<sup>15</sup> “Drive all of them to a dangerous and barren island, regardless of their status, for the purpose of killing them, their wives, and their children.”<sup>16</sup> King Taejo—for decades a loyal warrior of this very same Goryeo line—delayed. “The removal of all the Wang line is something I cannot bear to do,” he bemoaned.<sup>17</sup>

Then, in February of 1394, the Joseon court received news of an alleged conspiracy against their new dynasty, including hopes to restore the Goryeo clan to power. One high official (Park Wi, Assistant Grand Councilor of the Chancellery) had gone with some other magistrates to see a blind fortune teller, seeking advice on whether King Taejo or the Wang family would prove to have the better fortune in the end. It seems some Wang family members were involved in this dangerous divination, which suggested thoughts of a royal restoration in some quarters.<sup>18</sup> Such rumination could not be allowed. Members of the former royal family most suspected of these dangerous inclinations were tortured through the months of March and April, until confessions of conspiracy against King Taejo had been secured.<sup>19</sup> The abdicated King Gongyang and his sons were banished to the remote area of Samcheok on the east coast, while additional royal Wangs were gathered and interned on Koje island. “Have them permanently eliminated,” King Taejo was again advised.<sup>20</sup>

The King finally agreed, and began the executions on April 13, ordering five members of the Wang royal family beheaded.<sup>21</sup> After a few weeks of debate over what to do with the rest of the family, Taejo approved mass executions on May 14.<sup>22</sup> Ministers of Punishment were dispatched to the three Wang internment locations. There, they gathered up the doomed prisoners. On May 15<sup>th</sup>, all the Wangs on Ganghwa island were thrown into the sea and drowned. Two days later, King Gongyang and his two sons were strangled at Samcheok, as were several members of his household.<sup>23</sup> On May 20, the Minister of Punishments gathered all the Wangs on the island of Koje (about 111 of them) and ordered them onto boats.<sup>24</sup> The Wangs were told they were being transported to different

islands where they would be provided with land and allowed to live as commoners. During their voyage, divers swam underneath the waves and drilled holes into the boats. Watching the boats sink into the sea, a Buddhist monk on the shore called out in alarm to the Wangs. One of the doomed souls on the boat shouted back: *“the lamenting sound of oars, out in the blue ocean, even if a monk is present, what good is it?”* The monk wailed and turned away as all the ships sank, and all the royal Wangs drowned.<sup>25</sup>

About 135 males of the royal Wang line had been killed (females were mostly spared throughout the terror). On the mainland, the King commanded his officials to search out and behead all the male Wang clan members tied to the royals who remained alive.<sup>26</sup> Government officials hunted down Wang royals in a campaign lasting two decades. Dozens more were executed. The Wang surname was banned. Those who carried it were ordered to switch to their maternal surnames. Others simply added a small new stroke to the Chinese calligraphy of the Wang name, changing it to Ok.<sup>27</sup>

There would be no return to Goryeo.

## Of Myth-Making



*During the days after the fall of Goryeo's kings and generals, a new soup began to show up at local inns. The people called it Seonggye-tang, or Seong-gye soup. The pork in the soup was sliced off a pig that the cooks always surreptitiously named "Seong-gye." Butchering Seong-gye for the soup meant that people could cut up and eat a bit of Yi Seong-gye, in their anger at having so many of the Gaegyeong heroes and local families cut down by General Yi.*

*Yi Seong-gye had cooked the leaders of Gaegyeong in the Year of the Pig, but there were clever ways to slice a up bit of Yi Seong-gye as well.<sup>1</sup>*



Like any ruler of a new dynasty, King Taejo faced questions of legitimation. The new order had been birthed in violence, but was it the Will of Heaven? In the beginning of all things, the great rulers were gods and children of gods, divine authority transcending even rational thought.<sup>2</sup> The progenitor of the Korean people (Dangun) was descended from the union of a God and bear. Wang Geon, the founder of Goryeo, was said to be descended from a dragon, and his mother was the divine mountain spirit of Jirisan.<sup>3</sup> All the founding rulers of Korea's historic Kingdoms were surrounded by myths of divine origin and heavenly assistance. King Taejo of Joseon was no different—his authority needed legitimation from beyond.

### *Divine Origins*

After Taejo's ascent, the scribes of state took up their mythologizing task. The *Taejo Sillok* tells how the birth of Joseon's King Taejo was foretold in dreams by dragons and gods. Mysterious farmers and old hermits gave prophecies that



if the Yi clan buried their ancestors in certain places, a great destiny would surely come to the family line. The *Sillok* describes how Taejo's face "was as majestic and divine as a dragon" when he was born, his intelligence and wisdom clear for all to see.<sup>4</sup>

The Cantos of *Songs of the Dragons*—produced during the reign of Taejo's grandson, King Sejong—similarly tell story after story of King Taejo's divine origins and heaven-mandated ascent to the throne.<sup>5</sup> Canto 87 describes Taejo's godlike abilities.

*With one hand he knocked down  
A great tiger from the horse's back.  
With two hands he pulled apart  
The great bulls that were fighting.  
He quietly lifted up  
The horse suspended from the bridge.  
How can one recount  
All the divine powers of this Godlike man?<sup>6</sup>*

Heavenly portents followed all the footsteps of this "godlike man." Canto 84 tells how, at the very end of doomed Goryeo, dead trees would spring to life when King Taejo passed by. "The Dynasty was old and the Mandate of Heaven about to be lost. New Leaves appeared on a withered tree."<sup>7</sup> Children were said to sing about how "the shepherd wins the country," while prophets spoke of how a shepherd would ride from the mountains on a pig's back to save the country (1392 was the Chinese Year of the Pig).<sup>8</sup> Yi Seong-gye himself had visionary dreams of saving his nation by carrying three rafters out of a burning building, of receiving a golden ruler from a divine spirit, of Dragons requesting his help in their struggles, and flowers falling from fruit trees, interpreted by soothsayers as predicting ripe fruit and a portentous moment.<sup>9</sup>

Such myths and dreams are not just entertainment—they reflect the consciousness of a people and became the emotional footings of Taejo's power. In his study of the political significance of inspiring tales about Yi Seong-gye, Mun Jae Youn argues that especially in pre-literate societies, "the

dreams and wishes of people of the time are concentrated in that narrative...[Legends are] a complex reaction of the people to historical facts and a vestige of growing changes in popular consciousness."<sup>10</sup> Accepting a new ruler is associated with emerging stories about the divine origins of that ruler, the god that shines in his face, the epic achievements that prove his worth.

After Taejo's rule, this legendry appeared in sanctified written sources like the *Taejo Sillok* and *Songs of the Dragons*. During King Taejo's own time, these dreams and stories spread across the peninsula through oral tradition, were engraved on stone steles, and inscribed in memorials of fine calligraphy. Myth was materialized as well in projects to sacralize the remains of the divine Yi family. For example, there was the project of properly enshrining King Taejo's umbilical cord and placental remains. When he was born, his parents had buried baby Seong-gye's umbilical cord in a placental urn (*taesil*) near Hamhung. There it would remain, until it was disinterred decades later upon the accession of King Taejo and moved to the site of the Yi clan's ancestral home in Jeonju.<sup>11</sup>

Soon after becoming King, Taejo named Jeonju as the ancestral seat of his Yi clan, honoring the southern town from which his Great-Great-Grandfather Yi Ansa originally hailed.<sup>12</sup> Taejo ordered improvements to the tombs of his ancestors in the Jeonju area. He also dispatched a minister there, assigning him to search for a site to bury the umbilical cord of the new King. King Taejo was fond of Jeonju's mount Maisan (where he once had a dream of receiving a golden ruler from a divinity), and had authored a poem describing how the bare double peaks of the mountain were "like a lotus flower in full bloom," while "the water of the valley all flows in one place."<sup>13</sup> He consulted geomancers to make sure this place truly was an auspicious location of good earth energy. Receiving positive reviews, within a year of ascending to the throne Taejo ordered the removal of his placental *taesil* from Hamhung and directed it relocated to the mountains of Jeonju.<sup>14</sup> Relocating King Taejo's *taesil* to Jeonju—far to the south of Hamhung—united Taejo's "Profound Source" with the deep taproots where the Jeonju Yi clan story began.

Relocating his *taesil* was just one way that King Taejo reached beyond his own root of life to also draw on the divine tap roots of his ancestors. Within weeks of ascending to the throne, King Taejo also sent his son Yi Bang-won up north, back to his hometown of Hamhung, to pay a visit to the deceased ancestors buried there. There Yi Bang-won informed the entombed ancestors of the luminous events down in the capital, and of the enthronement of their descendant as the new King. Yi Bang-won made ritual offerings at the ancestral tombs and supervised the erection of a building where family members could partake in purification and fasting rituals before performing their sacrifices at the ancestral tombs. He bestowed tomb titles on the resting grounds and assigned some local families to stand guard and maintain the tombs.<sup>15</sup>

The tomb of Yi Seong-gye's father, Yi Jachun, would come to feature a memorial inscription, chiseled on a stone stele, recalling all the great deeds of the family Yi and their descendant Yi Seong-gye.

*A plum tree [the Yi clan] from the kingdom of  
immortals  
Took its root deeply in the hardened ground.  
...In order to make a fresh start for his people,  
The King illustriously proclaimed a  
government of benevolence.  
He said, "Though lacking in ability I ascended  
the throne,  
And it is only thanks to the virtue of my  
ancestors."*

*...As the headwaters were distant  
And the current of the waters shined all the  
way down,  
The royal family was finally able to achieve the  
great work  
Of founding a new dynasty.  
[King Taejo] employed men of ability  
And drove out the wicked and avaricious.  
Displaying his marital prowess, he repulsed  
invaders from the borders.*

*And treating people with benevolence, he  
settled their livelihood  
And he established law and order and  
developed rites and music.  
So the people of Korea loved him like their  
parent.*<sup>16</sup>

Having honored their tombs in Hamhung, King Taejo bestowed royal honors on his nearly divine ancestors, in his very first royal edict. Eleven days after ascending to the throne, King Taejo gathered his court—"all the officials of high and low ranks, the *hallyang* officials, the retired elder statesmen, and the servicemen and civilians who served both in the capital and the provinces."<sup>17</sup> Taejo began by extolling his 52 Meritorious Retainers, giving each of them certificates listing their excellent virtues and achievements.

Then King Taejo explained to the grand assembly that to ensure one thousand years of good fortune for his dynasty, there must be a sincere feeling of common descent among the people, nurtured by extolling the King's own virtuous ancestors—progenitors of a nation.<sup>18</sup> "Turning a family into a nation is due to the contributions made by my ancestors, which they accumulated over many generations," Taejo told his assembled ministers. "I presumptuously assumed a great responsibility and founded a nation thanks to the assistance of my ancestors...inheriting the achievements made over generations."<sup>19</sup>

Taejo then gave eulogistic titles to his ancestors, four generations back, elevating them to posthumous Kings and Queens. Speaking first of his Great-Great-Grandfather Yi Ansa (the one who had the courtesan quarrel and fled north into alliance with the Yuan), King Taejo talked for some time about his virtues and achievements. I name him Mokjo (King Mok), and his wife is Hyobi (Queen Hyo), Taejo proclaimed. As for Great-Grandfather Haeng-ri (the one who ended up fighting both the Japanese and a typhoon), he became Ikcho (King Ik) and his wife became Chongbi (Queen Chong). On it went, with King Taejo extolling many dynasty-worthy virtues and achievements of four generations of his distinguished ancestors.

Taejo wrapped it all up with a prostration and words of praise. Through such acts of ancestral veneration, Taejo sought legitimation by calling on the wisdom and virtues of his powerful ancestors, a deep-seated tradition in Korean society.

*Assisted by my ancestors, I was able to establish a shining foundation for a new dynasty...Since I was fortunate to establish a new dynasty, inheriting the achievements made over generations...I express my gratitude to the root of my being. So, choosing an auspicious day, I praise your resplendent virtues...look down on us and grant us end-less prosperity.*<sup>20</sup>

After all this solemn proclamation and elevation of his ancestors to royal status, someone had to grumble. It seems a local minister of works felt he wasn't quite feted enough when receiving his meritorious retainer certificate, considering all the nice things that had been said about others. My royal decree only says that I am "good at divination and medicine," the minister sulked. But the document doesn't mention all the other things I'm also good at, "which I believe to be no less than disrespect for me." We can imagine that on this most auspicious day of ancestral veneration and the highest royal decrees, the King may well have raised his eyebrows at the minister's trivial complaint, but Taejo was patient. He ordered the minister's document embellished.<sup>21</sup>

#### *Auspicious Places*

The legends of Taejo and his ancestors draped the new order with legitimating symbolism and Taejo wished to keep these virtuous ancestors always in Joseon's heart. So just three weeks after ascending to the throne, King Taejo ordered the Court of Royal Sacrifices to fashion new spirit tablets (*sinju*) for his ancestors.<sup>22</sup> Though they appear as only a small block of lacquered chestnut, with the names of the deceased inscribed on them, properly sanctified tablets are infused with the spirit of the dead and can help to call the deceased back into the

world of the living. While it is normal after death for the spirit to wander the incorporeal world, whether lonely or in repose, proper rituals before a spirit tablet can call the spirit of the ancestor back to the tablet itself, to receive sacrificial foods and hear both veneration and requests.<sup>23</sup>

These tablets could not be stored in the bodily tombs of Taejo's ancestors up in Hamhung, for these tombs were only for physical remains. Instead, the tablets needed a shrine for housing the *spirit* of the ancestors. So Taejo directed officials of the Astronomical and Meteorological Observatory to quickly find a site for a new Royal Ancestral Shrine to house the spirits of his ancestors. Some officials recommended that he should use the same Royal Ancestral Shrine site that the Goryeo kings had used, but the new king was non-plussed. "What can we make out of the old site of the ruined dynasty?" Taejo asked.<sup>24</sup> Find a new site, with new and promising energy to draw from, he ordered. He called on his geomancers to survey sites and read the signs of the land. He established Directorates for Constructing the Royal Ancestral Shrine and for Geomancy to be established and ordered them to research a proper site and begin planning the layout.<sup>25</sup>

It wasn't just a site for a new ancestral shrine that he was seeking—Taejo actually was seeking somewhere to build an entirely new capital. The energy of Goryeo's old capital (Gaegyeong) was all wrong and worn out, Taejo believed. The old kingdom fell, so why build a new dynasty on those ruins? Furthermore, many of the local families in Gaegyeong were connected to the old regime and were bitter with Taejo's rise. It seemed propitious to establish a new capital and leave the cold eyes of Gaegyeong behind.<sup>26</sup>

Taejo sought an auspicious location to build a new capital, palace and ancestral shrine. He ordered the secret records of

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\* The last King of Goryeo, Gongyang, had himself pondered the idea of leaving declining Gaegyeong behind and starting afresh with a new capital city. Pondering his precarious situation as the previous two kings had been executed, Gongyang ruminated in 1390 that "if the capital is not transferred, the king and his subjects will be put to ruin" (*Koryosa*, v. 34, 7.1390).

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0030\\_0080\\_0040](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0030_0080_0040).

Goryeo studied to determine where the good earth energy (*ki*) had run out and where it still flowed. He ordered his Hall of Heavenly Records to record astronomical and astrological prophecies, and he dispatched geomancers across the land.<sup>27</sup>

Like the Daoists and shamans, Taejo believed in the *pungsu* art of geomancy—the ability to read and engineer the energy of physical places so as best to secure good fortune.<sup>28</sup> According to the geomancers, particular places either did or didn't have good energy ("ki"). As one Joseon geomancer described it, "the energy of the mountains and rivers is concentrated in places, and it is scattered in other places."<sup>29</sup> The physical landscape is a living thing, with a cosmic energy flowing through it. The energy follows paths, like capillaries and veins, pulsing through the landscape in waterways of *ki*. These channels of *ki* leave some areas as barren and desolate energy deserts—sites of calamity and woe to all who linger there—but they manifest also in benevolent wellsprings where positive energy pools up and flows out to benefit the people who inhabit that place. Good energy can shift over time and part of the reason for Goryeo's collapse was thought to be because its once-auspicious capital city location (Gaegyeong) had run dry of good *ki*.<sup>30</sup>

So King Taejo dispatched the geomancers. Just as an acupuncturist searches the body, probing sites of positive and blocked energy flows, so did Taejo's geomancers probe the landscape for the right place to put down dynastic roots in a new capital. For the geomancers, the arrangement of mountains was particularly important. Mountain ranges are like powerful earthen dragons—wellsprings of *ki* flow from them, in mappable blood vessels or energy watersheds where the positive energy pools and can be tapped for beneficial results. To find such a location, it was good to have tall mountains to the rear (or north), smaller hills to the right and left, and a river or lake in the front (or south), to act as a watery dam holding the *ki* inside the bowl formed by the surrounding mountains and hills.<sup>31</sup>

Taejo's geomancers identified several possible locations with promising formations, but they constantly debated which site was best. King Taejo would sometimes grow angry with the geomancers' constantly shifting opinions; he once had a

geomancer beaten for not being clear and consistent. Taejo's Privy Council complained that the whole subject was murky. "The secret records handed down from the previous dynasty are also at variance, making it difficult to distinguish right from wrong."<sup>32</sup> New sites for the capital were identified near Mt. Muak, then near Mt. Kyeryong, then at Mt. Dora near Gaegyeong, then at Hanyang (today's Seoul). Opinions were constantly reversing and changing.

As King Taejo travelled the peninsula seeking a new site for his capital, some areas received him warmly. In Chongju, "the elders of the villages bowed down to the ground before the royal carriage, singing songs."<sup>33</sup> But in Chungcheong, many people didn't seem enthused with Taejo as the new king, so that possible site for a new capital was quickly abandoned.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, many of the old Gaegyeong establishment didn't want to move the capital at all, and constantly undermined the search.<sup>35</sup> When the King prepared an excursion, many officials would report illnesses or other problems so that they didn't have to leave their homes or promote the relocation project.

On one occasion, resistive members of the Privy Council asked King Taejo to turn his royal carriage back to Gaegyeong in the middle of a trip to scout new sites. Councilors said they *had* to turn around because the King's wife was ill. Also, bandits were appearing in the countryside, making the trip dangerous. But Taejo saw through the subterfuge. "Did you say bandits??" He asked with angry suspicion. "Was the report made by the provincial military officer? Who brought that report?!!" The Security Council officer was flustered and couldn't answer at all.

The king then angrily addressed all his ministers. "Moving the nation's capital is what powerful and flourishing families dislike, so I know they are trying to find excuses to stop it. Grand councilors and high officials have lived in [Gaegyeong] for a long time, and therefore they do not want to relocate...I am sure you also dislike moving the capital." However, Taejo barked, there will be no stopping this move. He angrily vowed that he wouldn't put up with continued sabotage. "Throughout history, whenever dynasties changed and kings newly received the Mandate of Heaven, they always moved the capital." The



angry King then ordered the carriage to return to Gaegyeong so he could attend to his “sick” wife. Ministers were now scared to return to the capital with the angry King, so they rushed to stop him, promising the trip could go on after all. “Consort Hyeon will certainly recover from her illness, and the bandits are not worth worrying about, either,” they admitted. The search went on.<sup>36</sup>

In the midst of these paralyzing geomantic debates and dithering resistance by ministers, the scholar Jeong Do-jeon stepped up and offered his insights. “I have not learned the art of geomancy,” he admitted. “Since everyone’s opinion is preoccupied with geomancy, I do not know what to say.” But he noted that he could speak to what was rational and practical. Sites too far south and too far north are not good for ruling an entire country, he said. Taejo should find a site in the middle of the peninsula. It must be close to the ocean for practical matters of trade, diplomacy, and national defense. It should have room to grow and accommodate shrines, palaces, and markets. Jeong pointed out that sites like Hanyang (today’s Seoul) met all these conditions. Jeong admitted he was basing his ideas on practical rationality, and not on the geomancy of the ancients. But he asked Taejo: “how can you trust the words of those who practice geomancy and distrust the words of a scholar?” In the end, the success of the state depends on the quality of its leaders, “not on the strength of the sites.” Jeong requested King Taejo to consult his practical and common-sense knowledge about the best place for a capital: “after that you can try fortune-telling.”<sup>37</sup>

Within a few weeks of Jeong Do-jeon’s observations, during the 8<sup>th</sup> lunar month of 1394, King Taejo gave his decision. He ordered his Privy Council to begin moving the nation’s capital from Gaegyeong (Kaesong) to Hanyang (Seoul), and to begin immediate construction of the Jongmyo Royal Shrine for his ancestors’ spirit tablets.<sup>38</sup> Just as Jeong Do-jeon had argued, the King liked that Hanyang was centrally located, with access to rivers and an ocean—but he also believed Hanyang adhered to important geomantic principles. It was surrounded by four auspicious mountains: Bukhansan (the Black Tortoise) to the north, Naksan (the Blue Dragon) to the east, Namsan (the Vermilion Bird) to the south, and

Inwangsan (the White Tiger) to the west.<sup>39</sup> The Han River ran before it, and through the city center ran the east-west Cheongygcheon stream. It was elegant and fortuitous, "A Hill of Five Virtues."<sup>40</sup>

The fortune-tellers were now unanimous in speaking highly of the King's chosen location. Festive parties on riverboat rides provided entertainment during the long search for a new capital. Everyone would get drunk and dance about to loud music, celebrating their achievement. Watching festivities, King Taejo once burst out into tears, recalling how sad it was that his parents had died early and could not see the new capital and their son's rise to glory.<sup>41</sup>

A groundbreaking ceremony for the new capital occurred on December 3, 1394. Purifying himself the night before, the King offered prayers to the Deities of Heaven and Earth.

*Your servant, the king of Joseon, dares to announce to Heaven and Earth with all sincerity...Prostrating myself before you, I acknowledge that all things are created and grow because heaven covers and earth carries them. Following the laws of nature, I desire to renew what is old and create a capital that extends in all directions...If you allow us to build a great capital here, uphold the Mandate of Heaven, and look after the people in the days to come, I will offer you sacrifices with more gratitude and sincerity. I will also work harder to discharge my duty, mindful of seasonal changes and opportunities, and enjoy peace with my officials and people.<sup>42</sup>*

Having supplicated the Gods of Heaven and Earth, the King prayed to all the mountains and rivers spirits of Hanyang, offering them food and wine.

*The king speaks as follows! You the spirits of Mt. Paegak (Bukhansan), Mt. Mongmyok (Namsan), and all other mountains, and the spirits of the Han River, Yangjin Ferry, and all*

*other rivers!...The reason that I decided to undertake this project is not to seek my personal interest but to bring benefits to the people by offering sacrifices and ruling them in accordance with the will of Heaven. If you spirits truly understand my sincere heart and help me finish this great task safely, preventing things such as bad weather, disease, and accidents, I will never forget to offer sacrifices to you. Let me assure you that I will not indulge in a life of ease even though I am a wretched person, and you will enjoy food forever.<sup>43</sup>*

The divine aspirations of Taejo's rule echoed in these prayers as the massive construction project began. A period of geomantic migration then followed, with the entire Joseon court and thousands of commoners moving towards the Hanyang area which had been discovered to be overflowing with auspicious geomantic energy and the blessing of the gods.<sup>44</sup>

### *Capital Construction*

The construction of the new Ancestral Shrine and Royal Palace in Hanyang\* would take three years of Taejo's newly opened Joseon dynasty. Tens of thousands of laborers were conscripted to work in the vast capital construction project, working in fifty-day shifts scheduled just before and just after the peak of harvest.<sup>45</sup> The Sajik Shrine to Earth and Grain had to be created, together with the Jongmyo Ancestral Shrine. The new palace, with dozens of fine residential, ceremonial, and administration buildings, had to be constructed. New buildings for every government bureau had to be built: from the tiny Bureau of Bamboo Crafts, to the Royal Salt Repository, to the stately Office of the Censorate. Schools and residential centers had to be constructed. The small city of Hanyang had to be built out to accommodate about 100,000 residents.<sup>46</sup>

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\* Upon being named the new capital of Joseon, the city changed names, becoming known as Hanseong as well as Hanyang.

Though the scale of the project was immense, King Taejo's Confucian architect, Jeong Do-jeon, took care that the palace and government buildings remained rather simple and frugal, as compared to the grandeur of China's Forbidden City. "If the palace is luxurious, it will make people suffer and will damage national finances," Jeong Do-jeon said. "However, if it is too shabby it cannot show the dignity of the Dynasty. It is beautiful that it is frugal, not shabby, and not extravagant while maintaining dignity."<sup>47</sup>

Around the entire city, strong granite walls were planned, 12 meters high in places. King Taejo travelled the city borders to plan the course of the wall with Jeong Do-jeon and the Buddhist Monk Muhak (who Taejo had named the Royal Preceptor). As they toured Mount Ingwansan on the western edge of the city, the party came upon the sublime rock formation known as the *Seonbawi* (the Zen Rocks). These are two large, black lava formations, about fifteen feet tall and looking out of place as they rise among the granite boulders all around. The lava formations have anthropomorphic characteristics and look a bit like hooded monks sitting side-by-side in prayer. They are pocked with dark holes and recesses, giving the formation a powerful, mysterious energy.<sup>48</sup>

King Taejo had a big decision to make regarding how to handle these mystic rocks on the slopes of Ingwansan. While he surveyed the area with his Buddhist and Confucian advisors, they discussed what route the new city walls should take as they crossed over the Ingwansan ridges to the west of the palace. Specifically, the question was whether the mystic *Seonbawi* rocks should be included *inside* the city walls, or whether the city walls should be strategically designed so as to *exclude* the mysterious lava formations.

Both of Taejo's advisors recognized the unique energy of the *Seonbawi* area of Ingwansan. The Buddhist monks prayed here, and shamans conducted rituals all around this portentous site. For these reasons, Monk Muhak argued vigorously that the city walls should be designed to include the *Seonbawi* *inside* the walls, so as to ensure the health of Buddhism going forward. The rocks were a promising source of energy and spiritual inspiration and should be embraced by the new dynasty, so that the dynasty could last 1000 years.<sup>49</sup>

But Jeong Do-jeon, the austere scholar, argued that the state should be Confucian at its core, and that the energy of the Seonbawi must be exiled *outside* the city walls, so as to keep the inevitable pilgrimages of Buddhists and shamans from polluting the city. The site will inevitably become “a focal point for the practice of certain shamanistic rites” Jeong argued. The rocks must remain beyond the city walls.<sup>50</sup> Monk Muhak replied that placing the Seonbawi outside of the city walls would result in the prosecution of Buddhism in Joseon and doom the dynasty to only lasting 500 years.

The fierce debate continued for days, until a heavy snowfall settled the matter. According to the *Joseon Bulgyo-Tongsa* [*Comprehensive History of Joseon Buddhism*], on the morrow after a serious snowfall, it was found that snow had melted away in some inner areas of the surrounding mountains facing the city core and remained frozen in outer areas of the mountains. This melting snowline was chosen as the course for the city walls, in hopes that areas inside the walls would be favored by sun and rapidly melting snow in the future. The Seonbawi rocks, unfortunately for Monk Muhak, remained in the snowy area.<sup>51</sup> King Taejo therefore planned his city walls to exclude the Seonbawi, exiling their unorthodox energy which so threatened Confucian sensitivities. A disappointed Monk Muhak lamented that this decision meant that “monks will from now on have to follow scholars around carrying their books.”<sup>52</sup>

As construction on the Jongmyo Shrine and Royal Palace wrapped up, construction on the Hanyang city walls began in the dead of winter—January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1396. Tens of thousands of workers had been conscripted to build the palace and shrines; one thousand alone worked on a guest house for Chinese envoys.<sup>53</sup> On the city walls, 18,000 people labored in 50-day shifts, over several years. Each province of Joseon had to supply work crews. People were taken off their farms for corvée labor without pay. While building the capital city, hundreds died and thousands were crippled or injured in construction accidents, epidemic illnesses, or from a freezing workplace environment.<sup>54</sup> Facing such conditions, many workers scattered and fled whenever they could.<sup>55</sup> But authorities were merciless when such workers were caught.

Six runaway workers were beheaded on one occasion.<sup>56</sup> At another time, one monk was apprehended for sluggish work as a stone mason. He was executed and his head was hung from the top of the gate that workers were laboring on.<sup>57</sup>

Jeong Do-jeon composed a peppy song (“the New Spirit”) to comfort workers as they toiled, but the laborers probably appreciated the efforts of one sympathetic *Dodang* Chancellor even more. On one occasion, this Chancellor informed King Taejo that the weather was turning too cold for workers’ health. He also noted that many of the King’s escorts were seizing the houses of commoners in order to stay warm during the work project, so people had nowhere to shelter. He urged the King to give workers a break and to slow down construction. For a time, Taejo agreed.<sup>58</sup>

#### *Enshrined Ancestors*

In September of 1395, the Jongmyo Royal Ancestral Shrine was ready to receive the spirits of Taejo’s ancestors. The King was delighted to finally give his ancestors a proper home. As the scholar Yi Saek taught, “if the domestic shrine becomes dilapidated, the spirit wanders, has nowhere to go, and does not attach itself to the descendants.”<sup>59</sup> It didn’t take special training in divination to know that such lonely, wandering spirits could never be good. But if built well, and with proper attention to ritual, an ancestral shrine would call back the ancestral *ki* and bring great fortune upon a people.<sup>60</sup>

Taejo crafted a lovely ancestral resting place: “the manifestation of a filial heart.”<sup>61</sup> In consultation with the geomancers, the Jongmyo shrine was nestled close to the royal palace and just below the positive earth energy of Mt. Bukhan to the north and between the protecting ridges of Ingwansan to the west (the Great White Tiger guardian) and Naksan to the east (the Blue Dragon guardian). It was a strategically chosen site of auspicious geomantic energy at very center of the geomancy cave (*hyeol*), where *ki* flowed down from the cradling mountains.<sup>62</sup> While the mountain ridge to the rear could be considered a great dragon’s spine, the new palace and Jongmyo shrine were located at the very head of the dragon, where all the good *ki* energy pooled.

Careful siting of ancestral tombs at this promising geomantic site helped naturalize the authority of the Joseon dynasty, aligning it with the energy of the earth, and helping Taejo's descendants to draw forever upon the energy of their ancestors.<sup>63</sup> "The energy of the ancestors becomes the energy of the descendants," the Joseon geomancer Yi Yuwon argued, "A well-buried corpse and pleased spirits of the ancestors can ease people's minds, while also ensuring their good fortune, good health, and compensation for all their troubles."<sup>64</sup>

The Royal Ancestral Shrine was located right next to the new palace and separated from the surrounding city amid a parklike serenity of locust, oak, ginkgo, pine, willow, and maple trees. There were no flowering plants—just an atmosphere of sublime dignity and quiet rest. The shrine complex included a collection of buildings to help in honoring the spirits (ritual preparation buildings, spaces to store sacred utensils, pavilions for musicians), while the central building was a long, elegant line of royal spirit chambers, closed behind thick cinnabar red doors. A slightly elevated black stone path was built throughout the Jongmyo complex, connecting one building to another, and meant only for the spirits of the ancestors to walk upon (called a *shinro*, or "spirit path").

King Taejo even authorized a small shine to King Gongmin, the reformist Goryeo ruler who had once ordered a young Yi Seong-gye and his father to drive the Yuan out of Goryeo lands. It is said that a loose painting of King Gongmin blew into the area one windy day while the Ancestral shrine was being built and landed upon the Jongmyo grounds. Officials took it as a portent and decided to enshrine Goryeo's King Gongmin at Jongmyo, together with the Joseon royals.<sup>65</sup>

At this shrine, Taejo ordered the commencement of annual ancestral veneration rites. Taejo ordered rites five times a year, marking the four seasons and one formal sacrificial day. Each occasion was a lengthy and grand affair and involved hundreds of ritual specialists, attendants, dancers, singers, musicians, food preparers and royal family members. These Jongmyo rituals were meant to unite the hearts and minds of Joseon, focusing all the officials and even commoners outside the shrine on consciousness of a common ancestry.<sup>66</sup>

The rituals first began on the 28<sup>th</sup> day of the 9<sup>th</sup> lunar month of 1395, when the Jongmyo Shrine was ready to receive its first residents: the spirits of four generations of King Taejo's ancestors. This inaugural enshrinement was no mere artistic festival for casual public display—it was a sacred process, transferring the still-sentient soul and essence of the venerable ancestors to their new home. The process began by sending a delegation of ritual specialists from Hanyang to the old capital of Gaegyeong, to escort the royal ancestral tablets to the new capital city. The tablets were placed in an ivory carriage and escorted with a musical procession. While the tablets were in transit, the King began his purification rituals. Together with other members of his court, the King refrained from meat, sex, alcohol, music, and festivities of any sort for seven days. For three days prior to enshrinement, the King would fast completely. Several officials who didn't begin these rituals on time were impeached and dismissed from office.<sup>67</sup>

Several days after the spirit tablets were taken to their new chambers in Jongmyo, on the 4<sup>th</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month, the King arrived in a red royal robe, wearing a jade crown and riding an ivory carriage, to begin his final day of purification before enshrinement. Officials lined up in straight rows and full finery to greet the King at the shrine. Taejo prostrated four times before entering the side gate of Jongmyo, as the central gate was only for the spirits. The King spent the evening at the shrine in a special room, praying and fasting.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month, Taejo dressed in a royal dragon robe and a mortarboard crown, with strings of hanging beads front and back, and prepared to perform the enshrinement rituals. In the courtyard were hundreds of attendants, members of the court, and scholar-officials in their finest ritual garb.<sup>68</sup> They had all come together in a national manifestation of filial piety, uniting hearts and minds with the common root of Joseon.<sup>69</sup> The King and his attendants followed the dictates of Confucian classics such as the *Li-ji* (Book of Rites) and *Zhou Li* (Rites of Zhou).<sup>70</sup> The *Taejo Sillok* approvingly records that King Taejo always honored Confucius' advice: "he sacrificed to the dead, as if they were present. He sacrificed to the spirits, as if the spirits were present."<sup>71</sup>



Food offerings were carefully laid out, with vertical rows of bamboo and wooden plates and ritually prepared foods from earth and sea. Tidy rows of square and round vessels were artfully arranged. Small stands presented the meat of three sacrificial animals—ox, lamb, and pig. On the left, boiled animal meat. On the right, livers, and lumps of animal fat. In the center, on three small stands, was the raw meat of each animal. In front of all these stands, a plate of the animals' hair and blood was presented to the ancestors. In front of all this, immediately before the door of each spirit chamber, was the ritual wine. The King welcomed the spirits to their new home, and they were offered three cups of wine. King Taejo offered the first wine, spilling it ritually on the ground. Then the Crown Prince, fourteen-year-old Bang-seok, offered the second tribute. The official ritualist poured the third offering of wine onto the ground. Taejo concluded by burning the ritual prayer and committing the smoke to the heavens.<sup>72</sup>

Having completed these ceremonies, King Taejo then left the shrine and travelled to the south gate of the city, where tents of celebration had been erected. Hundreds of officials from provinces across the land, as well as thousands of city residents, lined the streets to congratulate the King. Erudite Confucian scholars of the National Academy performed songs all along the route, written by Jeong Do-jeon just for the occasion. First, they performed the "Song of the Heavenly Mandate," then the "Song of the Royal Capital." Finally, they performed "Song of the New Royal Ancestral Shrine."<sup>73</sup> Taejo was often humbled after hearing Sambong's wonderful songs of celebration. "No matter how many songs you sing, you praise my virtue too excessively. Whenever I listen to these songs, I feel very ashamed of myself."<sup>74</sup>

Upon arriving at the celebration tent, before the gathered well-wishers, King Taejo thanked the "accumulated virtues of his ancestors" for helping him found the new dynasty, and solemnly proclaimed a royal decree. "If one wants to keep the heart of the nation beating, one must foster mutual respect and good custom," Taejo declared. "From this day forward, the members of the literati shall exercise self-discipline to control their conduct and show diligence in carrying out their duties."

The King decreed that the common people should also behave well and avoid reckless deeds and selfishness. It would all be in accord with the wishes of the ancestors.<sup>75</sup>

As for the quality of the Shrine itself, the King was pleased. "Since I believe that the Royal Ancestral Shrine is the great foundation of the state, it should have an impressive appearance and the sacrifices offered to the spirits should be clean and appropriate. My ancestors have prepared a way for me, and in my generation, my family turned into a kingdom. Looking at the great ceremony at this time, I find myself deeply moved and gratified. Hence, I intend to do the people a generous favor..."

The King then proclaimed a reduction of corvée labor in the capital, a reduction in taxation of those with few assets, reduced military obligations for the elderly, and new welfare provisions for orphans, widows, widowers, and the elderly. He declared general amnesty for criminals, forgiving all crimes that occurred before the enshrinement ceremony, "regardless of whether they are known or have been adjudicated." The only crimes not forgiven were those "subject to capital punishment by either beheading or hanging."<sup>76</sup>

It was a new beginning on the Korean peninsula. The spiritual foundations of the Joseon dynasty had been laid in the bedrock of ancestral virtue, taxes on the people were reduced, welfare programs were expanded, general amnesty had been declared, and the celebration in the capital must have been immense.

The palace was completed soon thereafter. On October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1395, Sambong kowtowed before King Taejo and then bestowed the palace and nearby roads and public squares with virtuous names, as the king requested. Sambong called the new palace "Gyeongbokgung," meaning "Palace Greatly Blessed by Heaven."<sup>77</sup> Looking at all that was being readied for the King, Jeong Do-jeon was pleased. Regarding Gwanghwamun Plaza in front of the Palace gate, Sambong later described its grandeur.

## THE KING OF JOSEON

*The high-rise office buildings that face one another  
Are like the countless stars surrounding Polaris.  
The moonlit official streets in the dawn look like a river.  
A carriage runs with its jade decorations ringing,  
but hardly a speck of dust rises.  
...The grand mansions stand tall above the clouds,  
And the villages, closely connected, fully occupy the land.  
Since they are covered with smoke every morning and evening,  
One sees the peace and prosperity of an age.<sup>78</sup>*

Back at Gaegyeong, the old Goryeo capital, things were different. One Goryeo diplomat to Ming described that “a tragic and desolate wall is all that remains” in Gaegyeong. The whole area was simply “tall trees wrapped in a cold mist.”<sup>79</sup> The Ming Emperor himself imagined Gaegyeong’s abandon.

*The capital moved away, and the streets turned desolate.  
Passing travelers are saddened to look at the desolation.  
Only the flowers are left in the palace garden crowded with bees.  
But the empty palace became the home of wild rabbits.  
The peddlers take a roundabout way to get to the new city,  
And the merchants newly relocated miss their old marketplace.<sup>80</sup>*

But in Hanyang, a hopeful, fresh dynasty was opening in a glorious new palace. The King moved into the grand palace and organized a celebratory feast on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1365: the occasion of his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. All the ministers and servants

were there and raised their glasses and bowed to the king. A colorful painting was unveiled of a king riding a dragon, with 1000 scholars following him, debating among the clouds. The whole crowd sang "*Mundeokgak*" to the King, another of Sambong's compositions.<sup>81</sup>

Jeong Do-jeon received a gold-gilt belt from the king and praised all they had achieved together. "The palace is high like the stars of the Big Dipper," Jeong swooned. "[Mt.] Muhak is surrounded by clouds. Every season the flowers and birds find the palace. Every day the commoners play happily."<sup>82</sup> As described in the *Taejo Sillok*, everyone was giddy, with glittering eyes. The King drank several rounds of wine,<sup>83</sup> and ordered Jeong Do-jeon to dance as he sang. As the great scholar danced, the king stood up, took off his ceremonial armor, and joined in. All the officials and scholars danced the night away in the new palace.

Jeong Do-jeon could hardly believe all that had come to pass. "We are already drunk with wine," he said. "We are sated with virtue and power."<sup>84</sup>



## Government by Benevolence



*The great treasure of the sage is called authority; the great virtue of heaven and earth is to grow things. How to maintain the authority is, then, by benevolence.*

— *Governance Code of Joseon*<sup>1</sup>



The country had a new capital, new palace, and a sacred ancestral shrine. Tales of divine dreams and mystic prophecies spread in support of Taejo's rise. But to undergird this divine myth-making, people also had need of food and security. When Taejo rose to power, there were formidable challenges of food shortages, illegal land acquisition by oppressive elites, erratic and incapable government bureaucrats, widespread banditry, and insecure borders. Amid the chaos, Yi Seong-gye was later said to always dream of "a country where people can eat rice without starving."<sup>2</sup> Now the dreamer had become king and the future of the Joseon Dynasty depended on Taejo's abilities to materialize his dream and legitimate the new political order by pragmatically addressing basic human needs and improving on late-Goryeo's disastrous socio-economic situation.

A decade earlier, the exiled Jeong Do-jeon had visited Yi Seong-gye in his Hamhung barracks, spreading the gospel of social reform. In the years after this visit, Yi Seong-gye constantly surrounded himself with Confucian theorists, ever intrigued with their rationalist social plans to craft a better world. The coming of King Taejo, therefore, was not simply a socially meaningless replacement of one loose faction of power-seeking politicians with another set of self-interested elites. Coming into power surrounded by high-minded Confucian reformers like Jeong Do-jeon and Cho Chun, Taejo set out from the start to craft his dynasty around the coherent

ideological framework of Confucian humanist rationality. Instead of a polity in which inherited wealth and palace favoritism defined the heights of power, or in which spiritual traditions of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism all coexisted equally, King Taejo's reformers set out to transform the political and cultural context of Joseon into a world of Confucian orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup> "We desire to renew governance and moral transformation with them so that We might respond to heaven's heart," Jeong Do-jeon had once said in an earlier memorial to King Gongyang.<sup>4</sup> The winds of Taejo therefore heralded the rise of Confucianism as the driving ideological force and foundational "public reason"\* of Korean society.<sup>5</sup>

There were several aspects to this social and ideological reconstruction project. The scholar Jeong Do-jeon was elevated as "Prince of the Faith" with a special role to reconstruct society and government in alignment with his Confucian ideals. A vision emerged of a world built around a literary framework of expanding schools, a culture of books and writing, and a politics of edification led by virtuous scholars and officials who earned their position through rigorous exams.<sup>6</sup> The Confucian ritualization of both public and private life was relentlessly pursued, producing a method to disseminate and reproduce Confucianism in Joseon social life far beyond Taejo's time (indeed, Joseon's claim as Asia's most thoroughly Confucian polity could be accurately sustained for the next 500 years).

As Taejo's most powerful advisor, Jeong Do-jeon constantly denounced the magical thinking of the shamans, the

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\* "Public Reason" is the notion that the morality or rules that govern common life must be rationally justifiable or highly valued by those living under them. Jeong Do-jeon argued that rulers should not make decisions or claim authority based on magical thinking about "witchcraft and mysterious forces," but on a rational pursuit of goals and on moral righteousness. In this way, Jeong Do-jeon and the other scholars of Taejo's day presented Confucianism as what philosophers today described as "public reason": "a standard for assessing rules, laws, institutions, and the behavior of individual citizens and public officials." See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Public Reason": <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/public-reason/>.

mysterious folklore and strange prophecies of common people, and the otherworldly spiritualism of the Buddhists. In this, Jeong Do-jeon agreed with the critique of fellow Confucian, Jeong Mong-ju.

But the teachings of Buddha are different. One must part with relatives, denounce the relationship between man and woman, sit alone inside a cave, wear clothing made of grass, eat roots, and revere the search for emptiness and Nirvana. How can this be called the way of everyday life?<sup>7</sup>

Instead of searching for empty Nirvana, Jeong Do-jeon urged that the King should be judged on his ability to rationally pursue social progress—to meet the daily needs of the people for food, shelter, and security—and to morally uplift the people through the edifying example of his own Confucian virtue.<sup>8</sup> King Taejo took up the challenge with sincerity. Eleven days after ascending to the throne King Taejo offered his first royal edict, promising many social reforms. Civil service exams would be required for men of talent and knowledge to enter into government service. Neither money nor personal connection would do, as he would admit only “loyal subjects, filial sons, men of principle, and virtuous women.”<sup>9</sup>

The new king ordered more provincial schools to be established. He proclaimed that welfare would be offered to widows, widowers, orphans, and poor people. He announced a reduction of state-forced corvée labor. There would be careful auditing of tax revenues and expenditures, and inspection of government granaries to prevent embezzlement. There would be more restraint in government travel expenditures and more support for sailors on warships. The cloth tax would be eliminated. Penal reform would advance balanced and fair punishments for crimes. The transport of Ming’s tribute tax by boat was abolished, so as to relieve the burden on coastal shipbuilding communities.<sup>10</sup>

Having announced a set of policy goals, King Taejo then instructed Jeong Do-jeon to begin putting flesh on things by drafting a broad new legal code. Jeong’s work—the *Joseon*



*Gyeonggukjeon*—would become the Governance Code of 1394: the Constitution of Joseon.<sup>11</sup> This document, the first legal document of Joseon, conveyed the ideological fervor of the moment. The document was not meant to be a detailed administrative code, guiding daily work, and it wasn't printed up for broad distribution. Rather, it was a general philosophical statement of core principles (*jurye*) of the ideal state—an educative tool to guide the aspirations of the King. Upon completion, Jeong Do-jeon urged King Taejo to keep the document close to his side so that he could frequently read and ponder the principles of good government. King Taejo placed the 1394 Code of Joseon inside a golden casket and kept it close in his reading room.<sup>12</sup>

The King had three foundational principles to reflect on in his nightly reading: First, and most importantly, the Code of Joseon asserted that the common people are the foundation of government, and the king must strive to love and understand them. Second, the Code asserted that Joseon would be a thoroughly Confucianized society of ritual propriety, guided by the philosopher-kings of Sungkyunkwan, so as to become the “Zhou of the East.”\* Finally, the 1394 Code articulated a theory of government by remonstrance: a government of balanced centers of power wherein educated advisors would always guide, check and remonstrate the king.

The principles began with the notions of *minbon* and *injeong*: “the people” as the foundation of state and the related necessity of a government by benevolence. This notion of the welfare of people being the foundation and purpose of political power was the animating spirit of Sambong's social contract theory. Without benevolence towards the people, no state could be legitimate or stable, Sambong wrote. The people are like the water floating the ship of state. The boat is the king, but the water can become unruly and overturn the boat. “The foundation of the king who governs a country is to win the people's heart...the regime which does not win public sentiment is bound to collapse. How can we win public

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\* The Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE) was the longest lasting Dynasty in Chinese history and was known for originating and developing the ideas of Confucianism.

sentiment? It can only be obtained by loving the people as true as the king's own self." The shepherd must lead his flock safely. The parent must feed his children well.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding the notion of benevolence to "the people" as the foundation of state, Taejo was committed, but was no revolutionary. Though King Taejo introduced reforms to improve most people's situation, he didn't advance a wholesale social revolution to overturn hierarchical Goryeo society. In Jeong Do-jeon's social code, in fact, four reputable classes of civil society were identified, with very little movement allowed between them: the literati (*sa*), the peasants (*nong*), the artisans (*gong*) and the merchants (*sang*). The code also identified a class of "unclean" professions (the *cheonmin*), which included butchers, shamans, jail-keepers, *kisaeng*, shoemakers, and enslaved persons (*nobi*). Most of the *cheonmin* were required to live in isolated places away from "clean" society and had no chance of social mobility.<sup>14</sup>

Reaffirming this social order, soon after the initial upheaval of his accession calmed down, King Taejo returned most of the enslaved servants (*nobi*) to the elite families who had resisted his rise and he continued to award enslaved persons to his Meritorious Retainers.<sup>15</sup> As another indicator of social continuity, most of the influential clans from Goryeo remained powerful and wealthy in the early Joseon era.<sup>16</sup> The social position of most commoners didn't change in the least.

Though King Taejo was not setting out to overturn the social order, he did pursue meaningful reforms to improve the situation of common people (including enslaved people). Most fundamentally, he pursued reforms to improve the food, housing situation, and physical safety of many. As Jeong Do-jeon argued, providing food and security to people was a requirement of "government by benevolence," and was also a strategy to reduce banditry and social unrest. "You have to have plenty of things to wear and eat to know shame and have manners," Jeong wrote. "If [people] are desperate from cold or hunger, they will have no time to reflect on their manners or to feel shame, and they become a bandit."<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, King Taejo pursued a host of reforms to improve agricultural production, reduce taxes, rationalize the criminal justice system, reduce corvée labor duties, and reduce

banditry.<sup>18</sup> He substantially expanded public schools as “the foundation for enlightening the people,” especially targeting areas like Tamna island where there were no schools at all and many people were illiterate.<sup>19</sup> To support his goal of enhanced national learnedness, Taejo established the Department of Books which began to develop a movable metal type, perhaps the earliest in the world.<sup>20</sup>

Some of Taejo’s most important projects focused on agricultural and land reform, so as to address persistent famine. Taejo sent public employees on pest control and forestry/river management projects throughout the provinces, helping to improve agricultural productivity.<sup>21</sup> He expanded state granaries so the government could provide better food relief during times of crisis. He also began regular audits of granaries, helping to control embezzlement by local magistrates. His officers began to keep better track of how much stored grain had been damaged by rain or rats and developed a system to keep old grain separate from new grain and to release the old grain first.<sup>22</sup>

To push more land into cultivation, Taejo sent surveyors across the provinces to investigate whether wealthy landowners were allowing large tracts of land to lie idle. Offenders were beaten with a paddle. He restricted corvée labor on state projects to non-farming seasons. “People should never be summoned or mobilized during the busy farming season for matters that are not urgent,” said his royal edict. “Let them devote themselves only to their farming, except when the matters are related to treason or the fight against the Japanese invaders or capturing thieves.”<sup>23</sup>

Local magistrates were ordered to do all they could to keep people working on their farms, and to provide support to those physically unable to work. Provincial governors were told “to inspect the farming situation occasionally, making idle people get back to their farming, providing those who have run out of provisions with grain from the righteous granaries, and providing those who are unable to cultivate their land due to illness with help from neighbors and relatives so that they may not miss the farming season.”<sup>24</sup> It was announced that widows, widowers, orphans, the old, and the sick were all exempted

from hard labor expectations and should be provided with state relief from the righteous granaries.<sup>25</sup>

Reforms were introduced to protect local lands from destruction and plunder by nobility or soldiers. "When the royal guards from various provinces travel back and forth to report to their duty stations, they recklessly pass through local districts, harassing the people and causing damage to their crops," a Privy Council memorial remarked in 1393. "From this day forward, they should be prohibited from entering the districts and required to camp in open fields."<sup>26</sup>

The king followed this rule himself during one local visit, camping in the open. He learned that a local magistrate had been extorting local residents for money to entertain the King's entourage and so Taejo had the magistrate flogged.<sup>27</sup> During one hot springs trip while camping in the open, the King discovered that a few furrows of crops had been "grazed and damaged by the horses of his entourage." He ordered his attendants to pay the villagers for the damage and then proclaimed: "From now on, if anyone lets his animals run through crops in the field, I will not forgive him, even if he is my son or brother."<sup>28</sup> Violators of the new expectations were punished. When two military officials went on an outing and shot the goats and ducks of village residents, they were impeached by the Censorate.<sup>29</sup>

Toward the end of his reign, new rules were announced that "Government offices must not be allowed to seize without payment the fruit and bamboo cultivated by the common people, and each government office shall establish its own orchard to supply the necessary fruit."<sup>30</sup> Tax collectors were required to dramatically reduce their entourage of attendants and guards when they went out into the provinces, so as to reduce demands on local lands.

Improvements to criminal and military justice were introduced. King Taejo approved Privy Council proposals for more fair and humane treatment of soldiers and sailors. Soldiers were protected from excessive corvée labor, while sailors were allowed to fish and make salt while on duty so as to garner a bit of extra income. Towards the end of his reign, the inspection and punishment of military officers found to be corrupt or abusive was expanded.<sup>31</sup> Multiple memorials to the

king identified central or local jails filled with unjustly or ambiguously accused persons and Taejo often granted amnesties. He also worked to establish a principle that the death penalty could only be implemented upon approval from the King.<sup>32</sup>

To enforce this wide range of reforms, King Taejo worked to improve the power and oversight of his central bureaucracy. He created an expanded corps of royal envoys (*Kyeongchagwan*, *Pyongmyeong Sasin*, and *osa*): central state officers sent to the provinces to oversee local work and evaluate provincial magistrates. These royal envoys expanded the reach of Joseon central power, holding local officers accountable to state goals.<sup>33</sup> To guide their work, King Taejo's advisors developed a list of seven standards to be used for evaluating local magistrates.<sup>34</sup>

1. Agriculture and sericulture must be thriving.
2. Schools must be flourishing.
3. Civil suits must be resolved quickly.
4. "Wiliness and slyness must not exist."
5. Magistrates should submit to military orders
6. There should be an increase in the number of local households and families.
7. Corvée labor should be made equal.

Of course, none of these high-minded reforms were wholly fulfilled, even when "wiliness and slyness" was held to a minimum. But the improved direction of Joseon was clear. The spotty but meaningful results of land reform provide a case in point. Cho Chun and Jeong Do-jeon had ambitiously pursued land reform since 1391. The fundamental goal was to reclaim vast land rights from the *gwonmun sejok* (as materialized in their right to tax the harvest). Those taxation rights would then be returned to the state for distribution to more meritorious subjects of the up-and-coming ministerial and scholar-official class. As well, land reform would prohibit the *gwonmun sejok* from easily converting farmers into slaves when they couldn't pay their taxes, partly by reducing the number of land owners with taxation rights on each plot of land and partly by capping overall tax rates. This land reform

project could also help ensure farmers never lost the right to till plots of land, since most land would ostensibly belong to the state in the end, not to private parties.<sup>35</sup>

Some elements of this ambitious plan were achieved in early Joseon. A national land audit was completed and the number of “landowners” able to tax a single plot of land was meaningfully reduced. Tax rates were also reduced. While most provincial land ended up staying in the hands of wealthy elites in the end, almost all the lands in Gyeonggi-do (the capital city’s bordering province) were returned to state control and became available for state taxation or for distribution to new officials and merit subjects. With an increased level of state-taxed lands, public coffers began to fill, and officials could count on reasonable salaries without resorting to bribery or embezzlement.<sup>36</sup>

As for reforms to the slave law, these were also limited, but meaningful. When King Taejo came into power, the slavery situation was in complete disarray. The *gwonmun sejok* families had converted hundreds of thousands of people into slavery, claiming rights to the servitude whenever someone couldn’t pay their taxes or couldn’t pay back a usurious loan. But keeping track of these enslaved persons and enforcing rights to their labor had become a chaotic situation. For one thing, these enslaved persons were constantly running away and wandering the land. Also, enslaved persons were often gambled away or promised to another in commercial transactions, or won and lost in constant factional court struggles, and it was difficult to keep track of who had a “right” to which slaves. Invasions from the Red Turbans and Japanese pirates had burned so many records—and Jeong Do-jeon had famously burned others in the capital public square (see chapter 17)—that it became impossible to know for certain the real status of many people that elites claimed as slaves under Goryeo’s slave law, and litigious disputes were never-ending.<sup>37</sup>

Early in his new regime, King Taejo issued a royal decree, describing the chaotic situation in which people constantly sued each other over slave ownership (including enslaved persons suing for manumission), causing chaos in the courts. “Cunning people conspired to file lawsuits using every means

possible. The problem was so serious that fights broke out among parents and brothers, who killed on another and harmed good custom, and it made me feel very sorry.”<sup>38</sup>

Trying to make a fresh start, King Taejo announced a new slave law policy. Starting at the end of 1392, any slaves “who were originally people of good status” would be restored to their freedom and good status, but only if they had already served as slaves “for a long time.” Also, people of good status who had only just recently been reduced to slavery were freed. But any people who were in the middle of their period of slavery should continue their servitude. As for enslaved persons who were previously of low social status, these people would have to keep doing the base work of slaves, perhaps serving as palace runners or gate guards. However, they would not be considered permanently of base status and could be elevated out of slavery over time. For example, if any such person made an outstanding contribution to the nation, they or their children could be freed and permanently granted good status.<sup>39</sup>

Lawsuits to resolve all these matters were given a hard deadline so that the status of all enslaved persons could be settled for good by that deadline. Anyone who continued to bring lawsuits after this deadline had passed would be seriously punished. Such a person would receive one hundred stokes with a paddle, “and his documents concerning his slaves shall be confiscated and burned by authorities.”<sup>40</sup>

These reforms were hoped to offer a serious improvement in the situation for many enslaved persons, offering a chance to regain good status and to resolve the endless legal struggles over whether people should be considered enslaved or not. In fact, serious improvements for some people did occur, as many formerly enslaved persons recovered their good names. But partly because of ambiguity in the King’s proclamation (e.g., offering to free people who had been enslaved “for a long time”), legal conflicts continued throughout all of King Taejo’s reign and beyond.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the King’s edict to free a thin slice of Joseon’s slaves meeting unique conditions did nothing to emancipate most enslaved persons across the peninsula.

In the end, the matter of freeing enslaved persons simply was not a priority in King Taejo's regime. In January of 1393, excited with prospects of freedom, fifty enslaved persons once blocked the royal carriage as it was returning to a temporary royal palace. The people all prostrated, begged, "and appealed to the king to restore them to their original status as commoners." But King Taejo only ordered them all arrested and taken to the Capital Constabulary to be interrogated. Three leaders were identified and beaten with a heavy paddle.<sup>42</sup>

Taejo's lack of serious commitment to addressing the slavery issue led some of the most idealistic revolutionaries to question his heart. In the southern provinces one notable scholastic hermit lived in a cave on Palgongsan mountain. This old hermit constantly delivered withering critiques against the wealthy elites and unfair taxation while insisting on fundamental land and slavery reform. Though King Taejo reached out to this well-known hermit and offered him a house and government sinecure in the new regime, the hermit stayed in seclusion because the land and slavery questions weren't well-resolved. He ultimately died as a critic in his cave, a moving symbol of the limitations of the Taejo revolution.<sup>43</sup>

Though such episodes reveal how some radicals were discontent with the extent of King Taejo's reforms, in the final balance sheet, things were improving for many people in Joseon. The nation-wide economic situation stabilized, food security dramatically improved, labor requirements were reduced for tens of thousands, borders became more secure, and taxes were rationalized.<sup>44</sup> A growing commitment to the rule of law versus rule by personalistic fiat also came with the Joseon revolution. Taejo's halting efforts towards reform of the slave law were part of an overall expansion of the rule of law in Joseon. Late Goryeo was dominated by personalistic abuse of office and local applications of ad hoc law, a chaotic and corrupt situation constantly criticized by Taejo and his Confucian *sadaebu* as his new regime settled in. Early in Taejo's rule he called for written revisions to Joseon's criminal and administrative codes so as to rationalize punishments, appointments and dismissals, lawsuits, and ritual activities. His call for a predictable empire of written law in Joseon led to



Jeong Do-jeon's early drafting of the 1394 Governance Code of Joseon (*Joseon Gyeonggukjeon*, which provided a broad, constitutional framework for Joseon politics), which was followed later by such milestones as the *Gukjo Orye* in 1474 (The Five Rites of State) and the *Gyeongguk Daejeon* in 1485 (The Compiled National Code of Joseon).<sup>45</sup>

With King Taejo's wide-ranging reforms, people began to settle into the new regime and return to their old homes—once abandoned due to fear of Japanese pirates or *gwonmun sejok* tax collectors. More farmland opened up and villages filled with again with a settled population.<sup>46</sup> King Taejo's Inspector General and court scribes reported the pleasant results.

The sound of worries and lamentations began to disappear from villages, and the vagrant people who had abandoned their hometowns had the joy of settling down. Empty places turned into towns and villages, and barren lands with brush and grass became paddies and farm fields producing rice and millet... As a result, the regional population began to grow and the people in one village could hear the sound of crowing chickens and barking dogs in the next. The lands along the coast and on distant islands were all reclaimed, and the people lived in peace, eating and drinking every day, forgetting war.<sup>47</sup>

## Zhou of the East



*"In what respect were these great men?  
Have you never studied the rites?"*

— Mencius<sup>1</sup>



In the insular world of 14<sup>th</sup> century Korean politics, it is intriguing that many of the once-dismissed government officials of late-Goryeo reappeared during King Taejo's time—released from incarceration, brought back from exile, restored to good name. Relatives of old malefactors like Yi In-im and Woo Hyun-bo found their way into high government position in little time.<sup>2</sup> The return of the exiles suggests that Taejo's revolution was nothing more than a small-scale political event—the emergence of a new cohort of political elites associated with Yi Seong-gye who claimed a bit of power to share with old Goryeo elites, but without broader social or ideological meaning.<sup>3</sup>

This would be a mistaken assessment. We have already detailed how land, tax, and other social reforms improved the quality of life for thousands in Joseon, helping win popular support and securing the financial health of state. But it was not these social reforms that most defined the Taejo revolution, most animated the moral vision of the *sadaebu* or most bound the Joseon reformers one to another—no, that glue of state was the righteous ideological foment of the scholastic Confucians. Undergirding the new order, providing the animating spirit of the Taejo revolution, was the notion of Joseon as a new moral polity—in accord with Confucian precepts of righteous behavior.

The heart of Taejo's revolution was that the *sadaebu*—those philosopher-kings of Joseon—now sat at the right hand of state. For these idealistic scholars, Goryeo was in social and

political crisis, and Confucianism had an answer. Widespread corruption among the aristocratic class was well known. Repeated famines, droughts and invasions had rocked the country. Recent Goryeo kings had proven themselves ineffective rulers and disinterested in national welfare. Amid late-Goryeo's social and political collapse, scholars of the Confucian academy found themselves in possession of dangerous new ideas, built around the notion of leading a life of perfect virtue, following the "Four Beginnings" of Mencius: commiseration, righteousness, propriety and wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

Living and studying together for endless hours at the Academy, scholars constantly absorbed the Confucian classics, and a new world of virtuous politics took shape in their imaginations. Amid the moral crud of late-Goryeo, we find constant reference to how scholars believed Confucian thinking and social reform could save the nation. These were not just dead letters on the ancient scrolls of Mencius laid out before the scholars at Sungkyunkwan. Rather, these venerable Confucian precepts illuminated an intellectual adventure and pointed to political action. They were the map to a new world.<sup>5</sup>

Records from the *Sinjung Tongguk Yoji Sungham*<sup>\*</sup> describe the intense environment of the Confucian Academy during these days, where a radical force of intellectual transformation brewed. Every daybreak, the drums would beat and the scholars would begin their long lectures and discussions. "For days and months, they work and rest together as one body to train themselves until they become new men. It is from these students that the future loyal ministers and the future filial sons are produced in prolific number to serve the state and their families. Never before in our country's history have we seen such knowledge and filial piety."<sup>6</sup>

It was all a bit grandiose and romantic, this high philosophizing at the Academy, but none of these radical ideas had much hope of actually changing the course of society until the coming of Yi Seong-gye to power. Yi embraced the moment, and an alliance of his military forces with the *sadaebu*

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\* 2:10 a-b

philosopher-kings was born. Once on the throne, King Taejo elevated many scholars to the status of “merit subjects,” joining his military associates and members of his ancestral Jeonju Yi clan in that recognition.<sup>7</sup> These earnest scholars had received a rigorous Confucian education and came into their status as a recognized *yangban* by passing the top civil service or military exams, not simply due to privileged family background.<sup>8</sup>

These “great priests of the soul”<sup>9</sup> were characterized by sincerity, self-denial, and absolute dedication to the Confucian precepts. They worked diligently to lay down a neo-Confucian moral and intellectual basis to all of political and social life.<sup>10</sup> Because this rising class of scholar-officials sat at the very highest levels of government under King Taejo, Confucianism became the state religion of Joseon Korean—more so than in any other Asian country.

Among the Confucian *sadaebu*, none were more influential Jeong Do-jeon, Taejo’s Chief State Councilor and principal architect behind the ideological, legal, and socio-economic framework that would shape Joseon for centuries. “The master’s virtue and righteousness are exceedingly lofty,” fellow scholar Gwon Geun said of Jeong Do-jeon. “His scholarship is most profound.”<sup>11</sup> This well-regarded Jeong Do-jeon was extremely close to King Taejo, so when the new King set out to create a new nation, he put the scholars in charge of much of it. Jeong was given the highest authority over both civilian and military affairs, and was entrusted to reform the nation’s land laws, tax system, legal codes, and political institutions, all in accordance with Confucian theories of a virtuous new nation.

Jeong Do-jeon was a strong advocate of social changes like land reform and tax equity, but even more than specific policy reforms, he believed people needed soul-felt hope that the new era was righteous and had the Mandate of Heaven. After the rot of Goryeo, Joseon needed to be a nation people could put their faith in, a nation of rectitude. In this great task, Jeong Do-jeon pointed King Taejo towards the example of the Zhou dynasty of ancient China, which “had claimed the Mandate of Heaven from the decaying Shang,” and built itself on Confucian foundations. Joseon could also be “modeled on the glorious age

of Zhou,” Jeong dreamed,<sup>12</sup> becoming a smaller efflorescence to mirror the “Central Efflorescence” of Chinese Confucianism.<sup>13</sup> With the coming of King Taejo, Jeong Do-jeon believed it possible “to transform the state into Zhou itself in the East.” Joseon would become a perfectly righteous country, “more than Confucius would have dreamed of.”<sup>14</sup>

In accordance with this thinking, just days after deposing Gongyang and assuming the throne, King Taejo received a report from the Office of the Inspector General. A lasting kingdom will only succeed with proper behavior, these prestigious advisors argued. Confucian reverence must begin now, with your very first royal decrees.

Oh, how can he be other than reverent? So-called reverence is central to the mind, serving as the foundation of all things. Therefore, one needs it all the time, whether one worships and performs the sacrifices to the Lord on High, which is a great priority, or one follows a daily routine such as rising, sleeping, eating, and resting, which is of relatively less priority...If you look back on history, suppression and rebellion and the rise and fall [of states] are all related to that. The so-called “reverence” alone is the beginning of the king’s good reign. Now is the start of your reign, when Your Majesty has risen to the throne. Establishing a sound government and leaving a good legacy for posterity depend on this day, and the blessings and curses on your dynasty, as well as the duration of your kingdom ordained by Heaven, also depend on this day.<sup>15</sup>

The Inspectors General than offered a long list of Confucian precepts and policy recommendations to the new king. After laying out each principle, the inspectors offered detailed reasoning to support their points. Their lengthy analysis meant the session with Taejo must have lasted a good while—the affair fills several pages of the official records. Here, just a

list of the principles themselves—without the scholars' additional exegesis—will suffice to demonstrate their thrust.

**“First** is to establish order and discipline,” including establishing clear expectations of good order and behavior by all officials.

**“Second** is to clearly distinguish between rewards and punishments,” and not “to deliver either frivolously or as a favor.”

**“Third** is to keep good people close by and distance oneself from petty people.”

**“Fourth** is to accept remonstrances from your subjects,” for a good ruler must be able to hear criticisms.

**“Fifth** is to prevent slander.”

**“Sixth** is to watch out for indolence and greed.”

**“Seventh** is to respect frugality and simplicity.”

**“Eighth** is to keep away from Eunuchs”—they are well trained and intelligent, but often the source of court intrigue.

**“Ninth** is to eliminate Buddhist priests and nuns,” who have become corrupted and indolent while living in luxurious temples.

**“Tenth** is to tighten access to the royal palace,” and don't let every friend, family member, or supplicant visit you at will.

The King listened carefully to the lengthy arguments in favor of each principle. At the end of it all, King Taejo offered a simple response that must have pleased his Inspectors. “Rejecting eunuchs and eliminating Buddhist priests and nuns cannot be done immediately because we are in the early stages of the new dynasty. As for the remaining proposals, however, I will have them all implemented.”<sup>16</sup>

Continuing from these very first days of Taejo's reign, the moral and intellectual aspirations of Joseon's "great priests of soul" were evident throughout Taejo's rule. In Confucian thinking, the scholar official played a key role in society and state, serving as the "morally superior man" who guided both commoners and the sovereign through his deep knowledge. Jeong Do-jeon described this virtuous gentleman as "a man who had the capacity to store morality (*todok*) and apply it to government—a versatile man who delved into the natural sciences, morality, history, philosophy, education, and literature. He was a scholar as well as a bureaucrat—a man who edified the people at the same time advised his sovereign."<sup>17</sup>

Seeking out such philosophers of state, King Taejo's first coronation edict lamented that scholastic achievement had deteriorated among civil service officials of Goryeo and ordered that future civil service exams to be more rigorous in testing for mastery of the Confucian classics.<sup>18</sup> In late Goryeo, the "protection privilege" known as "*eum*" had become increasingly prominent. This was the right of powerful families to place their members into government service without taking qualifying exams. The expansion of this *eum* privilege had allowed a few powerful families to dominate government service and produce all the top officials, no matter how inept.<sup>19</sup>

That all changed with the coming of King Taejo. The protection privileges were dramatically scaled back so that a meritorious examination system became the main route into government office during Taejo's rule.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the provincial hereditary aristocrats of the Goryeo era (the *hyangni*) became restricted by the new exam procedures which favored educated elites living in the capital region, who had attended the central Confucian academy, and who could most easily attend exams in the capital city, sometimes scheduled on short notice.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the previous system of allowing private provincial schools to administer Civil Service Exams was abolished altogether in 1392, in favor of a focus on the national Confucian Academy of Sungkyunkwan.<sup>22</sup>

Though these changes undermined provincial academic cliques of locally based masters and disciples and challenged the ability of Goryeo's old provincial elites to claim government position as a right, King Taejo's reformers didn't

mean to wholly upend the social structure, and the exam process was in no way a social levelling mechanism. In fact, almost all the scholars who took the exams came from elite families, as advanced study was expensive. Furthermore, applicants to take the national civil service exam had to submit a rather unblemished list of personal information on four generations of his ancestors and a character reference from an existing bureaucrat of at least mid-rank.<sup>23</sup>

As a result, the most accomplished Confucian *sadaebu* were still mostly well-born descendants of recognized clans. These dynamics maintained the foundations of Korea's social hierarchy, but with new rules requiring advanced exams for the top government positions, it became more likely that only the more studious and highly achieved members of these advantaged families would now rise in government.<sup>24</sup> Other members of the elite *yangban* class who did not pass the Erudite Exams were distinguished from these prestigious *sadaebu* by being called "*baekdu*," referring to the fact that they were not allowed to wear a scholar's headpiece.<sup>25</sup> What distinguished the *sadaebu* (scholar-officials) as a class unto themselves, therefore, was not their patrician background, but their commitment to study, their embrace of classic Confucianism, and their dedication to moral probity and (limited) social reform.

These dynamics maintained the foundations of Korea's strict social hierarchy, but with new rules requiring exams for most government positions, it became more likely that only the more studious and highly achieved members of these advantaged families would now rise in government.<sup>26</sup> Civil service exams became a more dominant route into high government office than before Taejo's coup, and examination dates became an increasingly feted moment to honor Joseon's Confucian foundations. In addition to the regular exam dates, early Joseon's leaders began to schedule an ever-growing number of "special exams" offered to a growing circle of eligible candidates, providing an exhortation to learning as the core of Joseon's worldview.<sup>27</sup> These civil service exams were rigorous. Schools across the country were expanded to focus on the technical skills (e.g., math and writing) and literary knowledge required for these exams.<sup>28</sup> There were "miscel-



laneous exams” on technical subjects like math, language, art and medicine (appropriate to lower level officers such as interpreters or doctors) and “Erudite Examinations” on literature and the Confucian classics (required for higher level government appointments, such as to the Ministry or Rites or Office of Remonstrance).<sup>29</sup> The Erudite Exam included a requirement to compose prose and poetry, a highly regarded skill for government literati. Only students who studied in the Sungkyunkwan national academy were allowed to take this literary exam.

Exams occurred in stages (local, national, and a final exam judged by the King himself). Exam candidates would gather in the dim, early morning and sit before a raised stage of ominous empty seats. “Just before sunrise, the examination officers appear on the stage and take seats under torchlight. Their august appearances resemble those of immortals.”<sup>30</sup> At sunrise, the heavy drums would beat, the exam questions were posted, and the exam began. Students would write until sunset, when the drums beat again. Exam answers were then gathered and rewritten in red ink to disguise the handwriting of candidates, and the anonymized answers were scrutinized by reviewers. The most successful candidates moved forward to the oral exam stage. If they succeeded again, they received appointments to government offices and palace positions. They had become a member of Joseon’s elite *sadaebu* society. Home villages were so proud of such an achievement that gates of honor, extolling the virtues of successful exam candidates, were often erected at the village entrance.<sup>31</sup>

The scholar-officials produced through this process took their social role seriously, and carefully supervised Joseon’s adherence to Confucian norms and rituals. Joseon’s Confucians were deeply moralist, believing in self-cultivation through a rationalist approach to life, respect for the wisdom of the ages, and reading of the classic texts.<sup>32</sup> They also believed that building a society based on Confucian concepts of *Yen* (benevolence towards others), *Li* (proper behavior in key relations, such as child to parent) and *Chih* (moral wisdom) depended on the ritual hegemony of a new Confucian order. People had to be educated and bolstered in their virtuous

commitments and behaviors by constant ritualized behavior in all affairs, grand and small.<sup>33</sup>

Confucian cosmology posited a natural order to both the cosmos and human affairs, whereby each person had their particular station in life (e.g., King, virtuous advisor, commoner, slave, father, son, husband or wife), and a particular set of behaviors appropriate to that station. To properly express natural hierarchies and stations in life, Taejo's philosopher kings constantly moralized about such things as proper ritual behavior, how best to venerate one's ancestors, the need to discipline street performers, and the dangers of indolent monks. These zealous reformers regulated what kind of clothes every person could wear, based on their class. Joseon residents were criticized for using "diverse, colorful silks and dyes of various colors" without concern for status, which created a confusing situation on the streets. Commoners would sometimes wear gold and silver decorations, the Confucians critiqued, further complicating things. In 1394, new codes prohibited colorful clothes and jewelry for most Joseon residents, since such garb violated the natural social order. Reinforcing a Confucian aesthetic, only government ministers or royals were allowed to wear such finery or bright, pure colors—at least in the capital city.<sup>34</sup>

In related rules, lower rank residents were prohibited from wearing hat strings decorated with jade or gold, or any fur at all. Woodcutters and enslaved persons were prohibited from riding horses or cattle in the streets of major cities, due to their low social status.<sup>35</sup> Colorful paints were prohibited on most non-governmental buildings. A typical appeal to Confucian austerity came to King Taejo's attention in June of 1394: "Oranges and other rare fruits, brocade flowers and phoenixes, gold and silver spoons, and colorful floral decorations should also be banished, except when entertaining Chinese envoys." The king agreed and made it so.<sup>36</sup>

To replace licentious disorder, Taejo's *sadaebu* promoted adherence to somber ritualized behavior in all matters. *The Book of Rites* (one of the classics of the Confucian canon, dating to China's Zhou dynasty) instructed that "to show feelings immediately and express them quickly is the way of the barbarians...To control expression of feelings suitably is

indeed what is called a rite.”<sup>37</sup> To that end, instructions in orthodox Confucian rites were distributed to scholars across the Korean peninsula, who were expected to promulgate these rites in their region. Proscribed rituals governed communication with the gods (e.g., how to pray for good weather), grand state affairs (e.g., naming crown princes or receiving envoys), special events (e.g., weddings, coming of age ceremonies) and all of daily life (e.g., how to properly drink among friends, how to speak to one’s spouse, how to install an ancestral shrine in one’s home).<sup>38</sup> King Taejo announced strict mourning rituals governing the hemp clothes people should wear while mourning and how the hemp girdle “should be worn loosely, so that it can hang down the backside.” Also, the King proclaimed that during mourning “for thirteen days, music cannot be played; for three days, slaughtering is prohibited; for one month, no weddings can take place, and for thirteen days, no ancestral rites.”<sup>39</sup> King Taejo even ordered his officials to gather together and frequently practice “the rite of the profound bow to one another,” so that officials could perfect this daily Confucian ritual.<sup>40</sup>

Such all-encompassing rites make people more virtuous, the Confucians believed. Humanity is weak and prone to error—but the rituals of propriety can keep people straight and true. Rites are more than just empty formalisms—they are guideposts on the path to one’s ethical and orderly humanity in all aspects of one’s life. Proper rituals bring the passions under control and “made the people’s minds firm and receptive to order.”<sup>41</sup> As Seong Hyeon articulated in the *Heobaek-tong chip*, (“*The Fundamental Role of Rights*”): “Rites must be cultivated...If a man lies idly and does not have instruction, he is insolent and disorderly and differs but slightly from wild animals.”<sup>42</sup>

Accordingly, Taejo’s very first royal order critiqued Goryeo’s less strict adherence to Confucian rites and ordered his new Board of Rites to “look closely into this matter and make more appropriate regulations.”<sup>43</sup> To maintain proper ritual observance, Taejo’s scholars kept meticulous records of the exact process to be followed in every important state event (e.g., royal weddings, greeting of envoys, holiday feasts and royal funerals), so as to inform future events. These records

are known as *Euigwe*, and there were thousands of them, providing an exact record of the types of foods, table settings, musical stylings, decorations, color patterns, types of incense, and all the other details that were present in every state ritual through all of the Joseon dynasty.<sup>44</sup>

To guide the unruly passions of commoners, there were also rituals for everyday aspects of life: archery contests, drinking and eating, commoner marriages, greeting friends, and school behavior. "To keep the people from becoming disorderly," schools were established across the peninsula with instruction on ritual propriety. Locals were required "to discuss their lessons with one another, in order to stimulate those who were dull or inattentive."<sup>45</sup>

Even the Chinese royalty were impressed with the strictness of Joseon's adoption of ritualized Confucianism, commonly regarding "the Korean adherents as more virtuous than themselves and refer[ing] to Korea as the country of Eastern decorum, referring to the punctiliousness with which Korean observed all phases of the doctrinal ritual."<sup>46</sup> Looking back, the late-Joseon era scholar Ou-yang Hsiu described the elegance of it all. "This is what I mean by saying that there was but one principle of government, so that rites and music reached everywhere... Ah! How perfect it was!"<sup>47</sup>

Proper rites were important to guide peoples' minds and prepare everyone for virtue and order, but in the end, Joseon's virtue had to flow from the King.<sup>48</sup> Jeong Do-jeon argued that just as Heaven is "the ancestor of the ten thousand things," so too is the King the "head of the 10,000 states." Only the virtue of the King can bring the "10,000 things" of the world under control.<sup>49</sup> To achieve such virtuous control, the ruler must behave in such an exemplary way that subjects are in awe of his rectitude and virtue, and adopt it as their own: the King must exert an "irresistible civilizing influence on his subjects."<sup>50</sup> One Taejo-era *sadaebu* (Pyeon Kye-ryang) described how "it was ruler's all-embracing benevolence that united heaven, earth and the ten thousand things that could bring everything with the radius of his civilizing influence."<sup>51</sup>

Committed to these Confucian expectations, King Taejo established a system of regular Royal Lectures so that he could hear daily disquisitions on Confucian virtues. As described in

Jeong Do-jeon's Code of 1394, these lectures were modeled on ancient Chinese practices. "His majesty employed Royal Lecturers for the first time and had them act as advisors. [His majesty] always said 'The Great Learning is for the ruler to establish a standard for the ages...' There is nothing better than this for the order of governing and the foundation of scholarship for the sovereign."<sup>52</sup>

But the regimen of daily lectures was quite demanding. The King grew busy and weary, and sometimes would miss his daily discourses. The *sadaebu* were merciless and urged the king to get back on track and show up for his lessons each day.

"But my beard and whiskers already became white," King Taejo grouched. "Should I need to attend a lecture, gathering Confucian scholars?"

"Yes," said his advisors, "you must attend daily." The Chief Royal Secretary replied that the lecturers were important not only to study the classics, but as a chance for Taejo to meet daily with the scholars. You should "keep men of integrity close so that you can benefit from their good counsel."<sup>53</sup>

King Taejo explained that he already *did* visit with scholars quite often, often walking privately in his garden with them and talking about Confucius. Did he really need to attend lectures *every day* as well? Yes, said the *sadaebu*, you do.

In our humble opinion...the reason he attends the royal lectures every day and asks questions is, first, to cultivate his virtue by meeting with good officials; second, not to be neglectful of his duties by reducing the time spent with eunuchs and royal concubines. Furthermore, he sets an example as the ruler who founded the dynasty. If Your Majesty ignores the royal lectures, your descendants will take your example as their excuse and neglect their studies.

Properly admonished, the founding lord of dynasty, who had thrown down both generals and kings, dutifully replied to his scholastic tutors that he would show up to their lectures more often.<sup>54</sup>

## Government by Remonstrance



*The quality of individual rulers is varied: there are those who are wise; those who are dull; those who are strong; and those who are weak. Therefore, it is the job of the Prime Minister to respect the goodness of the ruler; to correct the faults of the ruler; to revere the decisions of the ruler so that they are well performed; and to prevent improper royal orders from being performed so as to lead the throne to attain the state of the great balance [in state affairs]. Therefore, the role [of the prime minister] is called xiang (相), which means to “complement.”*

— *Sambongjip (The Collected Works of Sambong)*<sup>1</sup>



In some ways, King Taejo’s government was not so different that the political system of Goryeo. During Taejo’s reign, he continued to rely on the power center of *Dodang* (the Privy Council) for policy guidance and day-to-day management of government affairs, as did the kings of late Goryeo.<sup>2</sup> But even though there was no widespread social upheaval and many of the old Goryeo elites reappeared in later years, it is a mistake to discount the level of political and ideological change wrought by the coming of Joseon. There were important changes, most particularly in Taejo’s elevation of the role of serious policy and ideological debate among the ministers and scholars of the court, and in his reliance on Confucian advisors and Remonstrators to guide his own thinking and behavior.

King Taejo’s elevation of highly achieved Confucian civil officials to central roles in Government shifted power away from military strongmen and personal favorites of the *gwonmun sejok* (late Goryeo’s twin pillars of government). Taejo’s top civil officials (people like Jeong Do-jeon, Cho Chun and Nam Eun) were men who had passed rigorous exams

demonstrating their merit and technical expertise, and whose identity was bound up in the idea of becoming a Confucian “superior man.” Elevating such officials was in accord with Jeong Do-jeon’s reasoning in the *Joseon Gyeonggukjeon* (The Governance Code of 1394) which argued that an ideal state would feature a wise king, checked and advised by educated scholars, and committed to a politics of benevolence. Jeong Do-jeon’s system depended on a robust council of ministers (the *Dodang*), filled not with toadies of the day, or established old patricians, but with committed experts, willing to speak their mind and debate with each other and the king.

It is inevitable that the King will sometimes be unwise and erratic, Jeong believed. Kings are chosen by a random process of inheritance, so that you end up with both “the foolish and the wise,” “the powerful and the weak.”<sup>3</sup> But a robust Privy Council and a meritorious Prime Minister could always check and advise the King, no matter how foolish or weak. In an ideal state, these councilors would earn their position through exams and merit, so any virtuous state should give serious power to these wise advisors. In its ideal form, Jeong Do-jeon imagined that a King’s main role would be to choose the wisest and most accomplished Prime Minister possible, and the Prime Minister would then run the most important state affairs.<sup>4</sup> Though Jeong Do-jeon’s ideal state never came to be, King Taejo did substantially elevate the influence of his scholastic advisors. He also demonstrated patient respect for the virtues of a government by remonstrance, wherein the King was constantly second-guessed and admonished by punctilious Confucian censors.

In early Joseon (as in Goryeo), Taejo’s Council of top advisors was the *Dodang*. It featured a Chief State Councilor (the Prime Minister), with Left and Right Councilors to help. There were six main Ministries: Personnel, Taxation, Rites, War, Punishment and Commerce. Together, these six Ministers and the three councilors were the core of *Dodang*, joined by the Inspector General (whose job was to remonstrate and keep order among the officials) and the Censor General (whose job was to remonstrate and refute the missteps of the King).<sup>5</sup> When joined by provincial leaders, deputy ministers and lesser officials, the *Dodang* expanded to 30 to 50 members, creating

something of a “collective leadership” parliamentary system of shifting ideas, factions, and alliances.<sup>6</sup>

A unique role in this system was the Office of Remonstrance (aka, the Censorate), whose job was to criticize the king, especially for breeches of Confucian protocol.\* The *Taejo Sillok* described how officials of the Censorate, together with Office of the Inspector General, “will be responsible for rebuking and rectifying deviant behavior.”<sup>7</sup> Jeong Do-jeon described the vital importance of high officials constantly “rectifying the evils in the prince’s heart.”

When the prince is benevolent, everyone else is benevolent; when the prince is dutiful, everyone else is dutiful; when the prince is correct, everyone else is correct. Simply by rectifying the prince one can put the state on a firm basis. Thus, I say, in the job of minister, there is nothing more important than rectifying the ruler.<sup>8</sup>

It was the job of the Censorate, led by “The Grand Master of Remonstrance,”<sup>9</sup> to fulfill this important duty of royal rectification. Typically populated by young Confucian recruits, before they could be corrupted, these censorate boards had the authority to review the conduct of officials everywhere, including even the king—scouring their public and private lives for evidence of improprieties, mistakes, and misdeeds, from a Confucian perspective.<sup>10</sup>

Compared to late Goryeo, the powerful voice of highly achieved Confucian *Dodang* ministers, together with the serious role of Remonstrators, was hoped to make Taejo’s Joseon less vulnerable to ministerial malfeasance or monarchic ineptitude. Jeong Do-jeon imagined high-minded remonstrators who focused only on important matters of state and

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\* To be precise, the job of “censors” was to supervise and remonstrate lower officials, while the job of “remonstrators” was to remonstrate and rectify the King himself. See Jeong Do-jeon, “A Literary Mirror to Order the World (1395).” In Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Time*, p. 150.



Confucian protocol, and not on all the small-minded political battles of late-Goryeo. We must avoid “desultory memorials” focused on “minor infractions,” as in the past, Jeong argued. “They frighten officials of the realm through mean-spirited accusations. The minutiae of the women’s quarters, the slightest guilt through association, the trivial and the banal that are just irritating to hear.”<sup>11</sup>

In fact, King Taejo was supportive of high-minded and open discussions among his ministers, and he often took their policy debates and moral rebukes to heart. Throughout Taejo’s reign, the *Taejo Sillok* is filled with numerous examples of vigorous remonstrance activity, rebuking the king for such things as his overly generous treatment of old enemies, his support of Buddhism, his frequent trips to hot springs, his spotty attendance to royal lectures, and his excessive dedication to falconry. Taejo allowed even general members of the public to anonymously post ideas and critiques on the public notice board at night, advancing the marketplace of ideas.\* Powerful policy debates such as disagreements over where to site the new capital, whether to kill the royal Wang family members, and how to handle land awards to merit subjects, fill the records of early Joseon, and King Taejo oftentimes changed his opinion based on those debates.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the remonstrations, whether by official Remonstrators or simply by vigorous *sadaebu*, could be quite vigorous and hard to endure. One radical minister of the Board of War (Yun Sojong) was known for his fierce and unbending demands. This scholar and merit subject had many scholarly followers and used his intellectual influence to constantly call

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\* In later Joseon, public posting of ideas, appeals and critiques became a bit more of a dangerous matter. The Joseon kings erected a drum near the palace gates and the general populace could beat the drum to draw attention to a particular complaint or appeal. But the drum was always guarded, and anyone wanting to sound the drum for a public appeal had to first submit to a beating by the guard. If they were so committed as to endure the beating of the guard, they could then sound the drum (Park B., *Jeong Do-jeon: Joseon Cheogoui Sasangbeom* [*Jeong Do-jeon: The Best Ideological Outlaw of Joseon*], p. 115).

for faster progress on impossibly difficult matters like land and tax reform. "Being a man of righteous integrity and ambition, he believed that it was his duty to enlighten the king and correct wrongful customs. Whenever he spoke to the king, he was very outspoken and hid nothing." He paid little attention to his family, who often went hungry, and instead spent all day and night reading state records and Confucian histories, seeking new matters to critique and remonstrate. Soon after King Taejo rose to power, Sojong took to the floor, dramatically advocating to once again impeach and punish that old malefactor, Yi In-im. Though Yi In-im was already dead at this point, Sojong proposed that "his coffin be dug out, his corpse chopped into pieces, and the site of his house made into a swamp."<sup>13</sup>

King Taejo took a pass on that advice, but he remained always open to hearing more. One time when he disagreed with a Remonstrator, Taejo realized that the advisor was growing nervous and was clamming up, afraid of being punished. The King then gathered all his advisors and urged them to keep critiquing and reprimanding him, whenever it was called for. Taejo promised not to punish people for their thoughts and said he always wanted honest and direct advice.

Having already sincerely sought honest advice from my subjects, how can I dislike hearing about it and reproach the person who submitted it?...Punishing a subject because his advice is wrong is not the right way to seek advice. I respect and accept all the advice. Therefore, you officials should stop worrying and set your minds at ease. You should not be too cautious or suspicious because I was indignant. If there is anything related to my mistakes or the interests of the state, speak out about it in my presence.<sup>14</sup>

This system of open *Dodang* debate and government by remonstrance could be considered an early form of Joseon constitutionalism. Open speech among dozens of advisors and the constant Confucian appeal to find a "moral justification of

policies” was an early way to articulate and consider “public opinion” of the day, as expressed through diverse perspectives of officials and scholars.<sup>15</sup> Instead of submitting to “politics by private desire,” whereby the absolutist impulses of the king, or corrupt machinations of *Dodang*, governed things, government by remonstrance sought to “rationalize and guide the monarch’s legitimate authority.”<sup>16</sup> The debates of *Dodang* and the Remonstrators, together with frequent appeals of the scholars of Sungkyunkwan (and even postings at the public board), wove together diverse wills and perspectives.

Constant appeals were made to the strictures of Confucianism, to the precedents of history, to the judgements of the collective ministers or assembled scholars, to the will of the King, the needs of the people, and the Mandate of Heaven. The official historians were always present, taking note of everything that was said and done at court and collecting details for later publication. At its best, multiple opinions were woven together in open debates of ministers, *sadaebu* and Remonstrators, resulting in a kind of authoritative Confucian public sphere “which could work to check the actions of the monarch...a gradual offsetting of favoritism for royal relatives through public opinion debates of the literati.”<sup>17</sup>

Though these debates created something of a public sphere in Joseon, King Taejo was the monarch in the end, with a uniquely powerful position. In a monarchical regime, the foundation of a government by remonstrance depended ultimately on the inner virtue of the king, his willingness to consider other opinions, listen to admonishment, and to feel both humility and shame. Jeong Do-jeon described such an ideal king: “he does not hate harsh words and he does not feel satisfied with himself, nor is he reluctant to take himself down.”<sup>18</sup>

King Taejo was such a monarch. With an eye on self-improvement, he created the Office of Royal Lectures early in his rule. Jeong Do-jeon urged Taejo to keep attending these lectures so that he could always focus his mind on the deeper virtues. “How can the king work alone in high place?” Sambong asked Taejo.

Some [kings] end up loving women, music and dance, and others love hunting, and others go for building things. If you think only of what you love, you naturally become lazy and rough. Then should not the King be diligent every day?

You can understand the world if you think about it, but if you don't think about it, you lose it...So if the King does not think deeply and carefully, how can he distinguish between right and wrong?<sup>19</sup>

It went even beyond the daily lectures. Jeong Do-jeon frequently reminded Taejo that he needed to behave properly not only in public ways (such as by attending lectures) but even when he was alone and in private. That was the only way to develop deep habits of virtuous rule and to align all his actions with the broader moral universe.<sup>20</sup> To help his private virtue, King Taejo even agreed to paint his bedroom walls with all sorts of “praiseworthy and admonishing” thoughts from the ancients.<sup>21</sup>

Taejo was naturally austere and frugal—having denied his own sons quality lands as a reward for their service, and also critiquing the crown prince (his youngest son) for complaining about his cramped and hot summer house<sup>22</sup>—but Joseon's great priests of soul were relentless and always demanded a deeper and more pure virtue. During the first seven years of Joseon, the records are filled with constant advice regarding such things as restricting dance and drink, the need to discipline street performers and indolent monks, and the necessity of constant study of the ancients. “We must “restrict music from the royal palace at night,” admonished the Inspector General, in one typical advisement. “We have noticed in recent days that the sound of music in the palace has often continued all night long.” Also, we must ban female musicians from the front of the royal procession. There is also the problem that too many people “go on a drinking spree and get drunk for several days, forgetting everything, including their work.” Even some of the literati excessively “enjoyed drinking

and letting their hair grow loose.” These practices must change if Taejo was to “avoid the anger of Heaven,” his Remonstrators argued. People must be prevented “from having parties and excessively indulging in drinking”.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, officials should not be allowed to drink at sacrificial ceremonies before ancestral shrines. “Their practice of gathering together to have a drink, neglecting their duty, should be stopped, and the common people, including artisans and merchants and slaves, should also be prohibited from gathering in groups to have a drink.”<sup>24</sup> Consumption of oil and honey pastries was prohibited, outside of sacrificial rites, weddings, and toasts to longevity.<sup>25</sup> Fancy cakes and nice decorations on food were suspect. Colorful garb, nice silk clothes, gold or silver ornaments, and costly trappings for horses were all forbidden to commoners. The King himself was advised to be frugal in such displays.<sup>26</sup>

King Taejo was constantly advised to be frugal and get his heart straight—not just his actions, but his inner heart of rectitude. “Shut off unorthodox words and perverse people,” one advisor warned. “Admit men of integrity. This is the greatest among the matters related to rectitude.”<sup>27</sup> Another prayed that the King would read more inspirational poetry, seeking “royal perfection” by “guarding yourself against laxity while maintaining a sense of reverence.”<sup>28</sup>

Taejo was advised not to be idle and to minimize hunting trips. He shouldn’t dance or play cards.<sup>29</sup> Taejo loved to go hunting with falcons down by the Han River, but the Remonstrators found that to be frivolous, and constantly urged him to ban both falconry and alcohol. The King would sometimes order such bans, but always in lackluster fashion and on a temporary basis.<sup>30</sup> Once, a magistrate of Kwangju lost his office for having alcohol and music in violation of a ban.<sup>31</sup> But more often, King Taejo would relent and engage in some drinking and falconry himself. The fact is that Taejo thrilled to horseback *kyokku* games and falconry demonstrations. He loved boat rides and fanciful poetry recitals. And he enjoyed trips to the hot springs, especially when feeling ill.

The Remonstrators hated it all. One even compared some of King Taejo’s palace days to the decadence of late Goryeo, filled with drunken monarchs, dancing girls, and shifty

eunuchs.<sup>32</sup> After one falconry trip, the Office of Inspector General complained of the King “playing music in the palace until late at night.” We had thought Your Majesty had “accepted our remonstrance,” the Inspector pontificated.

However, since Your Majesty has resumed playing music as usual and making a trip to the falcon farm on the banks of the Han River, your acceptance of our remonstrance exists only in name, and we find little evidence of your sincere desire to follow our advice... Where, then, should we find our trust in you? We request that Your Majesty pay attention to our foolish words and renew your promise to graciously follow them so that your virtuous conduct may become the model for a thousand generations of your descendants.<sup>33</sup>

Sometimes the grim austerity and relentless remonstrances of the Censors would get to be too much, even for the thoroughly committed and endlessly patient King Taejo. Towards the end of his rule, in October of 1397, King Taejo decided to take a trip to the hot springs. He was a 62-year-old former warrior living in hard times and an exceptionally busy king who had toppled one dynasty and built another. His second wife had died in the previous year, and he was constantly ill. He needed some recovery.

But the Censorate didn't give an inch and submitted their critiques. You are going to Buddhist temples, hunting trips and hot springs too often, they complained. “We do not understand the real purpose of your royal excursions.” Not only that, but there have been gusty winds lately, and excessive thunder and lightning. “We dare to believe that Heaven deeply cares about Your Majesty and therefore reproaches you so that you can correct your ways.”<sup>34</sup>

But the King moved forward with his hot springs excursion. The King enjoyed the countryside travel and took a leisurely two weeks to get to the springs. The Censors travelled along with the King, but the whole time they kept complaining about Taejo's lack of daily lectures and his

relaxed Confucian standards. Furthermore, they kept asking, why is there need of so many hot springs trips in the first place?

A frustrated Taejo finally unloaded. "Why don't you all just close your mouths, pack up your things, and return home?" He raged. He commanded the Censorate to quit following the royal carriage as they had become "cumbersome and excessive."<sup>35</sup> The Censors refused and said they had to stay by the King's side and do their job of remonstrating and admonishing, even as the king relaxed into his baths. No, insisted the weary King, you must leave now, and I will enjoy my baths alone. The Censors tried one more time to stay. They offered to calm down their critiques and send some of the Remonstrators back home, but the King was firm.

"Since my decision to send them back was already made, do not make a request again."<sup>36</sup>

The Remonstrators didn't test things further, and returned home, leaving the King without remonstrance for the remainder of his journey. It was probably a wise choice by the Censors. On one other occasion, the King had grown so tired of a Remonstrator constantly complaining about abuses on a public works project that Taejo finally ordered the Remonstrator to go out and do the work himself. The Remonstrator was commanded to do hard labor on the southern gate of Hangyang, so that he might show everyone the proper way of doing it.<sup>37</sup>

King Taejo stayed at the hot springs for what must have been eight glorious days without admonishment and took five days on the return journey. The minute he returned to the palace, on March 26, 1398, the Censors rushed to his side, impeaching again.

Min Chingui wore everyday robes after his mother died, they complained. The King exiled the offender and banned him from office forever.

Cho Ido and No Sik secretly set up some salt cauldrons, but destroyed them before inspection to avoid taxes, they reported. Taejo stripped them of their appointments and sent them into exile.

Yuk Chin used too many horses on his trip to Jeolla province. King Taejo stripped him of his title.

Several other malefactors of various small crimes were identified, and all were paddled, but Yuk Chin—the Jeolla horseman—this one Taejo forgave. King Taejo recalled how Chin had once gathered beautiful peonies down on some islands in Jeolla province, and had presented them to the King, pleasing him. Remembering this pleasant flowery gift, the King pardoned Chin and bestowed him with a fine horse.<sup>38</sup>

From the pampas grass of Hamhung to the peonies of Jeolla, King Taejo always seemed to love the sweet things of nature more than the hard politics of the capital.





**“His Thunderous and Earth-Shaking Reputation  
Spread All Over the World”**



*A blue dragon and a white tiger on his left and right,  
Like a mountain tiger crouched on a stone,  
He came from a family of wealth and high position.  
Generation after generation of great commanding generals.  
His thunderous and earth-shaking reputation  
spread all over the world,  
The four oceans could not hold back his unifying measures.  
With the head of his three-foot sword, he pacified the state.  
With the end of his whip, he settled Heaven and Earth.*

— *Poem on Back of Enshrined Portrait of King Taejo*<sup>1</sup>



When the boy Yi Seong-gye was born in 1335, Yuan forces occupied the northern Korean peninsula and Goryeo was a subjugated vassal state. As General Yi become a military general his feeble country suffered persistent invasions from Jurchen raiders, Red Turban rebels, and hundreds of Japanese pirate raids. But as Taejo rose to become King, Joseon took its place as an independent nation of consequence in East Asia, with stable borders and able to conduct diplomacy on its own terms. Not a single Ming or Yuan soldier occupied Joseon territory in Taejo's reign, and Japanese pirating attacks came to a near cease. "If the monarch reads this, he will think of a god who protects the border," commended King Sejo (Joseon's seventh king and the great grandson of King Taejo) when he read about Taejo's achievement of a stable peace in *Songs of the Dragons*.<sup>2</sup>

These were no easy achievements, for during his reign, King Taejo would have to resolve several uneasy border situations with the Ming dynasty, would have to win the loyalties of long rebellious northern peoples, and would face

several invasions from Japanese pirates. In its time, each challenge was met.

*Managing the Ming Border*

The complicated issue of border relations with the Ming Dynasty had catapulted Yi Seong-gye to power and that issue did not go away with his accession. In fact, although Yi Seong-gye had turned back from crossing the Yalu in 1388, Ming authorities were well-aware of Yi's popularity and power in these northern lands and remained deeply suspicious of Joseon's intentions. Ming leaders had their own eyes set on claims to the vast lands north of the Korean peninsula, and they couldn't have liked it that so many tribal peoples there seemed enthralled with the magic of King Taejo.

As *Songs of the Dragons* records, Taejo was a homegrown hero of the north who had protected many of its people from Japanese and Yuan invasions. During the days of his military campaigns, many Jurchen captains of northern territories had served with Yi and become close allies.<sup>3</sup> Though the General had now become king in the southwestern capital, "the people of the East longed for him when he came to the West."<sup>4</sup> Also, as the *Songs of the Dragons* describe, when Yi Seong-gye returned from Wihwado, a thousand Jurchen warriors had quickly mobilized to join his march on the Goryeo capital. That fact was surely not lost on the Ming rulers.

*He sang of righteousness and led the troops,  
And the people gathered from far away;  
Sacred virtue ran deep.  
And even the Northern outlanders did not  
waver.<sup>5</sup>*

These northern "outlanders" were an important part of King Taejo's power base.<sup>6</sup> To solidify their loyalty, Taejo gave many of these peoples title and power in his new order. The *Taejo Sillok* lists forty Jurchen who served under Yi Seong-gye and describes how several reached chiliarch (*cheonho*) and myriarch (*manho*) posts in his army.<sup>7</sup> Some Jurchen leaders were granted court titles<sup>8</sup> and there were several Yuan-origin

individuals or ethnic Uighurs who served in Taejo’s government as well, becoming interpreters, envoys, educators, doctors, military officers, and even merit subjects.<sup>9</sup>

This all meant that King Taejo had a good foundation to grow Joseon’s influence in the fluid territories along the Yalu River. Vast, loosely governed lands there would be useful in addressing Joseon’s land distribution problems. Mining and lumber resources were rich in these areas. The area was also an important transit corridor. Joseon histories sometimes refer to the northern borderlands as the “East Eight Posts” region due to its eight abandoned courier relay stations, originally constructed by Mongol forces. Even with Mongol retreat, the “East Eight Posts” remained the most dependable land route between east Joseon and central China.<sup>10</sup>

But such regional assets also meant tense border threats, as Ming China had all the same reasons for wishing to control these attractive lands wherein clear borders between dynasties had never solidified. It made for an ungoverned contact zone, characterized by dangerously delicate Ming-Joseon relations. Whereas Ming leaders openly sought to absorb the land and peoples in areas south of the Yalu all the way to the border of South Hamyeong province, Joseon leaders frequently implied that lands north of the Yalu, extending all the way to Yodong and Liaoyang actually belonged to Joseon.<sup>11</sup> Instability was fueled by the mutual collapse of the Goryeo and Yuan dynasties, which unsettled all existing patterns and fostered fierce competition for the loyalties of Jurchen, Mongol, Han, Korean and Japanese peoples living across the northern areas.<sup>12</sup>

The unpredictability made for challenging times for local residents. Jurchen tribes feared that Korean authorities would raid their villages and take their wives and children if they submitted to Ming and crossed the Yalu. Similarly, enslaved persons and women living in Liaodong often fled south to Joseon to avoid being taken as tribute to Ming. Villages on both sides of the river were often raided by competing powers. Seeking some kind of stability, many Jurchen peoples embraced the new Joseon regime, intermarrying into ethnic Korean clans, serving in the Joseon army, and paying tax to Joseon officials. At the same time, others were lured across the

Yalu by Ming representatives, crossing into the Ming sphere to join trading posts and military garrisons there. It led to an unsteady situation of constant threats of military action by Ming versus Joseon, to which Taejo had to respond.

Ming forces had built several strong fortresses and garrisons along the East Eight Route north of the Yalu. But King Taejo had some strategies of his own. He prepared militarily. He expanded granaries all along the northern border to store supplies for soldiers. Much of the harvest of several provinces was dedicated to this task.<sup>13</sup> He awarded Jurchen chieftains with military titles and trained them with his army, and awarded them plots of land, clothes, and other treasures from the capital. He spoke of lands south of the Yalu and Tumen rivers—which notably included his own hometown area in the northeast—as being within the “fence” of Joseon, promising to defend the peoples there. He sent representatives of the crown to the northern region to help organize villages into self-defense networks while also steadily expanding the number of central army soldiers responsible for defending the area.

Where once Goryeo had relied mostly on local strongmen (*Hyangni*) to defend their own patch of land, Taejo advanced a principle of centrally managed national defense and built an ever-expanding national defense network.\* But this claim also meant people of the northern region were increasingly subject to Joseon law, including expectations of military service if needed. Taejo also sent royal envoys to the northeast to monitor iron and weapon production, and to encourage more of both. Finally, he supported the internal migration of Koreans to the north, where they were offered lower taxes and plots of land to farm.<sup>14</sup>

Other strategies included convincing the Jurchen to replace raids on neighboring villages with more stable trade, and he opened trading posts to that end. Jurchen villages that

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\* By King Sejong's reign (1418–450) (King Taejo's grandson), 22,000 central soldiers and 60,000 sailors were regularly deployed to the northern border areas. Kim, B. *Wangjeongui Jogeon: Damronuiro Ikneun Joseonsidaesa [The Conditions of Monarchy: Reading Joseon History Through Discourse]*, p. 170

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agreed to voluntarily submit to Joseon rule were offered new farming tools, land titles, lower taxation rates, and even wives, sent from the southern peninsula.<sup>15</sup> It was all a strategy to weave the northern Jurchen into Joseon's sphere of influence.

The Jurchen leader Yi Chiran, Yi Seong-gye's blood brother and now a high military officer in Joseon, was a useful envoy in these causes. Yi Chiran had long worked to deliver his clan's resources to Yi Seong-gye's cause. Now that he was a military officer and merit subject, Chiran played a key role in recruiting other Jurchen clans to submit to peaceful co-existence with Taejo's Joseon. Right after King Taejo's rise, Yi Chiran was posted to the north, and tasked to build schools, open trading posts, and spread the word about King Taejo's virtues. King Taejo directed Chiran:

...to change [the Jurchen's] practice of letting out their hair, to cause them to wear hats, change the animalistic customs and accept propriety, and to have them marry people of our country, to impose on them the same corvée labor and taxation as ordinary subjects, to make them ashamed to be led by their chief and to make them all want to become subjects of the kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

This was exactly the kind of development that Ming rulers were most afraid of,<sup>17</sup> so they kept growing their own forces along the border. In this tense situation, King Taejo built up a significant foreign intelligence network, sending secret missions into Liaodong and its regional capital, Shenyang. These agents would survey military installations, reach out to the locals, and gather information on Ming movements. In one case, Joseon monks paid blind beggars to travel across the Yalu, spying on the situation.<sup>18</sup>

On one occasion, alleged Joseon spies disguised as Japanese merchants caused a commotion by raping and plundering Liaodong locals. They were captured by Ming authorities, who then demanded that King Taejo explain why he was sending spies into Liaodong. Taejo claimed that these ruffians were definitely not his agents but were simply

Japanese “pirating types” who were lying about their identity so as to minimize punishment in Ming. The truth was hard to ferret.

In March of 1393, the Ming Emperor sent word that the constant (alleged) incursions of Korean spies and other intrigues had to stop. The imperial letter was read out loud to King Taejo in his court, as he bowed his head to receive the Emperor’s word. How come “the King of the Eastern tribes” keeps insulting us? Hongwu demanded. “You lured some ruffians from among the residents of Zhejiang to collect information on our domestic affairs and report to you.” Moreover, you bribed five hundred people with treasure and rice so they would cross the Yalu into your lands. “No crime can be more serious than this.” The Ming Emperor said he was a peaceful man, but he would wage war if all the defectors weren’t returned and Taejo didn’t account for himself. “I intend to turn swords into ploughshares...I also desire all my military generals to enjoy peace, traveling around in light clothes and riding fine horses. Why are the people of Goryeo anxious to fight?”<sup>19</sup>

King Taejo was angry at the Ming insult and complained to his ministers that the Emperor “make[s] endless demands on a small state such as ours, which were all unreasonable. Even now, he reprimands us for things we have little to do with and threatens war against us. How is it different from intimidating a child?”<sup>20</sup> But Taejo was the cautious general who had returned from Wihwado, so he offered soft words back to Hongwu. “Your stern instruction sounds very clear, and your awesome authority is quite palpable,” Taejo wrote. “Overwhelmed with fear, I would like to appeal to you.”<sup>21</sup> He apologized for the poor condition of many tribute horses Joseon had sent to Ming, and craftily explained that the gift horses were probably so weak only because the emperor asked for so many horses and Joseon was running out of good ones to give.<sup>22</sup>

Taejo also claimed innocence regarding any spies or tricks to lure people to defect across the Yalu. Travelling Koreans offering fabrics and other products to Liaodong residents were not trying to lure people south, he claimed; they were simply giving gifts “out of courtesy and respect.”

Most people who left Liaodong had not been “lured,” but were simply ethnic Koreans who had been displaced during hard times, and who now wanted to return to their homes now that things were stable in Joseon. Taejo offered to return all people of Jurchen or Han descent who had crossed into Joseon, but he would not return the Koreans.<sup>23</sup> One hundred and forty-seven households of Jurchen descent (504 people, total) were rounded up after a search, shackled, and turned over to the Ming Military Commission in Liaodong.<sup>24</sup>

The Ming Emperor likely grumbled at the mixed reply, but Taejo’s bit of deft diplomacy was enough to prevent military escalation. Still, in July of 1393, Ming made their continuing dissatisfaction clear. A Joseon envoy in the Ming capital was charged with disrespect to the Emperor. He had bent his head when visiting the Emperor, instead of sitting perfectly upright, according to Ming protocol. Hongwu had this envoy (Yi Yeom) beaten with a heavy stick until he nearly died. Yi Yeom was barely revived with medicine and sent back to Joseon. But Hongwu would give him no horses, so he had to walk all the way from Nanjing to Joseon. As the haggard envoy finally left Liaodong and crossed into Joseon, an order from Ming was announced: “Let no envoys from Joseon cross our border... From this day forward, Koreans are not allowed to enter.”<sup>25</sup> As Ming beefed up its border fortresses in the coming months, Joseon sent a series of envoys to the border, but all were denied entrance.<sup>26</sup> Tensions ran high.

Six months later (January 1394), things blew up again when Ming authorities reported the capture of a secret guerilla force of Korean invaders. They claimed they had captured a Korean commando named Chong Kalmae, who had sailed along China’s Liaodong peninsula with seventeen ships and 629 soldiers, landing now and again to attack and plunder villages. When captured, this alleged commando blamed it all on a Joseon magistrate who had ordered him to disguise his ships as Japanese merchant vessels so that he could launch surprise attacks on Ming.<sup>27</sup> The Ming emperor complained to King Taejo, demanded an accounting, and asked Taejo to turn over the military officer who ordered this attack. Ming troops began staging armed demonstrations right across the Yalu River.



Again, King Taejo was outraged that Joseon was being accused and threatened with war. But still he kept his harsh thoughts from Hongwu. Instead, Taejo delivered two different replies to Ming, providing lengthy and polite responses to all their accusations.<sup>28</sup> His message began with the equivalent of a diplomatic prostration. Hearing your accusations, I am “ashamed to the point of sweating,” Taejo described. “I am in awe of your mighty power. I was fortunate to live in an enlightened age and to benefit from your noble instructions on multiple occasions.”

Then he got down to the heart of the matter, explaining that “I do not know who Chong Kalmae is.” Taejo maintained that Joseon had no relationship with this raider and explained that it would be senseless for Joseon to send sneaky bandits to slaughter and plunder people in Liaodong. My own people would hate me for instigating war with Ming, Taejo claimed. “How can I recklessly provoke you? ...I am not so senseless as wood or stone, why should I dare to cause trouble and bring disaster to myself for no reason, exhausting my spirit and energy?”

In addition, Taejo apologized for the constant errors in style and tone in Joseon’s diplomatic communications with the Ming suzerain. Taejo claimed that all his mistakes were because he was a simple man from the north who didn’t know refined customs and etiquette, not due to scheming or a desire to send tricky insults. Joseon is “located far from the advanced culture, [and] is incapable of communicating properly. Limited in knowledge and behind in education, we barely know only how to express ourselves. The mistakes made in the composition of memorials, therefore, had to do with our ignorance of proprieties and nothing else.” The Joseon King promised that he would learn to do better. “I believe that your severe reprimands were intended to make me a better person and your kind persuasion motivated to raise me with affection, which is similar to the words of a parent who raises a child.”

Taejo’s deft replies and promises were enough to keep Ming from entering the Korean peninsula. Ming forces kept brandishing their weapons just across the Yalu, but still the Emperor wavered. Waging war in the rugged mountains of Joseon, far from supplies, was a demanding and dangerous

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proposition after all. It had taken the Mongol's powerful army thirty years to fully subjugate the peninsula. So the uneasy peace continued.

Then, on April 4, 1394, another Chinese envoy arrived at the Joseon capital. King Taejo led his officials, dressed in formal Ming robes, to the city gate and received the envoy's carriage with full honors. The envoy stood up tall and announced that King Taejo would receive the Emperor's message. King Taejo bowed his head to the ground. The envoy unrolled the imperial scroll and read the Emperor's words.

In recent days our armed forces at the borders in Ganpu and other places captured five bandits, including one named Hue De. They stated in their depositions that they had been sent by the [Joseon] officials in charge of border defense to plunder our coastal areas and gather information.

It was more of the same. Once again, the Emperor ordered Taejo to review the names of all the people Ming claimed were involved in this banditry and to send all those people across the Yalu to Ming authorities. After interrogation, Hue De had given up several alleged culprits' names, the Emperor said to Taejo. "You shall transport them under escort and hand them over to us. The ones you shall send are twenty-five in total."<sup>29</sup>

The Ming emperor ended with another threat of war, saying that he was only holding off because of his humanity and because the difficulties of war in rugged Korea were serious. "I wished to raise an army immediately to chastise [King Taejo], but refrained from acting hastily because my larger army, once crossing the border, would certainly harm numerous lives. Besides [Joseon] is surrounded by sea on three sides and mountains on one side. It's land, being rugged, stretches out several thousand li and therefore forms a natural fortress." Still, "If Yi and his people continue to be arrogant and insulting, I will have no choice but to raise an army and to chastise them."<sup>30</sup>

Though Taejo was frustrated with constant Ming allegations, he tried to make peace. He denied that Joseon had

anything to do with border banditry and agreed to punish any such thieves they might capture in Joseon. He also raised a complaint of his own, mentioning the many times that his own envoys in the border area, even ones sent to welcome visiting Ming dignitaries, were kidnapped and taken by force into Liaodong by Ming troops. He refused to turn over the 25 people named by Ming (as he claimed they had nothing to do with events), but he did give the Chinese envoys some silk robes and five eunuchs to take back to the Ming Emperor.

The Chinese envoys were frustrated with the stalemate, but still Taejo's ministers prepared a fine farewell party for them at a royal pavilion. During the feast, one of the Chinese envoys became so drunk that he grew belligerent, complaining that Ming wasn't treated well by Joseon. "Tell me why you treat me now as if I were nobody?" He shouted out at Joseon's ministers. He tore off the robe they had gifted him and threw it on the ground, stomping on it while shouting out. "I would rather die here than see the emperor wearing this shabby looking robe!" Then the envoy pulled out a knife and began to stab himself in the neck.

Most Joseon ministers dashed away to get out of the belligerent envoy's reach, but an official in charge of entertainment rushed to grab the envoy's arm and stopped him from hurting himself or others. He offered kind and soothing words to the drunk envoy, calming him down. King Taejo ordered a Security Council Commissioner to rush and get a nice, new robe for the envoy. Things calmed down enough for the envoy to leave in one piece, wearing the gifted robes of Joseon.<sup>31</sup>

But the situation didn't improve. The Ming Emperor would not accept Taejo's explanations and continued to doubt his loyalty. Threats of war lingered. Things grew so bad that King Taejo decided to send his highly achieved son, Yi Bang-won, to Ming personally, ordering him to meet and placate the emperor. Yi Bang-won was intelligent, charming, and well trained in Confucian classics, so he could hold his own in the Ming court. Moreover, sending King Taejo's son into the mouth of the dragon was a sign of loyalty and respect to the Emperor. Taejo was worried for Bang-won's health and safety on the

long journey to China, and wept as his son left, but this option seemed best.<sup>32</sup>

To further demonstrate his loyalty, while Yi Bang-won was travelling to China, King Taejo announced an order to control the Korean monks who Ming authorities alleged were behind so much of the proselytizing, spying and unrest in the north. “Henceforth, the monks frequenting the Northeast Region shall be beheaded, with no exception,” Taejo ordered.<sup>33</sup> Just as well, anyone else illegally crossing the border would also lose their head.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps these orders would smooth things for a successful visit of his son, Bang-won, in the court of Hongwu.

Yi Bang-won’s trip to the Ming would last five months, there and back again. With him was that aged minister Jo Ban, whose land-theft case had catalyzed the fall of the Yi In-im faction years previously.<sup>35</sup> When Bang-won arrived at the Ming court, he found great success. He met personally with the Emperor on three occasions and also met the Emperor’s fourth son while traveling on the road. He always displayed the perfect etiquette. Records show that “he stood there with gentle words and decorum...The food was served, and it was extremely rich and clean.”<sup>36</sup> When he met with the Emperor, Yi Bang-won was able to address all sorts of questions about alleged Joseon spying, alleged Korean raids on border villages, Ming’s refusal to receive Chinese envoys, and Joseon’s own complaints about kidnappings of Koreans into Liaodong.

Everyone’s feathers were rubbed the right way and by the end of Bang-won’s visit, the Emperor was so reassured that he told Bang-won not to worry about any invasion. He also said Korean envoys could resume coming to Ming. The Emperor actually called Yi Bang-won the “Crown Prince” of Joseon several times, a point which Bang-won portentously did not correct. He was sent back home with full honors, a crown prince in Ming eyes if not his own father’s.<sup>37</sup>

King Taejo followed this successful visit with a memorial of appreciation to the Emperor, apologizing for any previous errors and for the improper bowing and other poor etiquette of his envoys. The Ming emperor was so impressed with the sincerity of the King and his son that border relations stabilized for some time, and Joseon was actually allowed to

send three or four diplomatic envoy missions to the Ming every year going forward, rather than just one every three years as Hongwu had originally proposed some time ago.<sup>38</sup> Things were settling into mutual recognition by Joseon and Ming that that Yalu and Tumen rivers defined a firm border between the two polities. King Taejo was finally achieving a centuries-long goal of Korean kingdoms from Silla to Goryeo to secure claims to fluid northeastern lands up to the Yalu and Tumen rivers. Ming's Hongwu emperor may have been hungry to swallow up all that Yuan had once possessed in territories south of these rivers, but King Taejo's military prowess and diplomatic skills had built a northern fence for Joseon.<sup>39</sup>

*Calming the Southern Seas*

The northern border with Ming wasn't the only border threat to Joseon. King Taejo had to carve a space for Koreans to thrive between both the colossus of Ming and the marauders of Japan. Relations with Ming required deft diplomacy, but the chaotic piracy of the Japanese islands called for a more blunt response. One of Taejo's royal envoys to Daemado (i.e., Tsushima, a hothouse of piracy activity) described Taejo's firm commitment. "When our king ascended the throne, he took pity on the innocent people who were suffering from the damage and decided to save them by exterminating the wicked pirates."<sup>40</sup>

Accordingly, in his first royal edict, Taejo ordered serious improvement to his navy. He wanted to create a regional defense system along the coast, with naval units to both the right and left of Gyeonggi province (the capital city province). But the coastline was simply too long to constantly defend from surprise piracy attacks everywhere, so Taejo decided to send a navy to proactively search out and destroy pirate strongholds.<sup>41</sup> Since Joseon was united and growing stronger, while pirates remained divided among Japanese islands at war with each other, Taejo was confident in success.

He ordered his commanders quickly to build a powerful navy that could "float in the sea and arrest the Japanese."<sup>42</sup> In February of 1389, Park Wi set sail with 100 warships for Daemado. There, he sought out pirate strongholds and used

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gunpowder weapons to incinerate 300 Japanese ships. His troops stormed the island, but the Japanese pirates fled to higher land, and most couldn't be found. Still, Joseon had eliminated hundreds of enemy boats and proven its ability to take the fight to the pirates.<sup>43</sup> With this victory and the diplomatic successes with Ming, stability spread along Joseon's coastal areas.

Part of the reason for Joseon's success against pirates was that Japan was also moving towards more effective central rule (the North and South dynasties finally united in 1392, the same year Yi Seong-gye ascended to the throne). The increasingly centralized warlords of Japanese islands didn't appreciate ungovernable pirate forces in hidden coves and harbors any more than Joseon did.<sup>44</sup> Instead, the rulers of both Joseon and the Japanese islands wished to turn the pirates into regularized sailors and legitimate maritime merchants. To that end, after Joseon's anti-piracy campaigns, hundreds of Koreans taken prisoner in previous pirate raids were returned by Japanese warlords in 1394<sup>45</sup> and trade relations were opened up through the Korean port of Busan. Japanese merchants would trade local products, timber, silver, fish, and stoneware for Korean furs, ginseng, cloth, falcons, and hunting dogs.

Though the threat of piracy was dramatically reduced thereafter, another serious attack did occur. In August of 1396, about 120 Wako pirate ships appeared in Gyeongsang-do. They defeated local Joseon forces, killed commander Lee Chun-sa, captured several cities (including Pyeongseong) and began to plunder. This invasion led to a long series of cat-and-mouse battles between pirate raiders and the Joseon navy. King Taejo ordered his naval commanders to mobilize all the battleships of five provinces and to prepare a savage assault. Taejo had no desire to fight another war but explained that he had no option.

Since I ascended the throne, I have never recklessly mobilized the military, trying to follow the precedents set by the old sages, and the reason was that I was afraid people might be agitated. [But] these days, despicable barbarians from islands were mad

enough to dare invade our coasts...I am afraid that there will be no peace within our borders unless we eliminate them in one stroke by attacking them both at sea and on land.<sup>46</sup>

The King went to the south gate to see his naval Commander, Sahyeong, off personally. He bestowed Sahyeong with the symbolic battle axe of war, a saddled horse, armor, a helmet, a fine bow and a medicine box. "Your personality is austere and awe-inspiring," Taejo said to the commander. "The enemy will be scared to death."<sup>47</sup>

The battles were touch-and-go for a time. Both the Korean navy and the Japanese pirates had some successes. King Taejo was merciless in his demands for victory and refused audience with his commanders who lost a battle. In fact, those that lost battles were paddled 100 times, while those that fled a battle had their faces painted black and were beheaded.<sup>48</sup>

Joseon's navy wore the pirates down in the end. One unusual unit of the Joseon navy were Taejo's "stone throwers." In earlier years, while travelling the countryside, King Taejo would sometimes come across stone fights. These were occasions where people would line up on opposite sides of a creek or ditch and proceed to wage a friendly stone war against each other, driving the other side off the field by pelting them with rocks and boulders. Taejo enjoyed watching these brutal affairs.<sup>49</sup> One time, the King even ordered some of his military commanders to participate a stone fight, which went on all afternoon, until the sun set. Many of the stone-fighters were killed or wounded that day.<sup>50</sup> In April of 1394 the King decided that stone-throwing warriors had potential. He created a "stone-throwing" army unit and ordered them to train and perform with other military units.<sup>51</sup> This unit came in useful against the Japanese pirates. On a few different occasions, special attack squads of Joseon warships were sent to hunt pirates, featuring trained units of armored stone throwers, who must have acted like small canon fire against the enemy ships.<sup>52</sup>

Joseon warships and stone throwers attacked the pirates relentlessly, even assaulting their hometowns, until the pirates were ready to surrender. There were several different

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occasions of surrender at the end of 1396 and early months of 1397. One mass surrender occurred after impoverished and famished pirate leaders requested a small bit of land on Korea's southern coast where they could survive. “We will not dare to betray you and will also prevent other thieves from what they are doing,” the pirate leaders promised. King Taejo found these surrender terms acceptable. When the local Joseon magistrate showed up, all the pirates “took off their armor and bowed down, standing in a line and awaiting orders.”<sup>53</sup>

Some days later, the Japanese pirate chief (Kyuroku) was allowed an audience with King Taejo. Kyuroku presented a long sword and saber to the King, who then bestowed a robe and fine hat upon the pirate captain. Taejo also organized a grand banquet for the Japanese chief and his attendants, where Kyuroku again submitted and swore his loyalty to King Taejo. During the banquet, Taejo awarded several Japanese officers with government titles and bestowed silk robes and caps upon them, speaking words of comfort. Only days before many of these defeated Japanese raiders had been enemies of Joseon, famished and adrift, on the verge of death. Now they had a new and honorable future in Joseon. “Awestruck, Kyuroku dared not look up at the King, but only broke out in a sweat and shed tears.”<sup>54</sup>

To lure the surrender of pirating crews, chieftains were commonly given new titles in Joseon, in addition to silk, silver belts, fine clothes, rice, soybeans and paper.<sup>55</sup> Even though many of these raiders might have previously plundered and killed Joseon residents, surrendering pirate units were often granted land access on Joseon's coast to farm and fish. It is a necessary step to win the support of poor island people who have faced “a life of tragedy due to lack of land and food,” said Taejo's son, King Taejong. This is how we avoid a cycle of anger and constant coastal invasions. “It is well worth it to become an ideal world.”<sup>56</sup>

Some pirates were allowed to return to Japan, with promises to refrain from marauding. As for the warlords of Daemado, King Taejo implored them to get piracy from their islands under control, or face invasion from Joseon. Southern people of Joseon are begging for my help, Taejo said. “They



have repeatedly made requests that battleships be prepared on a massive scale and that our armed forces be dispatched to exterminate the bandits from the islands and thus remove the trouble by the roots.” But Taejo wanted to avoid this kind of ongoing warfare. He promised that if only the Lord of Daemado would suppress “the wicked gang” of pirates, then “your beautiful honor and righteous spirit will be known to the whole world and the friendly relationship between [our] two countries will last forever.”<sup>57</sup>

In reply, the Japanese general on Daemado sent several horses as tribute to the Joseon court and promised that he would henceforth control piracy on his island.

I have no intention of betraying your great grace...In [the past] Kansai’s strong servants disobeyed the order of the Joseon dynasty and invaded the country with reckless military force...The people of [our] periphery launched their own enemy ships every year to plunder the men and women of the coastal waters of your country. They burned the Buddha. This was not ordered by the national government, but now our land is unified, and the sea and land are calm and quiet, and the people are afraid of the law. In the future, we will punish pirates and send captive Koreans back and our coastal waters will be managed without problems.<sup>58</sup>

By the end of King Taejo’s reign, Japanese piracy had almost disappeared, and flourished only in small and hidden places like Ulleungdo—a small and isolated volcanic island for north of the Japanese archipelago.

### *Paying Tribute to Joseon*

As existential border threats of Ming invasions and massive pirate raids were brought under control, space was opened for what Joseon royals called “*hyangwpha*,” a concept describing less elevated persons “submitting to edification” in the

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presence of the Joseon monarch.<sup>59</sup> This term described how Joseon leaders viewed the transformative process whereby a morally superior king supposedly had a “civilizing” or edifying influence on foreign peoples who came in contact with him.<sup>60</sup> In this way of thinking, King Taejo had achieved so much, and his virtue was so evident, that the process northern peoples and pillaging Japanese raiders submitting to edification was now inevitable.

Certainly, there was evidence that many Jurchen people now recognized the authority of the King of Joseon. A steady parade of northern chieftains came to Taejo’s palace and bowed down to him, offering tribute and praise. As *Songs of the Dragons* describes: “Great being his repute, the Jurchen came to court; they did not contend with quarrels for primacy.”<sup>61</sup> Hundreds of Jurchen had submitted to Yi Seong-gye in the late days of Goryeo before he even became King<sup>62</sup> and now came more. The Woduli, Walong, and Jurchen peoples all came to Joseon with frequent gifts of local products.<sup>63</sup> In 1393, one Jurchen chief gave a live tiger as a New Year’s gift celebrating Taejo’s accession. Another gift from the north was a baby black bear, which Taejo raised in the back yard of his palace, together with the tiger, peacocks, and other wild things.<sup>64</sup> The *Taejo Sillok* describes the constant stream of tribute:

Tribes of different customs across the river [Tumen] and other areas reaching as far as Juzhou heard the rumor and admired our culture. So they personally visited our court or sent their sons and brothers or voluntarily made themselves retainers to attend our king. Some of them requested public employment, migrated to our territory, or presented their local products, and people like them formed long lines on the road. If their mares gave birth to foals of outstanding quality, they vied with one another to present them to us.<sup>65</sup>

One time after Taejo returned from the hot springs, a Jurchen leader presented the king with two fine bows made out of

horn. It was bittersweet for the king who loved to hunt, but who was now so old and busy that he hardly ever could do it. "If I were a general as I used to be, I would accept your gift," Taejo said. "What would I do with it now?"<sup>66</sup> The King then said he was still ill and too weary from his trip to the hot springs and would not be able to meet properly with his northern visitor for a few more days.

Many northern leaders, after presenting tribute and loyalty to King Taejo, were given fine clothes, land and military title and many turned up later among the ranking and powerful clans of Joseon. Others became accomplished diplomats and military heroes.<sup>67</sup> Over time, the northern provinces in this way were knit ever closer into the Joseon cultural sphere.

When various Joseon elites travelled north to visit these lands, the *Taejo Sillok* describes how more and more Jurchen peoples wanted to meet the Joseon officials, hosting feasts, and doing hunts together. Joseon legal codes came to be adopted up north, and when riverside people of the Yalu had disputes, the Joseon government adjudicated between parties, "either putting them into jail or punishing them by beating them with the paddle, but none dared to complain against our military commanders on the border."<sup>68</sup> Schools were spread across the north, and southern educators arrived to provide teaching on Joseon culture and the Confucian classics.

By 1395, the *Taejo Sillok* was describing the results of Joseon's cultural imperialism in the north. "As a result, [the Jurchen] abandoned their custom of having their hair loose and wore hats and belts. They also changed their barbarous behavior and practiced proper manners. They intermarried with our people, performed corvée service, and paid taxes just as our people did."<sup>69</sup> The official records list 27 Jurchen chiefs and tribal leaders by name ("...and so on") who submitted to King Taejo in his first four years of rule.<sup>70</sup>

Sometimes royal envoys from King Taejo would visit the northern tribes in the field. During these visits, locals would bow at attention while the royal envoy read words of edification from the King. Then they would be expected to get to their knees and ritually bow several times towards King Taejo's location.<sup>71</sup>

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As for King Taejo, whenever he paid a personal visit to his ancestral tombs in the mountains of the Northeast, the *Taejo Sillok* reports that “the Jurchens who lived across the river vied with one another to see him, and those who were unable to come in time returned home shedding tears. The Jurchens still become emotional remembering the king’s generous treatment of them in olden days whenever they have talks over drinks with our border commanders.”<sup>72</sup> *Songs of the Dragons* similarly described the King’s edifying influence on supposedly less civilized culture along the border.

*His Majesty and graciousness having spread,  
Those with untied locks put on caps and belts:  
From that time to this day,  
His profound virtue has overwhelmed their  
hearts.*<sup>73</sup>

Japanese residents of the southern islands also came to respect Joseon’s new strength and cultural influence. When the Japanese pirates surrendered, they were described as “submitting foreigners,” and were given titles and new lands as they were assumed to now live under the edifying influence of King Taejo.<sup>74</sup> There were many such tribute visits from Japanese delegations, bringing local products and swords, and promising respect to Joseon. In the fall of 1393, one envoy arrived with twenty fine swords, which Taejo distributed to his high officials.<sup>75</sup> Japanese island chieftains frequently arrived in Joseon court, offering local products and imploring for peace and Taejo’s benevolence, saying “we express our respect to you from a distant place.”<sup>76</sup> Through all of Taejo’s reign, visit after visit arrived, offering constant tribute of local products.<sup>77</sup> One tribute envoy gave Taejo a monkey, which he kept in the back yard with his tiger, bear and peacocks.<sup>78</sup>

Even the alleged son of a deposed King of Ryuku (Rakaon) came to live in Joseon and submit to Taejo, together with his twelve subordinates. Sitting in his Hall of Diligent Government, King Taejo received the former royalty of Ryuku on the April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1397. The King bestowed Rakaon with a “silk robe, a ramie robe, a cap, a silver belt, and a pair of men’s wooden-

sole deer skin boots.” Each of the 12 attendants also received a ramie robe.<sup>79</sup>

Other tribute streamed in. The unruly Tamna island—holdout of Yuan influence—gave fine horses to the King, and Taejo reciprocated with gifts of silk, wine, and loads of rice.<sup>80</sup> An envoy from Siam arrived in 1394. Though they had lost most of their tribute treasure to pirates during their long journey, they were able to offer Taejo “a sword, armor, copperware, and two dark-skinned servants.”<sup>81</sup>

On the first day of the New Year in 1398, the final year of King Taejo’s reign, envoys from around the region showed up as manifestations of Joseon’s influence over northern Jurchens and southern islanders. Wuduli and Wulangha chiefs were there, as were chiefs from Iki, Tsushima (Daemado), Hakata and other Japanese islands. They all came together to present local products in the Hall of Diligent Government and to offer felicitations to King Taejo’s rule.<sup>82</sup>

Joseon had become a nation of consequence. King Taejo had deftly carved a space for Korean life between China and Japan, the borders of Joseon were secure, and the harvest of peace could now begin. Court scholars attributed it all to the moral influence of the King.<sup>83</sup> On the occasion of Taejo’s Sixtieth birthday, the poet Mokeun put it to words.

*Like the ocean, Taejo is embracing all.  
Old loyalists and new in his new palace.  
High in the sky rises the loyal sun.  
The sea is calm because the fog has lifted.*<sup>84</sup>

## The Ming Memorial Affair



*Gongsun Chou asked, "What is the principle behind your policy of declining to meet with ruling lords?"*

*Mencius said, "In the past, if one was not a subject one did not appear in audience. Duangan Mu leapt over a wall to avoid a visit [with a ruling lord], and Xie Liu shut his gate against one...Zengzi said, 'It is more tiring to shrug one's shoulders and smile like a sycophant than to farm the fields in summer.' Zilu said, 'When men talk to those they disapprove of, you see how blushes color their faces. I am not capable of such conduct.'*

— Mencius<sup>1</sup>



Many affairs stabilized under King Taejo and the conditions of life improved for most people, but court politics are eternal. There were, for example, the differing perspectives of Jeong Do-jeon (Taejo's top advisor) and Yi Bang-won (Taejo's ambitious son) regarding the question of relations with Ming. Jeong Do-jeon was the first Joseon envoy to Ming, immediately after Yi Seong-gye's accession. The visit was tense. Though the Ming Emperor (Zhu) must have appreciated Jeong's intention to open the "Eastern Zhou dynasty," the Emperor and Jeong Do-jeon were alleged to have threatened war with each other in ways both overt and implied.

The Ming Emperor much preferred the compliant Yi Bang-won to the arrogant and unbending Jeong Do-jeon. When Yi Bang-won visited Ming in 1394 (helping resolve northern border disputes), it was a highwater moment of good Ming-Joseon relations. Bang-won returned with a re-opened northern border and a restoration of diplomatic relations. It even came to be known that the Ming Emperor happily called Yi Bang-Won the crown prince, though that honor was actually

bestowed upon Bang-won's younger half-brother, Yi Bang-seok.

Though Joseon-Ming relations improved following Bang-won's visit, it seemed that Jeong Do-jeon had different opinions about the virtues of Ming and was suspicious of Yi Bang-won's supplicating relationship with the Hongwu Emperor. Moreover, Jeong Do-jeon had tremendous power in Joseon and his perspective could not be avoided. He was the Head of the Finance Commission, the head of personnel appointments, and chief of the state's military. Beyond all that, he was King Taejo's most trusted advisor, serving as the wise minister who Jeong believed should always "correct the faults of the ruler...and prevent improper royal orders from being performed so as to lead the throne to attain the state of the great balance [in state affairs]."2

It's unclear how much the wily Jeong Do-jeon was or was not directly involved in a series of Joseon memorials that were to enrage the Hongwu emperor in King Taejo's later years, but Ming loudly claimed that he was the central offender. Perhaps Jeong had been careless in crafting a message to Ming. Maybe he meant to purposely poke insults at the Emperor. Or perhaps the Ming made much ado about nothing in the end. What we know is that in the fall of 1395 a long series of diplomatic conflicts with the Ming began to unfold. They would challenge Joseon-Ming relations for years and would help to catalyze the sad events that brought an end to King Taejo's reign.

Things began well enough that fall of 1395. Yi Bang-won had returned with a successful visit to Ming in 1394, Japanese piracy had been subdued after Park Wui's campaign of 1393, and Joseon seemed a new world on the rise. On October 30, 1395, there was a big poetry and dance party in the palace, with drumming, gongs, and festive singing. King Taejo and Jeong Do-jeon both enjoyed their wine and things grew boisterous. Remembering those dangerous days when King Taejo lay injured and politically vulnerable after a horsing accident, while Jeong Do-jeon was facing execution, a joyous Sambong playfully teased the God of Joseon. "I wish Your Majesty would not forget the days when you fell from your horse, and I the days when I wore a wooden collar around my neck!"3 The King laughed and told the musicians to play on

and pushed the scholar to take off his formal wear and dance about the great hall. Taejo then gave his good friend a fur-lined turtle jacket and asked the musicians to play the *Mundeokgok* ("The Enlightened Virtue of our King"). The King and the scholar danced and danced, until the early morning.<sup>4</sup>

The party was glorious, but just weeks earlier a message had been sent to Ming that would contribute to years of trouble. Earlier that month, on October 10, King Taejo had sent a New Year's message of celebration to the Ming Emperor. Jeong Do-jeon was likely involved in drafting it. Taejo had no idea of the trouble this small missive would end up causing, but a royal headache was about to begin. In fact, when the Ming Emperor received the New Year's memorial, he was outraged. This is not a message of respect, the Emperor exclaimed, but a clever insult, containing several careless phrases and mocking passages with double meanings. It seemed as if Joseon was trying to secretly mock Hongwu, right under his nose. Hongwu later identified Jeong Do-jeon as the likely author and ordered him sent to Ming immediately to explain himself.<sup>5</sup>

Taejo's message to the Ming Emperor was a formal, ceremonial communication—a *piao*—a congratulatory message sent to the Emperor on a special occasion.<sup>6</sup> All diplomatic messages with the Ming Emperor were highly important, ritualized communications, meant to demonstrate the sincerity and respect of a tributary country, and thereby allay any possible misunderstandings or tensions between countries. Reflecting their importance, messages had to be crafted on a specially prepared memorial paper. Highly skilled calligraphers transcribed the text in beautiful thin characters, with references to the emperor or the imperial state elevated and printed in bold to demonstrate Ming superiority. The document had standard dimensions of height and width, and precisely twenty rows of characters per column. The Joseon King's seal would be stamped on the document, and it was placed in a case of ritual specification. The moral order of the political universe was manifest in the document itself, with Ming's special place made clear.<sup>7</sup>

But now the Ming court believed that Jeong Do-jeon had hidden low insults inside all the gilded finery. There were all



sorts of insults hidden in the crafty diction, as well as purposefully miswritten characters, the Emperor proclaimed. The note was full of “ornate allusions” and “suspicious homophones,” insulting the Emperor and the imperial state.<sup>8</sup> As divine emperor, Zhu prohibited any messages that reminded him of his humble peasant roots, so perhaps some characters violated that rule, leading Zhu to find frivolous and degrading phrases in the message. It’s all unclear, as the original messages has been lost to history.

For his part, King Taejo claimed no insight into what the problem could be. “Being originally a military person, I have little knowledge and understanding,” he reported to the Emperor.<sup>9</sup> The point of all my communications are to celebrate and honor the great Ming empire, so how can we be hiding secret insults? Taejo asked. When presented with a beautiful face, the Ming Emperor seemed to be “blowing away hair to look for blemishes.”<sup>10</sup> In fact, there is little evidence in any historical record as to what message could have been so offensive, and many historians agree with King Taejo that it all seemed to be a huge (purposeful?) over-reaction by the Ming court.<sup>11</sup> In any case, the incident soon metastasized into a three-year conflict with Ming, revealing a deadly undergrowth of deep tensions in Ming-Joseon relations and internal divisions about the future of the Joseon dynasty.

At the end of 1395, King Taejo held court with his advisors to decide what to do about Ming demands. There were demands that Joseon give up Jeong Do-jeon (Taejo’s top official) or face nasty consequences. Even though a majority of Taejo’s advisors supported sending Jeong Do-jeon on a dangerous trip to Ming, King Taejo would not do it. This was a highly dangerous assignment, as Ming officials frequently abused Joseon envoys. Envoys were detained for months and even years, made to walk for long distances without horses, beaten for small mistakes in etiquette, and sometimes even executed. One envoy to Ming was in such despair over possible consequences when he was found with a suspicious bit of shamanic text hidden in his clothes that he leapt into a well and drowned himself.<sup>12</sup> Jeong Do-jeon was simply too important an advisor, and the Emperor’s attitude too dire, to allow Taejo’s Chief of State to go to Ming.

King Taejo replied to the Ming court that Jeong Do-jeon didn't have much to do with drafting the offending missive. Instead, he sent an aged monk, Kim Yak-hang, as the supposed author. The elderly Kim could hardly walk, but staunchly agreed to go to Ming to account for the memorial. King Taejo sent him with an explanation that it was all an honest mistake caused by Joseon's inadequate knowledge. I am "surprised and deeply mortified" at our errors, Taejo apologized. Joseon is "crude in its use of words and too ignorant to master the various ways of composing memorials," Taejo admitted, but sincere in its loyalty.<sup>13</sup>

But the Hongwu Emperor would not bend. "Stop playing scholarly tricks," Zhu demanded, and just send us Jeong Do-jeon if you want to avoid war.<sup>14</sup> It's unclear why Ming rulers were so set on punishing Jeong Do-jeon, but it could be that they were concerned that Jeong had militaristic intentions regarding Joseon's northern border with Ming. In fact, during this time, Jeong Do-jeon (as head of the army) had started serious military training of an increasingly centralized army, including preparations on the northern border, so Ming authorities had reasons to worry over his intentions.

At this time, the Ming court was holding several previous envoys hostage (now including Kim Yak-hang the elder) and refused to release any of them until King Taejo submitted Jeong Do-jeon.<sup>15</sup> The Ming Emperor explained that he would hold these envoys for a long time, so Taejo should send their wives and servants, to attend them to during their long detention. If Taejo didn't send the families, the envoys would be impressed into military service in Ming.<sup>16</sup>

As Joseon prepared family members to join the detained envoys in Ming, the tense standoff continued into the summer of 1396. One Ming envoy arrived in Joseon in June of 1396 with new demands to give up Jeong Do-jeon. This envoy had even brought some soldiers with him to help escort Jeong back to Ming. King Taejo welcomed the Ming envoys with full honors and put them up in a lovely guest house. He invited them to feasts, night after night, and falcon hunts during the day. Sumptuous foods, dancing girls, refined *kisaeng*, and clever eunuchs were always available to entertain the envoys,

either in the colorful royal pavilions or afterhours in their guesthouse quarters.<sup>17</sup>

The festivities went one for three weeks, until finally the Ming envoy returned to the nasty business at hand. “We came here on a mission given by the Emperor, but we have not accomplished anything yet,” the envoy admitted to Taejo. “If we keep on enjoying ourselves, drinking wine, how should we report to the emperor when we return home? If you can tell us about the decision you have made, however, we don’t mind getting drunk day after day.” King Taejo deftly ignored this request for a decision and sent his grand councilors to the envoys the next day, inviting them to yet another party. The envoys decided that another day or two of debauchery couldn’t hurt and headed for the pavilion.<sup>18</sup>

*A Joseon Poet in the Ming Court*

The parties couldn’t go on forever and King Taejo finally had to give his answer. In early July, Taejo sent the Ming emperor four reasons he could not send Jeong Do-jeon to China. First, Jeong Do-jeon didn’t draft the missive. Second, Jeong is 55 years-old and the journey is difficult. Third, Jeong is Director of the State Finance Commission and has important work in Joseon. Fourth, Jeong had abdominal bloating and a troublesome disease.<sup>19</sup> Once again, Taejo repeated that there was no insult intended in any messages sent to the Emperor. “So we are utterly at a loss” and can offer only gifts and respect, Taejo concluded. He sent along a new ritual missive, drafted to celebrate the Emperor’s birthday, and offered twelve quality horses as a gift.<sup>20</sup>

King Taejo also sent along one other token of good will. He wouldn’t send Jeong Do-jeon, but he did send another envoy—the *sadaebu* Gwon Geun, a ranking official and highly achieved poet of Joseon, well versed in literary Chinese. While Jeong Do-jeon felt any trip to Ming was hopeless, Minister Gwon Geun stepped up and volunteered for the assignment. He argued that the voluntary journey of a high scholar-official like him would placate the Hongwu Emperor and convince him of Joseon’s loyalty. Many in Joseon’s court were greatly

impressed at Gwon Geun's courage and spoke poorly of Jeong Do-jeon, who seemed to be avoiding the risk.

Jeong Do-jeon grew angry and reminded King Taejo that Gwon Geun often sided with the conservative Yi Saek faction and had supported Jo Min-soo back when Chang became king over Yi Seong-gye's opposition, several years ago. He can't be trusted and "I urge you not to send him," Jeong warned. But Taejo disagreed and sent the poet to Ming.<sup>21</sup> Jeong Do-jeon turned his attention to overseeing a new wave of military training, so Joseon could be ready for the days to come.

These were darkening days. Mutual suspicions divided Jeong Do-jeon's faction from those that wanted to mollify the Ming by sending top officials on journeys of supplication. While Jeong Do-jeon strengthened the army and made preparations along the border, Ming constantly threatened war and invasion of its own. Several hostages were held in Nanjing. Some unusual natural disasters around Joseon led one of King Taejo's officials to even proclaim the judgement of Heaven and urged Taejo to submit more fully to Ming. "When a nation is not ruled properly, Heaven reacts with natural disaster," proclaimed a cheeky assistant director of the Security Council.<sup>22</sup>

In the troubled late summer of 1396, more bad news came. As the poet Gwon Geun headed for Ming, the long illness of Taejo's wife, Lady Kang, reached a crisis. So that a baleful ghost would not be left to wander the palace if she died there, King Taejo's beloved second wife was taken out of the palace and transferred to the private home of Yi Tukhun, Director of Palace Attendants.<sup>23</sup> Kangbi had been sick all spring and summer. In January and February that year she had attended Buddhist temple on Geumgangsan (the site of the Maitreya enshrinement of the Sarira Reliquary, years before). There she prayed all night with King Taejo. In March, Taejo and Kangbi had visited a hot spring in Chungcheondo. It was their first hot springs trip together since he became King and their last happy occasion together. Soon after that trip, plague struck and Lady Kang fell ill, never to recover. By August 13, Lady Kang had fallen into a coma. That day, King Taejo held his queen close as she spoke incoherently. Finally, Kangbi closed her eyes and died; she was just 41 years old. One legend says

that among her final wishes, amid incoherent ramblings, Kangbi implored King Taejo to protect the crown prince, her young son Bang-seok.<sup>24</sup>

The King fell into grief, cancelling all his meetings and closing the court and all the markets for the next ten days. He banned alcohol and falconry, both in the capital and in the provinces.<sup>25</sup> The King and all his officials put on dull sackcloth and hemp belts. Attendants wrapped the Queen's body in a shroud, and prepared mourning rites. Two days after her death, King Taejo put on a white mourning robe and travelled out of Hanyang to Anamdong to look over possible sites for the Queen's tomb, as none had yet been determined. Several sites were visited outside of the city, but officials argued so strongly over one proposed site that the King had them all severely flogged. Another site proved too marshy.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, the King abandoned protocol and selected a tomb site in the very center of the new capital, right along the road leading from his palace to the southern gate of Sungnyemun, near Namdaemun market. Placing a tomb in the heart of the capital violated Confucian protocols that burials of any sort had to be located outside of the city walls, but the King pressed forward. Taejo was pleased to be able to supervise every aspect of the tomb's capital city construction and was happy that he would easily be able to venerate the Queen's remains. Showing respect for the fallen Queen, Taejo commissioned the governor of Tamna island (far to the south) to travel to the capital and oversee a team of master masons who carved intricate designs in the granite slabs that would encircle the Queen's tomb. Twelve spirit general carvings were among the massive stone slabs, each guarding the queen while standing among swirling clouds of carved stone.<sup>27</sup> He assigned a merit subject to watch over and maintain the deceased queen's tomb for three years. The grieving King returned to his court, and for the next three months ate no meat.<sup>28</sup>

Two weeks after her death, the Court of Royal Sacrifices submitted Queen Sindeok as the sanctified temple name for Lady Kang, and *Jeongneung* as the name of her royal tomb. On the first day of 1397, hundreds of officials gathered for final rites for Queen's Sindeok's corpse. As final evening preparations were made for the transfer of the Queen's palace coffin

to its tomb, shooting stars streaked across the sky.<sup>29</sup> The next day, all the officials dressed in white robes with black belts and went to the palace hall where the Queen's coffin lay in state. There, they performed the final rituals before taking the queen's coffin to the royal tomb. The rites included a long ceremony of official proclamations, assigned wailers, burning of incense, presentation of ritual foods, hanging of banners, and lighting of a candle. Officials also prepared a spirit tablet for the Queen, in the Hall of Benevolent Tranquility.<sup>30</sup> This Hall was located on the grounds of Gyeongbok Palace, where the Queen's chestnut spirit tablet would remain until the death of the King, whereafter both the King and the Queen's spirits were expected to be enshrined together at the Jongmyo Ancestral Shrine.

Queen Sindeok's burial mound was in the center of the city, right next to a Buddhist Temple (Heungcheonsa) that King Taejo ordered built in her memory. Temple monks were directed to ring a large bronze bell and perform daily prayers for the soul of Queen Sindeok. For months to come; "in his affection and sorrow, [King Taejo] refused to pick up his utensils to eat until he heard the temple drum assuring him that the monks were offering prayers for the spirit of his beloved queen."<sup>31</sup> In addition, the King regularly offered personal sacrifices to the Queen's spirit tablet, in the Hall of Benevolent Tranquility. The prominence of the Queen's tomb, the daily prayers of the monks, and the King's own sincere dedication, reminded everyone of Queen Sindeok's exalted status in the capital, and of the fact that she was mother of the young crown prince.

After a few months of preparing her tomb and mourning for Queen Sindeok, King Taejo returned to diplomacy with the Ming envoys remaining in Joseon. On the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month in 1396, Taejo visited the Chinese envoy Niu Niu at the guest house, where he had been staying for months. For the first time since Queen Sindeok died, Taejo ate meat. The next day, the Chinese envoys set out through the palace grounds to thank Taejo, but one of them fell off his horse and grew enraged. He started furiously whipping the Joseon official sent to greet him. To calm everything down, Taejo had to have the

stable manager locked up in the Capital Constabulary for the crime of providing the Chinese envoy with an unruly horse.<sup>32</sup>

A few weeks after that, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November, the Chinese envoy was finally set to return home, leaving on the same day that Joseon court officials were allowed to remove their mourning clothes for Kangbi. King Taejo sent several supplicating memorials along with the Chinese envoy, including details about how some members of a Ming envoy party had recently drowned in the Yalu River crossing over to Joseon, but explaining that it was not Joseon's fault. It seemed the envoy had overloaded his boat with cattle, and it had tipped over in some rapids on the flooded Yalu River, drowning the boatman and several envoys amid a throng of panicked cows.<sup>33</sup>

Though this incident was unfortunate, things were in fact looking up for Joseon's relations with Ming. When the poet Gwon Geun arrived at the Ming capital a few months earlier, the Emperor was very impressed with his erudite Chinese and delicate words.<sup>34</sup> He bestowed royal court robes upon Gwon Geun and three other envoys who had been detained in Ming (Jeong Chong, Kim Yak-hang, No In-do) and invited Gwon Geun to travel about Nanjing for three days. Gwon Geun could see the sites of Nanjing, fraternize with court scholars, attend feasts, and compose poetry.

It was a glorious time for Gwon Geun. He was shown around by Ming Ministers and eminent scholars, who he said looked "like ornate orioles and brilliant phoenix flying about the Forbidden Forest." Every meal was a feast of "rare foods and fragrant fish."<sup>35</sup> Perfumed dancing girls, beautiful views and fine wine filled his three-day literary sojourn.

After one day, Gwon wrote his poetic praise: "Returning to My Quarters After Having Drinks at Nanshi Pavilion."

*Watching exciting dances while having a gold  
cup full of wine,  
I could not help reciting a new poem again to  
the sound of the lute.  
Having already found great favor with the  
emperor, how can I decline to drink?*

*As I returned to my quarters quite drunk, the  
moon was high in the sky.*

After two days, more poetry poured out in Gwon's "Revisiting Heming Pavilion and Listening to the Sound of Jade Pendants."

*A girl wearing jade pendants walks  
towards me lightly.  
It's such a pleasure to listen to her song,  
To the accompaniment of the exquisite  
lute.  
But it's equally wonderful to observe her  
slim hand offering wine in a gold cup.*

After three days, following a visit to Belshi Tower, more poetry.

*Relaxing I drink and open my heart,  
Truly falling beyond debauchery.  
Getting help to go home, I felt lonely as  
the wind blows.<sup>36</sup>*

The result of this resplendent experience was a set of poems that Gwon Geun and the Emperor of China came to exchange with each other. Gwon Geun's poems celebrated the beauty of Ming and the greatness of the Emperor. He wrote about how all the vassal states of Asia were a chess board of loyal pieces, admiring the Emperor. "Wide open is the palace gate of the great nation...I wish that I could spread my loyalty and sincerity on it, and that the Emperor could notice it even a little." Geun's "Arriving at the Capital with My Order from Joseon" well represented the mood of several poems that he dedicated to the Hongwu Emperor.

*The flourishing majesty of Your Highness'  
sagely rule brings peace and security to all,  
people from afar come bearing tribute that has  
crossed distant mountains and streams.*



*Auspicious mists gather in profusion,  
surrounding your august abode in a  
magnificent aura, resplendent in radiant  
vestments, the emperor's affairs flourish.*

*Mists of dawn withdraw, revealing the sun-like  
demeanor of Your Highness, a divine wind  
delivers fragrance from the incense burner.*

*This humble servant is bathed in favor of your  
imperial grace, entering to wait upon your  
majesty and draw near to your radiance.<sup>37</sup>*

By the end of this splendid poetic exchange, the emperor was impressed with Joseon's erudition and sincerity and was reassured about Joseon's non-military intentions. The Emperor informed all four envoys that they could return home to Joseon with good news. The envoys long held hostage, together with the poet Gwon Geun, were all told they could finally go home.

#### *The Mourning Clothes Incident*

On the day the four envoys gathered in the imperial court to bid the Emperor farewell, only the poet Gwon Geun wore the formal court robes bestowed upon them by the Emperor. The other three wore white mourning clothes in honor of Joseon's Deceased Queen Sindeok, whose passing they had only recently learned about. But such white robes violated Ming court etiquette and the Emperor grew enraged. He ordered Jeong Chong, Yak Hang, and No Indo all taken away for brutal interrogation. Only Gwon Geun was allowed to leave for home. All three of the other envoys were soon executed in Ming. They had all been highly achieved officials and Merit Subjects in Joseon.<sup>38</sup>

When Gwon Geun arrived in Joseon, he brought mixed news. Though the other envoys had been executed, Ming was ready to restore good relations. The Emperor invited Joseon to send envoys without risk in the future, under certain conditions. First of all, Joseon should be more careful in always

sincerely respecting the more powerful Ming. "There is only one sun, and you cannot look down on it," the Hongwu Emperor observed. Furthermore, "when you send envoys to China, send the ones who are proficient in Chinese language; otherwise do not send envoys at all."<sup>39</sup>

The Ming Emperor also sent along touching condolences for the deceased Lady Kang, calling her Taejo's "first queen consort," and "mother for the nation."<sup>40</sup> In an imperial letter of condolence, a Chinese envoy shared the emperor's message to the King of Joseon.

When he transformed his old household into the royal family of the nation, Lady Kang supported him as his wife and set a good example as the mother for the nation, didn't she? Though she left him, he finds her traces everywhere, so he feels her absence more poignantly, doesn't he? When she was alive, she got up early to assist him to dress and made sure that he was not late for his schedule, constantly checking the water clock. And when he was late for dinner, being too busy with state affairs, she helped him to have meals properly. When he went out to preside over the morning audience, she saw him off with court ladies, and when he returned in the evening after dark, she waited for him along with court ladies, holding a candle in her hand, and escorted him to his bed chamber.

Now she is gone forever and there is no one who looks at the mirror hanging on the wall. Neither is there one who attends the King when he goes out early to preside over the morning audience nor one who shares conversation with him when he returns late to his bedchamber. The only ones that he sees are the court ladies and female servants who shed tears, touching and stroking her coffin.<sup>41</sup>

It was a touching tribute and suggested a growing civility in Ming-Joseon relations. Then, the Ming Emperor raised one other promising subject in terms of Ming-Joseon relations. "I have grandsons and the King of Joseon has granddaughters. Let's have them marry each other."<sup>42</sup>

This marriage proposal was a promising development indeed, even though the Hongwu Emperor once again also denounced Jeong Do-jeon. He urged King Taejo to avoid "a few aberrant Confucian scholars," strutting about with pretend strength and "bringing disaster to their people."<sup>43</sup> "What they do is dangerous enough to bring the disaster of war to the land of Joseon and deprive the king of his domain. What is the use of employing such worthless people?" The Emperor urged King Taejo to "deeply think over what I have said."<sup>44</sup>

King Taejo deeply thought things over but refused to demote Jeong Do-jeon. But he did plan to accept the arranged marriage proposal. Joseon's royal family would now be intermarried into the Ming Dynasty. King Taejo celebrated the excellent work of Gwon Geun in restoring relations and rewarded the scholar nicely.

But Jeong Do-jeon was enraged about the constant insults and felt that Gwon Geun might have had something to do with the Ming's continued hostility towards him. He instigated the Inspector General to impeach Gwon for returning home while other envoys were still detained and subsequently executed in Ming. And he urged King Taejo to inspect where in the world Gwon Geun had obtained all his recent gold. Didn't it seem like ill-gotten gains? Perhaps even bribery from Ming?

"How do you know that Geun was awarded gold?" King Taejo asked.

"I heard that Geun used gold to pay for his expenses. Unless the gold was bestowed by the emperor, how could such a poor scholar obtain gold?" Jeong Do-jeon cleverly replied.

King Taejo burst out laughing. "Even though he is a poor scholar, are there no ways for him to get gold?" Taejo then told Jeong Do-jeon that he himself had awarded Geun with gold for all his great service. "At a time when the emperor was enraged, [Geun] volunteered to go to China and mollify the emperor. As a result, the emperor no longer demanded that you appear at his imperial court. So Geun made contributions

not only to the country but also to you yourself. I was going to reward him, but you want me to punish him?"

Jeong Do-jeon fell silent and retreated for a time.<sup>45</sup>

### *The Etched Saddle Affair*

King Taejo now set out to pursue the proposal of marrying his granddaughter into the imperial family. Several gift horses were prepared with fine saddles to indicate King Taejo's pleasant reception of the Emperor's recent messages, including his proposal of a royal marriage. Upon delivery of King Taejo's gift horses, however, there arose the unfortunate "Etched Saddle Affair." When Joseon's gift saddle horses arrived in Ming, the Emperor inspected them and found the horses and saddles all to be weak and flawed. He immediately sent an envoy to Joseon, putting a pause on the marriage idea. "Upon seeing how the gifts were produced and presented, I could not help but be disappointed and skeptical because such an unfavorable beginning of our new relationship foreboded an undesirable consequence in the end."<sup>46</sup>

It got worse. It seems that a few days earlier, a different saddle had been presented to Ming by the Director of Joseon's Saddlery Service. The Emperor's people had inspected this fine golden saddle and found the character for "Heaven" etched upon it. The Emperor was outraged at such a thing. "A saddle is a thing that a man sits on. How then can a man sit on Heaven? This is an insult to me." The Hongwu Emperor likely took the insult quite personally, considering he claimed to be the "Son of Heaven," specially chosen by God to rule "All under Heaven."<sup>47</sup> The angry emperor had the saddle burned.<sup>48</sup>

Based on this previous incident, the Emperor now had all of King Taejo's marriage-gift saddles inspected, even tearing them apart to see the insides. Sure enough, the saddles were found with secret insults. As the Emperor reported to Taejo, "When we pulled them apart, we found some characters inscribed inside them...Several eunuchs cut the saddles apart, and they found the Chinese character *tian* [signifying heaven] inscribed on both sides of the seat upside down, and characters such as *xuan* [signifying darkness] and *shi* [signifying ten] inscribed on other parts of the seat." It seems

there might have been some secret insults and strange shamanic hexes embedded with these inscriptions.

Finding the damning evidence, Hongwu stood up slowly and personally examined the saddle. "How can they be as tricky as that?" he wondered. "When we write characters on documents, we always make sure that the character *tian* comes first, on top. I have never ridden on a saddle like that."<sup>49</sup>

Joseon seemed to purposely be casting dangerous curses towards Ming and it was unforgiveable. The proposed marriage was called off. Hongwu demanded that Joseon provide 20,000 troops to Ming to help make up for the etched saddle insult. A Joseon envoy was detained at the border for 42 days until finally being denied entry and sent home. Another Joseon envoy at the end of the year was detained and taken hostage into Ming.<sup>50</sup> A renewed round of critiques were sent regarding Joseon's insulting memorials and requiring the submission of Jeong Do-jeon. Things were back at square one.

About a month after the Etched Saddle Affair, Ming sent yet another missive to Joseon charging that Joseon officials were purposely insulting Ming and deserved punishment. Three low-level Joseon officials were charged with adding trickery to a memorial on the birthday of the imperial crown prince. According to Ming accusations, these three had conspired to produce a memorial with some clever homophones in it that might insult the Chinese crown prince without the Ming court even realizing it. "Why don't we produce some characters similar in sound and have them hidden in the memorial?" the three tricksters said to each other. "Let's find out if China has scholars intelligent enough to discover them." This, anyway, is what the Ming envoy alleged the Joseon officials to have said.<sup>51</sup>

King Taejo's advisors were at a loss. The three accused officials were all rather obscure. One was illiterate in Chinese, and the other two only had basic skills, so how would they have pulled off such a literary conspiracy? These three officials "did not attempt to mock or insult the Chinese court, and the spirits of heaven and earth are our witnesses!" maintained court officials.

Everyone believed that there must be something bigger behind all these preposterous charges—some reason that the

Ming rulers constantly “try to conspire against us.”<sup>52</sup> But no one could determine exactly why Ming was so angry at Joseon. A majority at court felt there was unfortunately little option but to give up the three unlucky officials and hope for the best. King Taejo sent a letter to Ming, along with the three hapless officials, explaining that they all had poor literary skills and couldn’t possibly have pulled off such a clever trick. Having read Ming’s charges, “I am so surprised and awed that I am completely at a loss,” Taejo said. The charges are ridiculous, but Taejo still planned to deliver the officials to Ming.<sup>53</sup>

### *The Drunken Eunuch Incident*

As the unfortunate officials were sent north to Ming in early summer, they must have crossed paths with yet another Ming envoy that was travelling south and arrived in Joseon in late June. On June 22, the eunuch Sin Kwisaeng arrived in Joseon with a letter from China’s Ministry of Rites. Kwisaeng was a Korean native but had served as a court eunuch in Ming for decades. He had come to love Ming culture and power so now the Ming court decided to send him back home to tell Joseon all about Ming superiority. On June 22, Sin Kwisaeng arrived at the south gate of Hanyang. Taejo sent attendants to greet Sin with music, dancers, and royal wine at the gate. He also ordered his own eunuch, Yi Kwang, to bestow new clothing, a hat, and new shoes upon the envoy.

But Sin Kwisaeng was insulted at the slight. Why had King Taejo himself not come out to greet him? Kwisaeng angrily pulled out a scroll and arrogantly demanded to see the King immediately. “This is an instruction given by the emperor himself!” Kwisaeng proclaimed.<sup>54</sup>

Therefore, King Taejo prepared to receive the eunuch Kwisaeng in the royal palace, in ceremonial dress. Kwisaeng ascended to a high seat in the hall, and King Taejo knelt down to receive the letter from the Emperor. It was a strange missive. For some time, the letter went on and on about the fantastic skills and high intelligence of Kwisaeng and described how the emperor had trained him well. The letter then proclaimed that the job of Kwisaeng was to educate the Joseon court about how elevated and inspiring everything was in

Ming and cause Joseon officials to be awestruck. "This is the instruction of the Emperor, and we duly convey it to you," said Kwisaeng pompously, as he waited on King Taejo to perform the ritual kowtows before him.<sup>55</sup>

All Joseon's ministers were greatly offended and found Kwisaeng insufferable as he strutted about, instructing them on various aspects of Ming superiority. They learned that Kwisaeng had also showed off to Korean field officers all along the road into Hanyang, bragging about all the items the Emperor had bestowed upon him. Kwisaeng would place these items on top of a table to show them off, and then sit down to guard them fiercely, pulling out his sword. Everywhere along the road, he would place these prized items in a horse-drawn carriage and follow behind, brandishing a menacing sword.

It was soon discovered that all these supposed gifts of the emperor were actually just the eunuch's own possessions.<sup>56</sup> King Taejo refused to entertain the deceptive and arrogant envoy personally, which caused Kwisaeng to grow so indignant he would not drink with anyone else who attended him. Finally, King Taejo agreed to host a dinner for Sin Kwisaeng on July 3<sup>rd</sup>. Unfortunately, Kwisaeng got very drunk and belligerent at that dinner, pulling out his sword and waving it about angrily.<sup>57</sup>

Other than that unfortunate incident, the King ignored Kwisaeng's visit, and focused instead on the status of central army troop training. Affairs with Ming seemed to be deteriorating, to the point of Ming sending insulting drunks as envoys, and Taejo was determined to build a more effective military. Jeong Do-jeon had developed an innovative system of new field maneuvers guided by long work on his "Diagram of Troop Dispositions." King Taejo had ordered manuals of these troop dispositions sent to all the provincial army commanders and he was eager to see how their training was going.<sup>58</sup> Jeong Do-jeon also continued to reinforce garrisons on the northern border and stepped up his campaign to absorb private military forces into a state-managed central army, under his control.

But Yi Bang-won, who had once greatly impressed the Ming court, refused to participate in Jeong Do-jeon's training and kept his private troops to himself.<sup>59</sup> It was a direct violation of the King's own orders.

**“With Horses Driven Like That, One Can Go to War”**



*In ancient days, the Holy King of the East, Jumong, was the founding King of Goguryeo. Yuhwa, the mother of Jumong, was the daughter of Habaek, the river god, and it was on the banks of the Yalu River that Jumong was conceived. Jumong became an excellent horseman and archer of the northern lands and one day he crossed over the Yalu River on the backs of helpful turtles and fishes, coming south into the Korean peninsula. Jumong united many tribes of Korean peoples and founded the kingdom of Goguryeo. Goguryeo became a great power, ruling lands north and south of the Yalu river for 705 years, with 28 consecutive kings. Jumong and his kingdom drew power from the great Yalu River, where the spirit of his grandmother lived as a god.<sup>1</sup>*



There were good days in the spring of 1397. In late March, King Taejo took a trip to the hot springs to recuperate with Jeong Do-jeon, Cho Chun, and Nam Eun, three of Joseon’s leading radicals. Taejo enjoyed discussions with his old friends and recalled all they had achieved together. Before they left the springs, the King bestowed honorary straw hats and jade hat strings on the three eminent scholars.<sup>2</sup>

The next day, as they left the hot springs, King Taejo received a welcome update on the recent surrender of many Japanese pirates. The day after that, on his journey back to Hanyang, Taejo went hunting, with a falcon perched on his arm. These were good days of merriment and officials “engaged in boisterous, drunken merrymaking at night, joined by entertaining women and playing loud music.”<sup>3</sup>

But the troubling issue of relations with Ming festered. While spring festivities blossomed, Gwon Geun had returned alone from Ming that March with news that the other three Joseon envoys had been executed. King Taejo was so frustrated with the situation that he began to turn over an old



idea in his mind: perhaps the time had come to join with Jurchen and Mongol peoples and pour over the Yalu, taking those northern territories from Ming.

From his first days in power, Taejo had paid close attention to military matters. He created an elite royal guard to protect his family, filled mostly with loyal warriors from the north. He worked with Jeong Do-jeon and Cho Chun to begin centralizing the nation's military, hoping to replace the scattered private armies of influential families with a more professionally trained and centrally integrated national army.<sup>4</sup> This process would take some time to complete, as so many military commanders and influential families had their own loyal private forces, and that included Taejo's own sons.<sup>5</sup> But planning towards those ends got underway in the first year of King Taejo's reign.

By Taejo's order, Assistant Chancellor Jeong Do-jeon took the lead in the military planning and reorganization. To demonstrate his thinking on the matter, in the fall of 1393, Jeong produced some images called *Pictures of the Hunting Scenes in the Four Seasons* and presented them to the King. These scenes were of hunting parties, which Taejo was very fond of, but they also cleverly showed military formations for a new training system that Jeong Do-jeon was contemplating.<sup>6</sup>

Then Jeong Do-jeon had some troops perform a demonstration of his new military system for the King. In November of 1393, Jeong "mustered the troops on the *kyokku* ground and drew them up in a battle array. Then, he trained them to respond to the sound of drums and horns as well as banners and signals and practice advance and retreat."<sup>7</sup> King Taejo was excited by what he saw and authorized Jeong to move forward with the long plan of nationalizing the military and overseeing a new training regimen.

Jeong Do-jeon had a vision of a unified military command, featuring well-trained, enlisted soldiers with required periods of mandatory service.<sup>8</sup> But many commanders of Joseon's scattered private forces were loath to give up their personal armies. Several commanders simply refused to show up at Jeong's scheduled trainings.<sup>9</sup> In January of 1394, a grand sacrifice to the banner of the central military commander

(Jeong Do-jeon) was organized. Central commander Jeong showed up in full military regalia to receive honors from other military officials—but several lesser commanders refused to even attend, and one was openly critical of the whole project. An enraged Taejo had many of these resistive commanders beaten with a paddle and he executed the most vocal critic.<sup>10</sup>

In February and March more trainings were held. On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, Jeong Do-jeon was appointed head of the three armies—Joseon’s central military forces. Several court officials complained about the increasing centralization of military and political power under Jeong Do-jeon, but King Taejo angrily dismissed anyone who spoke out strongly on this matter. When one Palace Censor interpreted “strange celestial phenomenon” as the voice of Heaven criticizing Taejo for elevating Jeong Do-jeon, Taejo had the Censor locked up, tortured, and exiled.<sup>11</sup>

For his part, Jeong Do-jeon approached his job with gusto. He created a new military training book (*The Diagram of Troop Dispositions*), which King Taejo found promising. Taejo agreed with Jeong’s analysis that adequate military preparedness required constant training of soldiers in all seasons, just as in the days of China’s Zhou dynasty.<sup>12</sup> In the spring of 1395, Taejo ordered the Three Armies (the central armies of Joseon) to publish and study both of Jeong Do-jeon’s texts: *Pictures of Hunting Scenes* and *Diagram of Troop Dispositions*.<sup>13</sup>

After the Ming Emperor executed the three Joseon envoys in the spring of 1397, Taejo’s heart hardened, and he ordered training to become more rigorous and widespread. In the summer of 1397, Taejo directed the *Diagram of Troop Dispositions* to be distributed to all his provincial commanders and subordinate officers. He commanded officers to study it carefully in preparation for field training to come. In August that year, Taejo dispatched instructors well versed in *Diagram of Troop Dispositions* to all the provinces. Provincial officers and soldiers of the three armies were ordered to gather on city and village streets and begin practicing the troop dispositions.<sup>14</sup>

Jeong Do-jeon and Nam Eun grew excited at the national mobilization that summer of 1397 and urged Taejo to raise an

army and send it to cross the Yalu and invade Liaodong. The two fiery philosophers wanted to get fellow radical Cho Chun on board, so they headed to his house, where Cho lay very ill in bed. But Cho Chun found the whole idea crazy and likely to ruin Joseon. Against the wishes of his friends, he rose from his sick bed, ordered his sedan, and was carried by servants to talk with the King. With animated opposition, Cho Chun convinced Taejo that invading Liaodong would be a disaster. "The two chancellors [Jeong Do-jeon and Nam Eun] might be good at handling a few bushels of grain but are incapable of discussing important affairs that concern the future of the state," Cho Chun insisted. In the end, Taejo shared Cho Chun's caution and promised he would not invade.<sup>15</sup>

Though Taejo was not prepared to send a serious military force to the northern border just yet, he did continue ambitious plans and made military preparations. In October of 1397, he received a memorial documenting a range of military issues needing attention. The granaries did not have enough food storage to support two years of war. The costs of the capital construction were so high that military expenditures had fallen behind. King Taejo was urged to tax surplus food heavily this year, and to spend frugally, so that the granary supply could be built up. Jeong Do-jeon was appointed Commissioner of Military Supply Warehouses to see this plan through. A plan was also introduced to rationalize the conscription of troops through a careful census of the population and innovative use of new "tiger tally" counting sticks whenever troops were called up.<sup>16</sup>

Things were also changing in the royal palace during these days. For one thing, crown Prince Bang-seok was growing older. Now fifteen years old, Bang-seok had presented wine to King Taejo on the occasion of the Hongwu Emperor's birthday (September 22). By this time, Bang-seok had also married Lady Sim of the Buyu Sim clan. On September 27<sup>th</sup>, the King dressed in his royal robes, invested Lady Sim as the crown princess in the royal audience hall, and bestowed her with the royal script and seal.<sup>17</sup>

While happily celebrating the growing maturity of the crown prince and newly invested crown princess, the troubling military squabble with Ming remained. At year's end

(December 22, 1397), King Taejo decided it was time to send Jeong Do-jeon to the northern border, where he could oversee efforts to win local loyalties and prepare border defenses. Jeong was sent to the northeast and ordered to repair fortresses and ramparts, inspect granaries, create new postal relay stations, clarify civil and military positions, and untangle legal disputes. “Submit detailed reports on the number of resident populations, the quality of military officials in the district, and so forth,” said King Taejo. “And when you find ways to improve the lives of the people, carry them out on your own...”<sup>18</sup>

Jeong Do-jeon was a weary 55 years old at this point, with a serious stomach illness and other health problems.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, this was a demanding trip to the rugged and frigid north. Still, Taejo felt that Jeong Do-jeon’s recent military work and his ideas about military action on the border made him the right person for this sensitive job. “[You are] extremely conversant with all kinds of learning throughout history and singularly talented both in literary and martial arts,” King Taejo said. “Hence, I appointed you chief pacification mobile inspector of the Northeast Region. Leave now to your new post and make sure nothing is amiss.”<sup>20</sup> To help in the demanding and dangerous work, Taejo sent along his blood brother, the Jurchen Yi Chiran, giving him title as chief regional military commander.

So ended the year 1397.

There were mixed portents to start 1398. In early January, reports arrived that Japanese invasions were dying down after Joseon’s 1397 anti-piracy campaign. As pirates were defeated and new fortresses and moats were built in coastal territories, displaced people began to return home, repopulating the local villages. Fish and salt production were increasing, as were related tax revenues. With the improved economic situation, and to further win the hearts of the people, King Taejo announced increased salaries for officials, the expansion of northern fortresses, and reduced taxes on monasteries, salt, and fish.<sup>21</sup>

More “hearts and minds” legitimation projects were to follow. In February, a grand royal portrait was finished of King Taejo and was sent to be enshrined in the Hall of Deep

Origin in Hamhung.<sup>22</sup> This was an ambitious project, meant to project the King's charismatic authority into the fluid northern lands. Once the portrait was finished by the court's best artists, a massive procession was organized to transport the portrait from Hanyang to Hamhung, taking over a week of travel. The procession involved hundreds of people, marching hundreds of li through the countryside. It was headed by the provincial Governor and his guards. Then came the governors and other municipal officers of areas that were passed through along the route.<sup>23</sup> Then came a contingent of guards, carrying ceremonial flags. Next marched a band of musicians, brightly clad in yellow, and playing lutes, cymbals, flutes, drums, and conch horns. Then passed a contingent of guards with horses, tall umbrellas, and ritual specialists guarding palanquin carrying the incense burner. Then passed another collection of musicians, followed by the palanquin carrying the King's portrait. Next another musical band marched, followed by a collection of officials overseeing the whole procession, and finally came a group of rear-guard soldiers. A small army of cooks, teamsters, mechanics, and other attendants accompanied the procession.<sup>24</sup>

As the procession passed through all the towns and villages on the way to Hamhung, it must have been an awesome spectacle, inevitably radiating a sense of power, purpose, even divinity.<sup>25</sup> Those that came to view the grand portrait of the King in Hamhung were affected. The visual shock drove many to tears, others to prayer, some to poetry and prose. King Taejo was systematically projecting and solidifying his charismatic reach towards the border lands.

Back in Hanyang, there were other good signs that spring of 1398. In April, a massive bell meant for the capital's Jongno Pavilion finally finished its journey up from Kwangju, where it had been cast. One thousand and three hundred soldiers were required to transport this bell to Hanyang, where it would be installed as a manifestation of Joseon's new order: ringing the days in and out and proclaiming meritorious deeds. The poet Gwon Geun, only recently returned from Ming, inscribed the bell on the auspicious occasion of its installation at Jongno.

“WITH HORSES DRIVEN LIKE THAT, ONE CAN GO TO WAR”

When Songdo [Gaegyeong] was our capital, the nation was in terrible shape. Then our King took over the nation and replaced tyranny with benevolence. The people no longer saw wars and the clouds looming over the court suddenly cleared. The wise and talented were united in their efforts to bring about peace. Those in near and distant places began to return until the streets were filled with people and their renewed energy. For this reason, a bell was made that will be rung at dawn and at night.<sup>26</sup>

Jeong Do-jeon offered King Taejo some poetry of his own in these happy days of April, celebrating all that Joseon had become. One poem celebrated all the lovely food cargo ships filling the rivers.<sup>27</sup>

*Ships gather in the West river from all  
quarters,  
Fast as dragons carrying thousands of tons of  
grain.  
Look at the ceiling of the granary getting  
rotten with grains.  
The secret of good government is to secure  
sufficient food.*

Another poem remarked on all the busy, happy enterprise of the new country.

*As the water at the South Ferry runs with  
rolling waves  
Travelers gather from all quarters to make the  
place bustle.  
As old people rest while the young carry  
baggage,  
They exchange songs back and forth while  
walking.*

But one of Jeong Do-jeon's poems that April was more foreboding, speaking of how his well-trained soldiers were now prepared for war.

*The resounding sound of bells and drums shake  
the earth,  
And the flying banners and flags reach out to  
the sky.  
More than ten thousand horses move as if they  
were one.  
With the horses driven like that, one can go to  
war.*

Jeong Do-jeon faced the mighty Ming empire and didn't blink. For the first three months of 1398, he had surveyed and prepared the northern border forces. It was a dismal, cold time to travel along the Yalu river, so King Taejo used his casual pen name of Song Heon ("Pine Hut") to send the scholar care packages of liquor, warm clothes and political updates to keep his spirits up. "Many days have passed since your departure, so my anxiety about you is growing," wrote Song Heon to Sambong.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, it was an anxious time, for when Sambong returned from the border, he spoke of war. Joseon's armies were strong and well trained, he reported. "*With the horses driven like that, one can go to war.*" The Ming rulers deserved punishment for their constant harassment of Joseon. King Taejo was popular among northern Jurchen and Mongol peoples and there were many old Goguryeo lands north of the Yalu River that were ripe for the taking.<sup>29</sup> The radical *sadaebu* Nam Eun shared Jeong Do-jeon's enthusiasm for invasion of Liaodong. "The troops have been well-trained, and we have enough provisions," he wrote. "When the time is right, we will be able to recapture the territory that had once belonged to King Tongmyeong of Goguryeo."<sup>30</sup>

Jeong Do-jeon brought out a book of prophecy and showed it to Taejo to further make the case that the time was right. He told Taejo that the northern peoples of the border regions were the strongest force in China, meaning that if King Taejo won their support, he could even conquer all of the

Middle Kingdom and sit on the dragon throne itself. Moreover, an invasion of Liaodong was a good way to abolish all the private military forces in Joseon and require everyone to join together in a powerful central army.<sup>31</sup> Abolishing private forces was a dramatic step, and Nam Eun realized that King Taejo’s own private forces had once been vital in overthrowing Goryeo. Without Taejo’s private troops, “I, too, would not have been able to be here with you today” Nam Eun admitted. “[But] years have passed since then and the time has finally arrived to abolish the provincial military commissioner system. If you bring those military units together to form a regular army, it will be much safer.”<sup>32</sup>

This was hardly a popular proposal among those with private troops. The meritorious retainers with troops (including King Taejo’s own sons) feared a loss of influence if their troops were absorbed into the central army, and many of them were suspicious of Jeong Do-jeon’s ever growing power. Also, there was the very real possibility of losing a war against Ming if Joseon crossed the Yalu. There were powerful enemies of this war buildup, and Jeong Do-jeon realized the dangerous path he walked. “Because I am foolish by nature and coarse in my learning, I am exposed to frequent attacks and interference every time I made a move, until my life is on the line.”<sup>33</sup>

Though no one spoke openly of an actual plan to invade Ming, rumors were in the air. Thousands of commoners were mobilized for corvée labor to enhance Hanyang’s walls and repair old fortresses that summer. More military training went forward in the late spring and summer of 1398. In late May, Jeong Do-jeon ordered the private troops of all the Meritorious Retainers and provincial commanders to join in training according to the *Diagram of Troop Dispositions*. But many commanders simply didn’t show up and those that did show up had not studied the field manuals. Angry at the situation, Jeong Do-jeon became a brutal taskmaster. “Having decided the rules and movements for the provincial commanders and troops, he suddenly had them practice these, beating and lashing the soldiers so there were many who complained about him.”<sup>34</sup>



This uneasy and tense situation continued into the summer. One minister returned from a field inspection across the peninsula to report that “each garrison failed to give instruction in the *Diagram of Troop Dispositions*.” King Taejo was indignant and ordered all the instructors of each garrison arrested and the garrison commanders investigated. Any garrison commander who hadn’t mastered the *Diagram of Troop Dispositions* was ordered flogged.<sup>35</sup>

The summer was strange and unsettled. In mid-June, a blood rain fell from the dusty sky, panicking the people. It was an omen of disaster.<sup>36</sup> Late spring weather had been unusually scorching, with dry windstorms. Amid the drought, Pine trees browned and withered, and everything dried up around the capital. The barley didn’t grow, and everyone despaired about the harvest. During these days, a huge fire broke out. It burned hundreds of houses and the palace granary, consuming even the chickens and dogs. Watching the blaze, Taejo despaired: “The drought we have had is already too extreme. Now, we are struck by fire. What did I do wrong?”<sup>37</sup>

Monks held dharma assemblies to pray for the elimination of disasters.<sup>38</sup> Many of the *sadaebu* censors said it must be due to disorder in the royal house. The King should look into his own faults and determine what he had done to outrage the heavens, implored the Remonstrators, bowing before the King.

We request that Your Majesty, revering the anger of Heaven and emulating the heart of King Tang, stop all the construction work and return the workers to their homes to look after their families. Then their complaints and resentments will cease, and peace and harmony will be restored.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to releasing workers from their toil on the city wall and fortresses, Taejo was urged to look into his own vices and daily missteps. One petition that summer urged the King to surround himself daily with more Remonstrators. “Your Majesty now stays mostly in the auxiliary palace, spending time with military officials and enjoying their company, and I

am very concerned about it,” the petitioner noted. It would be better for the King to sit in the palace listening to Confucian censors so that he could learn to “comport yourself” and “regulate your conduct.” “I urge you to let remonstrating officials attend you all the time,” the petition implored. “If you make sure that their words are implemented, and their remonstrance accepted without fail...you will have no problems of erring in judgment.”<sup>40</sup>

One particular complaint was that the King wasn’t attending enough morning audiences with the Confucian Remonstrators and department officials and was spending too much time focused on military matters. So Taejo agreed to do better. The next day he sat on the throne in the Hall of Diligent Government at the crack of dawn, lighting the torches and sounding the drum, and asked his officials to come before him with whatever issues they had. For a few days, hardly anything important was brought up at all, which upset the King. “Why am I coming here at dawn if you don’t have important issues to bring up?” he fumed. But many officials were so frightened at the King’s mercurial temper lately that “they dared not advance towards the king.”<sup>41</sup>

After one of these mostly unproductive morning assemblies, even before sunrise, King Taejo returned to his inner royal hall to have a drink on the terrace. He called the Left and Right Chancellors (Jeong Do-jeon and Nam Eun) to join him. The three revolutionary friends became drunk that morning, “discussing the incidents related to founding the new dynasty.”<sup>42</sup>

After several occasions of attending early morning audiences, the King began skipping them again while the scorching summer wore on. There was even a time when all the high officials assembled in their robes, but the King was not there. Instead, Taejo had went to inspect the Heunchangsa temple under construction in honor of Queen Sindeok and reflected upon her memory.<sup>43</sup> Called to account for always missing morning audiences, the King said he would try to do better, but that he was simply wore down and feeling ill. “The reason I failed to attend the morning audience recently is that I was unable to get up early due to my poor health.”<sup>44</sup> Taejo

resolved to attend more morning assemblies, even if sick, but the King's health was failing fast.

On July 5<sup>th</sup>, a weary King Taejo heard a troubling report about some locals in Hamhung who cast aspersions on all the fine attention being paid to the old tombs of the King's ancestors. A minister of works had been sent that summer for a site visit to the Dongbukmyeon (Northeast) region. Upon return, the minister noted that the ancestral tombs were looking wonderful. "*Sulleung* [the royal tomb of the King's grandmother] was relocated, and the stone sheep and tiger statues as well as the stone chamber of her tomb were extremely luxurious and splendid," he reported. However, this minister of works also reported negatively on another official who had earlier been sent to the Hamhung region in exile—a certain Chon Si. It seems this exiled minister was taking issue with the excessive pampering of the tombs of the King's ancestors. "Isn't it a little too much for the tomb of the King's grandmother?" Chon Si asked. But the tomb of the King's father-in-law is similarly luxurious, the visiting minister of works observed. To which the exiled Chon noted that this other tomb was *also* excessive and overly luxurious.<sup>45</sup>

When King Taejo heard of this disrespect of his ancestors—and implicit critique of his own decisions—he grew infuriated. He ordered the severe torture of minister Chon Si, until he revealed the names of ten others who had also said critical words about the King and the tombs. All were exiled.

The King must have been in a foul mood because just one week later he heard of another incident whereby several local officials got drunk and voiced criticism of the lavish house of the Prime Minister Cho Chun, who was loyal to King Taejo, as they drunkenly walked by his house in the night. "To say that Chun's fortune will not last is to say that the fortune of the Joseon dynasty is short-lived," fumed the King. He would have none of it. He ordered one official beheaded, had one severely flogged, and lashed another. Nineteen other government inspectors who had been at the drinking party were fired. In a related case, reported that same day in the *Taejo Sillok*, a court official was arrested and tortured for "making critical

remarks related to the Royal Tomb of the King's grandmother.”<sup>46</sup>

The earth was scorching and the pine trees on the guardian mountains of Hanyang were dying.<sup>47</sup> Complaints and insults about the fledgling Joseon dynasty seemed to be growing. Now the testy king was ordering beheadings, torture sessions, floggings, lashings, and dismissals for drunken insults, seeing enemies all about. As the summer wore on, Taejo's illness grew. All the while, the situation of military preparations for possible war against Ming fractured the royal family.

In early summer, King Taejo ordered the creation of a Military Supply Warehouse for the very first time and said that he intended to address the situation of people in eight northern provinces having to endure “prolonged barbarian control.”<sup>48</sup> Unpopular trainings to create a centralized military continued. On August first, many officers once again skipped a required military training—this one was organized as a comprehensive evaluation of troop readiness. The soldiers of Yi Bang-gwa, Yi Bang-won, Yi Chiran, and Yi Hwa—the King's sons and his blood brother—all failed the evaluation miserably. It was humiliating to have his own children ignore him in this way and King Taejo became enraged.

Between August 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, King Taejo began to mete out punishments for poor military readiness, unleashing a torrent of shock therapy. The princes and other commanders were reprimanded in public. Multiple officials were dismissed from office. Some subordinates of the princes were slated for execution for refusing military training. Three high officers and 292 other people were impeached for their failures. One hundred trainers from the provinces were held responsible for neglect of duty and were arrested. The royal princes couldn't be physically punished directly, but lower-level officers under the princes' command were “beaten with a paddle” and “lashed on the buttocks” as a warning and punishment to the resistive Princes.<sup>49</sup> There was even an appeal from the Ministry of Education to retrieve the military licenses of all the Princes' influential supporters.<sup>50</sup>

On August 9<sup>th</sup>, King Taejo again ordered the Princes to participate in all future trainings. He issued an order to

## THE KING OF JOSEON

disband their private troops and ordered their weapons confiscated. Though evidence is murky, the folklore is that Yi Bang-won worked with his wife to hide some of his troops' weapons in the city, instead of destroying them.

The Palace became a hotbed of resentment and intrigue.

On August 14<sup>th</sup>, King Taejo fell deathly ill.<sup>51</sup>

## The Strife of the Princes



*Driven out of the court to become a sorrowful bird,  
The wandering soul casts its lonely shadow deep in the  
mountains.*

*Night after night, deprived of sleep, it longs in vain for rest;  
Year after year, its deepening sorrow never reaches its bounds.  
As its crying stops at dawn, the fading moon looks pale;  
The stream of the spring ravine is dyed crimson by fallen petals.  
When the sky is deaf to the blood-choked supplication,  
Why should my grief-stricken soul have ears to listen?*

— King Tanjong, 6<sup>th</sup> King of Joseon (1441-1457),  
reflecting on being deposed and his coming execution<sup>1</sup>



The events of the late days of August 1398 are an impenetrable mystery. The official records of the *Taejo Sillok* share their version, but this version was written by diarists under the watch of the victor, while those who were thrown down lay dead.\* No one today can know for certain how it all happened, but by the time the “First Strife of the Princes” settled down, the reign of King Taejo had ended. The details told here adhere

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\* One of the key editors of the *Taejo Sillok*'s version of these events was the scholar Jeong Yi-o. This scholar was aligned with the Yi Bang-won faction that ultimately triumphed in “The Strife of the Princes,” and had a very close relationship with people like Ha-Ryun who became high officials during the later reign of Yi Bang-won as King Taejong. As one scholar of the era argues, it can be expected that Jeong Yi-o's version of the events discussed here (as reported in the *Taejo Sillok*) was perhaps written in such a way as to “hide the uncomfortable truth about the prince's rebellion.” See Lee, J., “鄭以吾 交遊 Gwangyewa Jeongchi Hwal-dong” [“A Study on Jeong Yi-o's Companionship and Political Activities”].

to the story as generally understood, though many points remain murky and unresolved.

King Taejo often talked of his retirement from politics and even his ultimate passing—it sometimes worried his supporters. In the spring of 1394, Taejo once visited his future tomb site, something he did with some frequency. That afternoon, a drinking table was set up on a boat and everyone shared wine. Taejo's trusted advisor, Jeong Do-jeon, fell into tears at the thought of having to bury the King. Taejo laughed it off, saying he was only planning for the future. Still, his advisors were spooked.

As the party returned home, the King tried to chase after a roe deer that dashed by, hunting it on horseback as he did in his younger days. But Taejo's horseman held the King's horse tightly by the bridle and would not let the aged monarch gallop away. The King had to give up the chase and was returned safely to his capital home.<sup>2</sup>

There were many times in his reign that the King spoke of hunting, fishing, and wanting to retire to a quiet life away from the capital—just as he did in those days right before the coup d'état that brought him to the apex of power. The King sometimes talked softly about the halcyon days when he was out of public view, staying at home. He mostly owned barren lands and wasn't a rich man, but he didn't mind.<sup>3</sup> The King missed his hometown and thought fondly of how he used to hunt freely across the fields and mountains of Dongbukmyeon (the northeastern area). The beautiful silver pampas grass of Hamyong, he missed that too. All over Korea, expansive fields of pampas grasses grow several feet tall, with plumes of misty feather emerging in pinks and purples in late summer and turning a silvery white with the coming of fall. Taejo always remembered the pampas grasses of North Korea's Hamhung area best of all, and often remarked on how he would like one day to be buried under those grasses.

With the passing years of his reign, the aged king seemed increasingly weary of court politics and the burdens of rule. Taejo's talk of missing his hometown, his sojourns to the hot springs, his frequent bouts of illness, and the planning for his own death often worried his advisors. It all must have drawn the court's attention to the thorny issue of dynastic

succession—certainly it drew the attention of his sons. In Taejo's final years, in fact, the question of royal succession became a bitter issue and provoked a famous "strife of the princes" that would ultimately drive the founding King into abdication and self-imposed exile back in his Hamhung hometown of old.

When King Taejo chose his youngest son, Yi Bang-seok of Lady Kang, to become crown prince, it was a decision the ambitious and achieved Yi Bang-won could not swallow but could not change. But now in the scorching summer days of 1398, the Joseon court was rocked with tension. Lady Kang had passed away just a few years previous and now King Taejo himself had fallen ill.

On the August 13, 1398, after two years of mourning his mother, Queen Sindeok, the crown prince Bang-seok took off his mourning clothes. The next day, the *Taejo Sillok* reports only a single line: "the King was not well."<sup>4</sup> It was a dangerous moment for the young crown prince. His half-brother princes were known to disagree with his title, his mother had died, and his father was deadly ill. At the same time, as the summer ended, Jeong Do-jeon escalated his calls that that the grown princes of King Taejo had to disband their private armies in favor of a central army, controlled primarily by Jeong Do-jeon himself. It seemed King Taejo and Jeong Do-jeon were perhaps planning a questionable invasion of Ming. There was even rumor that Jeong Do-jeon might be plotting to kill Taejo's older sons from Lady Han in order to secure his own influence and secure the future of the young crown prince.

After the King fell ill on August 14, his health deteriorated day by day. It seemed the disastrous moment of his death might be approaching. His father's death would mean that Yi Bang-seok would become King and this is something the ambitious Prince Yi Bang-won just could not tolerate. Bang-won disagreed strongly with the moves towards war with Ming, he was angry at Jeong Do-jeon's military reorganization, and he had serious political ambitions of his own.

The Provincial Governor of Ansan-gun, Lee Seok-beon, was a supporter of Bang-won, and whispered darkly about how to solve things now that King Taejo was ill. Just act with conviction and turn the tables on Jeong Do-jeon, Lee advised.



Another supporter, Ha-Ryun, met with Bang-won right before Ha-Ryun was slated to leave Hanyang for a government post in a southern province. At Ha-Ryun's farewell party, the aide wanted a word with Bang-won in private. He arranged to "accidentally" spill wine on Bang-won's clothes. While Bang-won and Ha-Ryun went to the back room to clean the clothes, Ha-Ryun spoke up. He told Bang-won that a fortune-teller had prophesied that Yi Bang-won, not the crown prince, was the future of the country. Ha-Ryun believed it, and urged Bang-won to act now, before Jeong Do-jeon sent them all to war.

Yi Bang-won had earlier heard about another fortune teller that supposedly had met with Jeong Do-jeon. That fortune teller had predicted big changes and troubling times coming to the Joseon court, but Jeong Do-jeon had only replied that "They are to be removed pretty soon. Why should you worry?"<sup>5</sup> It made Bang-won worry about what was on Jeong Do-jeon's mind, as King Taejo lay close to death.

Yi Bang-won conspired with some trusted allies, met with his two brothers (Bang-gwa and Bang-gan) and prepared his own troops. Weapons of private troops weren't allowed in the city, but Lee Seok-beon had a plan. He had a detachment of troops that were responsible for relieving the guard at Queen Sindeok's tomb (a guard was permanently set during the three-year mourning period) and when these troops entered the city for their duty, they could hide weapons as they came. This would add to the cache of weapons Yi Bang-won and his wife had hidden in the city earlier. The conspirators planned and watched for their opportunity.

King Taejo remained ill, and family members came and went to his side in the palace.

On August 22<sup>nd</sup>, a strange current of red energy streamed across the sky of the capital.

On August 23<sup>rd</sup>, there was heavy thunder and lightning, enough to make it into the permanent record. Hail and a rainbow followed.

On August 25<sup>th</sup>, a meteor streaked across the sky.<sup>6</sup>

The next day, August 26<sup>th</sup>, Yi Bang-won made preparations.\* He had dispersed some of his soldiers around the city and palace, but only twenty were fully armed as he wanted to avoid suspicion.

It seemed everyone was on edge. At the Palace, Yi Bang-won saw his half-brother Yi Bang-beon nervously going into the Hall where his father lay ill. Bang-beon was the brother of the crown prince and Yi Bang-won felt something was going on. Then an attendant came out of Gyeongbuk Palace and called out to Bang-won; "The king is in an emergency, so all the princes should come in quickly!"

Yi Bang-won noticed that the lamps around the hall were not lit and grew suspicious of the dark. Instead of going into the Palace hall, he said his stomach hurt and made for a nearby toilet. While inside, he heard people running about, searching for him. It was all too suspicious. Prince Yi Bang-won concluded that the situation had become irreversible. The time had come to act.

Bang-won fled the palace and sought out his associates. Near Gwanghwamun plaza, the three elder princes gathered on horseback: Yi Bang-won, Yi Bang-gwa, Yi Bang-gan. Other loyal supporters joined them: Yi Baek-gyeong, Yi Je-ju, Sim Jong. Racing on their horses, they sent word to Lee Seok-beon, whose soldiers were gathered and ready to act. Some had serious weapons, but many were given iron bars and sticks as

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\* For one record of all the events of August 26, 1398, described in the following paragraphs, see *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.8.26). This official record was surely compiled with an eye to presenting the actions of Yi Bang-won (who would later become King Taejong) in a positive light, so it cannot be wholly relied upon. However, there aren't many alternative records to rely upon. The material presented in the following paragraphs draws upon the reporting of the *Taejo Sillok*, and secondary sources cited here. All quotes are from the *Taejo Sillok*, except where otherwise cited. Though events must have occurred something along the lines of the well-known story presented in this collection of sources, precise details will probably remain forever murky. For one representative speculative account of these events, see Kim, D., *Yi-Seong-gyewa, Cho Chun, Jung Do-jeonui Joseon Wangjo Gaechan* [The Foundation of Joseon Dynasty by Yi Seong-gye with Cho Chun and Jeong Do-jeon].

so many weapons had been previously destroyed. Yi Bang-won then rode to the house of a royal concubine, where it was learned that Jeong Do-jeon was steeped in wine. Yi Sook-burn shot three arrows into the roof of a nearby house, which was a signal to other troops to set fire to three neighboring houses. Jeong Do-jeon had been laughing and enjoying himself that evening, but as the flames went up all around his drinking chambers, he must have felt his doom approaching.

Jeong tried to flee to another nearby house, but the owner came running out, crying that a man with a bloated stomach was trying to hide in his home. Bang-won's soldiers surrounded the house and commanded Jeong to come out. "Hardly able to walk, he crawled out."<sup>7</sup> The official history notes that Jeong Do-jeon looked up at Yi Bang-won and begged for his life. "Don't kill me," he pled. "I hope you save me today as you have saved me in old days."<sup>\*</sup> But Yi Bang-won accused Sambong, of conspiring to ruin the country with his military intrigues and planning to kill Yi Bang-won himself. Yi Bang-won ordered the scholar beheaded, right then and there.

Before the execution, it is said that Jeong Do-jeon quickly pulled out his small *pil-mook* (a travelling pen) and was allowed to leave a final poem (or perhaps he simply recited the poem). They are remembered as his final words and recorded in the *Sambongjip* (Anthology of Sambong).

*Consistently I put all my effort  
into contemplation and reflection.  
I have lived proudly  
Without abandoning the lessons in the book.  
Although I accomplished so much in the last 30 years  
without any rest  
Everything became in vain  
with one drink at Song Hyeon- bang's Pavilion.<sup>8</sup>*

With this final missive, soldiers beheaded Jeong Do-jeon in the streets of Hanyang, with flames all about. Now Yi Bang-won

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<sup>\*</sup> Jeong Do-jeon is referring here to the time Yi Bang-won saved his life by killing Jeong Mong-ju on the Sonjuk bridge, saving Jeong Do-jeon from a death sentence.

rode to the palace gates. By this time, the young princes of Lady Kang (Yi Bang-beon and crown prince Yi Bang-seok) had found time to raise their own troops. But when these troops rode out of the palace gate onto Gwanhwamun Plaza to confront Yi Bang-won, they panicked. It appeared to the loyalists of the crown prince that all of Gwanhwamun plaza was loaded with Yi Bang-won's troops, who stretched from the palace gates to the base of Mount Namsan, a mile away. Frightened by this display, the crown prince's troops retreated and melted into the night, unwilling to lose their lives.

Yi Bang-won then entered the palace gate and rode up to the Main Palace Hall, calling out the names of Park Wi and his supporting commanders, and ordering them to come out and surrender, or lose their lives. It was about 2:00 am, in the dead of night. Park Wi finally came out of the Hall, reluctantly, and stood before Yi Bang-won. Surveying the situation, he saw that Bang-won's forces looked weaker than expected, and he took heart. "I'll see what the day brings," said Commander Park, turning to go back in the Palace Hall. He hardly made it a step, as Yi Bang-won rushed forward and sliced his head off. All of Park's soldiers then threw down their weapons and took off their armor. Yi Bang-won ordered them to return to their homes and not come out again that night.

Bang-won then turned his aim to the princes of Lady Kang, Yi Bang-beon and Yi Bang-seok, the crown prince. When Bang-won ordered Bang-seok to come out and surrender, Bang-seok's wife Hyun-bin wailed, grabbing the hem of his clothes and begging him not to go. Yi Bang-won shouted to the Crown Prince that he had no choice, but that he was safe. "What harm can come to you if you come out?" Bang-won asked. "The battle is over." Bang-seok nervously came out to surrender. Yi Bang-won brought horses for both Bang-seok and Bang-beon and told them they would be escorted to a distant place until things had calmed down in the palace. "You're only safe in the remote part of the country...[but] even if you leave the palace now, you will be back in a short time."

The two sons of Lady Kang were then ordered into exile. As they left the palace they were slain on the trail. The two princes were just 16 and 17 years old. The husband of Princess Gyeongsun (King Taejo and Lady Kang's daughter) was also

killed. Other relatives and associates of the crown prince and Lady Kang were later hunted down and either beheaded, imprisoned, exiled, or flogged. Jeong Do-jeon's second son was killed during the night's battles, and his youngest son killed himself at home after hearing the news. Only Sambong's eldest son survived, later becoming demoted in office and sent to a post with the Jeolla provincial army, far south.

Yi Bang-won had "turned his hand over" and transformed the Joseon Court. Immediately thereafter, Yi Bang-won pushed his older brother, Yi Bang-gwa to accept the now vacant position of crown prince and presented the accession of the oldest son to King Taejo as a *fait accompli*. King Taejo was laying in his death bed and saw no way to resist. The deathly-ill King agreed to issue the royal proclamation presented to him. "To establish the eldest son born of the legal wife as crown prince is the law and the tradition handed down for ten thousand generations," the proclamation read. It then alleged that Lady Kang's children had committed conspiracy against the older Han princes, and supported the designation of King Taejo's eldest son, born of queen Han, as the new crown prince. "My eldest son is by nature sincere and cautious, practicing loyalty and filial piety. Hence, he deserves to be crown prince," proclaimed the King. Then a profoundly saddened King Taejo retired to his sickbed and quietly mourned his two executed sons.

A few days later, King Taejo began to feel a bit better, in terms of health. He was also pleased that at least his older, calm-headed son had become the crown prince and not the fiery and violent Bang-won. Taejo ordered the new crown prince to move into the palace's eastern bedchamber, giving him a bit of advice as they visited the Royal portrait hall. "Since I no longer have my father, I made this portrait to preserve his memory," the King told his oldest son. "Though my health has broken down, I am still breathing, which I believe is fortunate for you. While my illness continues, I wish for some grapes."<sup>9</sup> The word went out, and all the princes and officials ordered searches of the Royal Forest for grapes. When mountain grapes half ripe in the frost were discovered, the King was extremely pleased. "Whenever the King felt thirsty, he tasted

one or two grapes, and thereafter the King started recovering from his illness.”<sup>10</sup> King Taejo was not yet fated to die, after all.

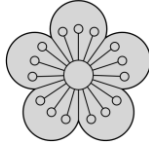
It was just a few days after that—five days after the strife of the princes—that the recovering King decided he wanted no further part of court politics. Aghast at recent developments, demoralized that his sons would commit fratricide for the crown, and mourning his dead queen and her two executed sons, the weary King Taejo had seen enough.

How long can I leave unattended the numerous things that happen every day? Whenever I think of this, I feel my condition worsen... Staying in the military for a long time and often exposed to frost and dew, I am worried that I have now become too old and sick to carry out various affairs of state from early in the morning until late at night... Now I want to abdicate the throne to the crown prince so that I can live out my last days while coping with my illness without worries.<sup>11</sup>

His eldest son, the crown prince Bang-gwa, agreed to take over the crown from his ailing father. Thereupon, King Taejo passed the royal seal to the crown prince, who changed his dress into the golden dragon robe, and put on a crown of hanging beads. He then bestowed upon his father the eulogistic title of “Supreme King” (*Sangwang*) and bowed low to the old founder, and before all the gathered officials. A new King sat upon the Phoenix throne of Joseon.<sup>12</sup>

As for the former King Taejo, he shook hands with his sadness. He was recovering, but still frail. Thinking about the deaths of his two sons, Taejo wouldn’t eat meat for weeks after the Strife of the Princes, so the members of the Privy Council began trying to sneak meat into his meals, hoping it would give him strength.<sup>13</sup> About a week after abdicating, Taejo heard a lonely hoot owl calling out all night in the northern garden of Gyeongbok Palace. The next day, the King moved his quarters to that very place, where he could sleep with his loneliness.<sup>14</sup>





## **THE HOLY MAN OF HAMJU**

“Gate Gate Paragate  
Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha”

(Gone, Gone, Altogether Gone,  
Oh What an Awakening, So Be it).

— The Heart Sutra





## The Disappearing Messengers



### *An Old General*

*The white horse neighing in the wind is tied to a willow;  
The general's sword in the sheath, for there is no war.  
Before he has done his share, he has grown old.  
In his dreams,  
he treads the mountainous front in deep snow.*

— Pak Wi-Gyeom<sup>1</sup>



As the former king recovered from his illness, things looked promising for a time. Though the former was greatly aggrieved at the conflict of the princes and murder of his two youngest sons, there was at least some wan consolation in the fact that his well-tempered oldest son had now become King. Taejo had always loved to hunt with his older son—the new King Jeongjong—and respected his calm demeanor. Taejo said that Yi Bang-won had brought him great misery but that Jeongjong “has never hurt my heart before.” He is “by nature sincere and careful, displaying integrity in his conduct.”<sup>2</sup> The former king appreciated how Jeongjong had graciously received his advice when Taejo handed over the royal seal.

I also admonish you to carry yourself according to precedents and regulations. Try to befriend men of integrity and keep away from petty people. Do not impose your personal prejudice upon others; instead, decide your preference in accordance with popular opinion. Do not dare to abandon yourself to dissolution or neglect to pay attention to your duty. Let your successors prosper by making your throne secure forever. Ah! Your father, lacking virtue, is not worth emulating, but the

Way of the sage kings is recorded in the books. Get up early and go to bed late, always being reverent in your behavior.<sup>3</sup>

The former King also must have found it familiar to see his son facing those same old Confucian Remonstrators he always had. Soon after accession, Jeongjong found the censors at his side, urging him to avoid hunting, women, and frivolous poetry that focused only on “singing of the wind and moon.” “The ruler should not indulge in [these] things no matter where they are,” the Remonstrators warned. “If he does, it is inevitable that he loses his mind along with his judgement.”<sup>4</sup> Instead of frivolities and “luxurious ease,” Jeongjong was urged to focus on rigorous Confucian studies and to attend the royal lectures. It was exacting standard, but Jeongjong seemed sincere to meet it, just as his father had been.

King Jeongjong’s very first royal edict mentioned that he was “terrified” to take over the rule from his father, but that he intended to rule with the same virtue as the former King Taejo. He announced a series of reforms to ease burdens on common people and committed his court to frugality. “The ceremonial weapons and banners, dresses, and vessels used in the palace shall be made as simple as possible,” he ordered. “Gold and silver, beads and jades, colorful flowers made of genuine silk thread, and such items shall all be prohibited.”<sup>5</sup>

The former king took some comfort in the familiarity of it all and searched to accommodate the new circumstances. In the early fall, as his health returned, Taejo enjoyed several banquets with all the new and old ministers, with plenty of drinking and dancing.<sup>6</sup> But there was plenty to be bitter about. In early October, King Jeongjong had sealed a pact of loyalty with his own set of new Meritorious Retainers, joining together as “one, in body and soul.”<sup>7</sup> These meritorious retainers included Yi Bang-won and Yi Bang-gan who had conspired against the former crown prince, killed Jeong Do-jeon, and (notably) been left off former King Taejo’s list of meritorious retainers. King Jeongjong noted that “their contributions [were] not recorded and publicly recognized” by Taejo, but “their contributions are so great that they cannot be forgotten.” Therefore, he bestowed each of them with 200 *kyol*

of land, 30 enslaved persons, a royal saddle horse, a gold-decorated belt, and “ordered shrines built in their honor and their portraits hung in them, and their contributions inscribed on the monuments.”<sup>8</sup>

While honoring his brothers and other meritorious supporters, Jeongjong ordered executions of those thought friendly to Jeong Do-jeon to continue, “so that the roots of treason can be eradicated.”<sup>9</sup> Some were beheaded, one was drawn and quartered, and an accused concubine was drowned. Others were flogged 100 times and assigned to hard labor in the navy.<sup>10</sup>

While the former king watched this sad fate of the Jeong Do-jeon faction, it must have been bittersweet to see King Jeongjong and Yi Bang-won quickly move to abolish private armies, a long goal of King Taejo and Jeong Do-jeon. This issue of creating a national army and abolishing private forces had led Yi Bang-won to rise against Jeong Do-jeon, but now that he sat at the right hand of his brother’s power, Yi Bang-won was fully supportive of abolishing the private armies of others.<sup>11</sup>

King Jeongjong also decided to move the capital back to Gaegyeong. Hanyang had proven cursed. It was the site of the strife that tore his family apart. Soon after taking the throne, a flock of black crows had flown cackling into the palace, spooking the new king. Owls were heard constantly hooting on the roof of the palace pavilion.<sup>12</sup> It seemed a haunted place. So the new King turned his back on this symbol of his father’s great achievement. It threw the former King Taejo into deep sadness to turn Joseon’s back on Hanyang, so soon after he had chosen the new capital. At the very end of 1398, a disconsolate Taejo released all the wild animals kept in his back garden: the bear, the tiger, the monkey, and all the other tribute animals gathered over the years.\*<sup>13</sup>

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\* As the *Annals of King Taejo* (the *Taejo Sillok*) come to an end with the close of 1398, this release of Taejo’s beasts is the final action of King Taejo that is mentioned in all of lengthy *Taejo Sillok*. The *Annals* of his sons, King Jeongjong and King Taejong, together with other records of the time, pick up the story from here.

As the former king left Hanyang, he wept while passing the tomb of Lady Kang; the dethroned king must have seemed something of a helpless old man.\* Taejo's daughter, princess Gyeongsun born of Lady Kang, also remained in deep grief over the murder of her husband during the Strife of the Princes. Instead of moving back to Gaegyeong, where Jeongjong was returning the capital, Taejo encouraged the princess to shave her head and become a monk in the monastery, which she did.

Jeongjong moved the capital back to Gaegyeong, but his reign was uneasy. Prince Yi Bang-won, the architect of the earlier strife of the princes, could not be restrained for long while his less ambitious brother occupied the throne. But even if Yi Bang-won's older brother agreed to abdicate to the power-thirsty Bang-won, there was the problem of yet one other older brother—the middle brother, Yi Bang-gan—who stood between Yi Bang-won and the Phoenix throne. That problem was soon fixed.

Escalating conflict between Yi Bang-won and his older middle brother soon led to violent conflicts between differing supporters of the two brothers, which Yi Bang-won eagerly joined with his private military forces. Yi Bang-won's forces won the short battle later known as "The Second Strife of the Princes," which solved the problem of any claim his middle brother might have to the throne.<sup>14</sup> He exiled his brother, Bang-gan, to a northern province, and executed some of his brother's supporters. Then Yi Bang-won turned his gaze on his oldest brother, who still sat on the throne as King Jeongjong, and probably was feeling a bit nervous.

The new King Jeongjong didn't much like all the familial strife and soon considered abdicating the throne to his ambitious younger brother—even though he had only served two years as king. In the summer of 1400, King Jeongjong

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\* In later years, after Yi Bang-won ascended the throne as King Taejong, he ordered Lady Kang's tomb removed from the capital city altogether and used some of the stones from her old tomb to help rebuild a city bridge. He also ordered construction of a new monument to his own mother, Yi Seong-gye's first wife, Lady Han. See *Taejong Sillok*, 2.18.14014, in *Sambongjip*, Vol. III, pp. 259-260.

asked his father how he would feel about turning over the crown to Yi Bang-won. Taejo instantly turned ice cold but had no power in the matter. "I can't tell you to do it, nor can I tell you not to do it," Taejo admitted stonily. "What can I do now that you are on the throne?"<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, there was nothing Taejo could do. King Jeongjong's advisors were already warning him of his danger, saying "Your Highness should seriously consider measures concerning your safety, and preparations for the troops to protect you cannot be delayed." The King grew anxious, wondering if he could really hold onto the crown.

When one of Jeongjong's concubines had a child and started calling this baby the "first-born" of the King (and thus the implied crown prince), everyone saw the disaster coming. The Dragon in the wings, eyeing the crown, certainly wouldn't appreciate this new hatchling.

Fix this situation, advisors warned. "You will certainly regret it unless you listen to what we say." King Jeongjong knew what his brother was capable of, so right away he renounced the supposed "first born."<sup>16</sup> "This boy is not my son!" he declared, claiming the concubine was pregnant before even being brought to court. The boy was kicked out of the palace and exiled to remote provinces. In later days he was forced to become a monk, though he always claimed: "I am the son of Jeongjong."<sup>17</sup>

As it became clear that Yi Bang-won would inevitably take over the throne sometime soon, the former King Taejo requested that at least some of Yi Bang-won's supporters who had helped instigate the strife(s) of the princes should be banished from the capital. "If you trust mutineers, won't they soon be looking to mutiny versus you?" Taejo asked Bang-won. "How long will Joseon last?"<sup>18</sup> But Bang-won refused to consider such exiles and had some of his aides visit Taejo to convince him not to try to impeach these meritorious retainers who had supported Yi Bang-won's rise. Taejo exploded in rage. "How can I stay here when all the people of the country are wrong? I will go where I want to go from now on!"<sup>19</sup>

Taejo then stormed out of Gaegyeong to hole up in a Buddhist temple (Sinamsa) some distance to the south. With his father self-exiled to Buddhist temple, on November 13,

1400, Yi Bang-won took over the throne in Gaegyeong's Suchang Palace. He would become known as King Taejong, the third King of the Joseon dynasty. After taking the throne, Taejong tried to visit his father to perform the very important ceremonial bow known as *sebae* on New Year's, 1401, but Taejo would not leave the temple to see his son.<sup>20</sup>

The former king continued to sojourn in Buddhist temples throughout much of the next two years, staying mostly at Hoemsa temple near Mt. Soyosan. In late 1402, Taejo received word that his blood brother and close childhood friend Yi Chiran had died. Taejo's growing loneliness and grief at the passage of all his loved ones must have played a role in his decision in early November 1402, to leave Hoemsa altogether and head for his ancestral home back north, in Hamhung. He said he wished to feel the more wholesome spirit of his old life and to die in his hometown area.<sup>21</sup>

The newly installed King Taejong was greatly aggrieved—even to the point of tears—by his Father's temple sojourn and long absence from the capital.<sup>22</sup> Such a situation surely troubled Taejong's sense of filial piety, while also being a serious political disadvantage. In addition, former King Taejo had taken the royal seal that signified the legitimacy of a king's rule with him when he left for the temples, and now for Hamhung, and refused to turn it over to Taejong. It was a politically difficult situation for the new King Taejong, who after all had rose to power through contentious fratricidal struggle and who even now did not have access to the royal seal.

As the former King Taejo made for the north on a strong station horse, the capital was abuzz with all the family conflict. Different factions had aligned themselves this way and that, and now the much-respected former king had turned his back on his son, the new King Taejong. Bringing the old king back to the capital, acquiring the royal seal, and reuniting the family Yi would surely be best for the country, the new King Taejong realized.

And so Taejong begged his father to return. Or rather, a series of unfortunate messengers did.\* As told in the *Yeollyeosil Gisul (The Narratives of Yeollyeosil)*, Taejong began to send messengers to Hamhung, begging the former King to forgive him for the murder of his half-brothers, and to return to the capital. According to popular folklore, these messengers rarely returned home. Legend has it that the former king, in anger at his son's fratricide, killed the messengers that came to him, sending his son an unmistakable message. Thus the origin of the Korean term "*hamhungchasa*," used in Korea to this day to describe someone who has left someplace and is never heard from again.

The stories say that one of these messengers was Sung Seok-rin, an old friend of the former King. He once showed up in common hemp clothes just beyond Hamhung's entrance. He tied his white horse at a tree and began preparing some rice on the road. Noticing his old friend, Taejo sent a eunuch out to ask what was going on. Sung Seok-rin said he had business in the area and was simply passing by. Taejo invited the old friend in for drinks and food.

During their conversation, Sung Seok-rin steered things to talking a bit about King Taejong and then asked whether Taejo would ever return to the capital. Taejo turned white and grabbed his old battle sword. "Did you come to comfort me for your king?!!" he raged. Sung fell to his knees, begging. "I swear on your sword I was not put up to this, or may my descendants be blinded!" Taejo let the old friend leave his house with his head intact, but legend has it that both the sons and the grandsons of Sung seok-rin were all born blind.<sup>23</sup>

Then there was the visit of Park Soon-sik. He arrived in the chilly November of 1402 for a casual visit with his old friend Taejo. He happened to be riding a mare who had recently calved a foal, and the baby horse followed along behind. Arriving at Hamhung, Park Soon-sik didn't ride the mare into town but told Taejo that he left the mother horse in

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\* The story of the "disappearing messengers" is likely apocryphal, at least in terms of Taejo himself possibly killing several of them. We share the old legend here, followed in later pages with an alternative explanation for the fate of at least one "disappearing messenger."



the field with her foal, saying that he couldn't bear to see the mother and child apart.

The reference to family bonds seemed a bit suspicious, but Taejo sat down to drinking and playing some Korean chess with his old friend. During their game, a mouse suddenly fell from the ceiling rafters. It was a mother mouse, and though she had fallen to her death, she had kept her baby mouse clutched to her chest. It reminded Park Soon-sik of the depth of parental love, and he fell to the ground weeping, begging Taejo to return to the capital. Taejo, too, fell into tears.

Taejo was touched and promised his friend he would think seriously about it, and then saw Park off to journey home. Some of Taejo's attendants were suspicious. King Taejong is playing on your emotions, and his messengers are lying to you, they said. "You should have Park Soon-sik killed!" they urged. Taejo placated his angry attendants with a bit of a gamble. He ordered his attendants to follow after Park Soon-sik, some time after he had left, and to make sure he was crossing the nearby river to head back down south. If Park hadn't yet crossed the Heugryong (Yonghong) River, that meant he was suspiciously delaying his travels for some reason, and he should be killed.

Unfortunately for Park Soon-sik, when he reached the river, he had fallen ill. Therefore, he had delayed his river crossing for some time, and was resting on a boat in the river when Taejo's men showed up on the riverbank. Park Soon-sik had not made it all the way across the river, so the men did as they were directed and slew him on the boat.

When Taejo heard what happened he was grievous. He was sure that Park would have already made it across the river some time ago and did not expect his men to actually kill his old friend. Back in the capital, Park's wife hung herself when she heard the news. In Hamhung, Taejo hung a portrait of his friend on the wall and cried often while gazing at it.<sup>24</sup>

Though stories of these disappearing messengers are commonly told, the facts may have been different. Evidence suggests that few, if any, messengers were killed by the former King, though it is clear that there was serious tension regarding Taejo's flight to the north and Taejong's effort to retrieve him. In fact, at the very moment that Taejo was riding

north on his station-horse, a rebellion of northern forces resistive to King Taejong was gathering. Loyalists to a faction of Queen Sindeok (Lady Kang), whose sons had been murdered by Taejong, had constantly whispered about “Kang’s revenge” in Taejo’s ears since the First Strife of the Princes. Now, in November of 1402 an actual conclave of pro-Kang rebels started to gather in the north, with a dangerous goal to rekindle her family.<sup>25</sup>

Taejong was understandably anxious at the idea of his father, that old military hero, joining with these rebellious northern forces. Taejo had said he planned to travel all about the northern provinces, visiting the ancestral tombs and taking comfort in meals with old friends and northern customs. Amid all the discontent and rebellion brewing in the border lands, the former King’s northern journeys didn’t sound too promising to the current monarch.

As his father rode north, Taejong sent messengers to find his father and bring him back to the capital. He also sent thousands of troops into the field to track down and defeat the growing rebel forces. Some of his troops were sent to the northeast, through Anbyeon and on up to Hamhung. Others were sent into northwest territories. A contingency garrison was posted at Seogyang (Pyongyang).<sup>26</sup>

It was during this time of northern discontent that Park Soon-sik (one of Taejong’s alleged messengers sent to persuade to his father) had supposedly been killed by Taejo’s soldiers while lying sick on a boat in the middle of the river. It seems likely that Park—a military man after all—may actually have been killed by northern rebels, under suspicion of being a spy for Taejong.<sup>27</sup> In the end, the former King Taejo barely made it back to his northern homelands before the small northern rebellion had been crushed. King Taejong effectively mobilized the centralized army that he had inherited from Jeong Do-jeon’s efforts and sent it north to destroy the uprising. Though there was no battle near the Hamhung east coast, where Taejo had travelled, Taejong’s northwestern army did encounter and defeat rebel forces on November 19-20 of 1402.<sup>28</sup> It was brutally cold and many of the ragtag rebels froze to death even without ever entering battle. Others drowned when the ice broke as they tried to flee across the

frozen Cheongcheon river (about 150 li north of Pyongyang). About 50 rebel cavalymen made it all the way back to Anbyeon near the east coast, but they were captured there and taken back to the capital. A group of rebel leaders and their sons were executed on December 12, 1402.<sup>29</sup>

It was unclear how much the former King Taejo might have been involved in this uprising personally, but its demise coincided with his decision finally to abide by King Taejong's constant appeals to return to Gaegyeong. The last messenger who arrived in Hamhung to convince the former king that he should return to the capital was Monk Muhak. It had to be a heartfelt meeting between the two former revolutionaries. Monk Muhak had once interpreted Yi Seong-gye's dreams of divine kingship. He had prayed with Yi Seong-gye in messianic rituals of Maitreya. He had planned the outline of the new capital and the course of Hanyang's walls. And now he had arrived to urge the fallen king to return to the capital he had once abandoned (Gaegyeong) and hold hands with the son who had broken his heart.

"Your face looks like a pig," said a morose King Taejo, making an oinking sound after Muhak arrived.

"Well, your face looks like the Buddha," complimented Muhak in return.

"Ah! I was trying to joke around, but you only flatter me," said a disappointed Taejo.

"But consider this," Muhak replied. "Everything looks a pig from the eyes of a pig, and everything looks like a Buddha from the eyes of a Buddha."

At that, the two old rebels fell into laughter and became like old friends again.<sup>30</sup> They talked, drank wine, and played *baduk* together for several days. Through the rest of November 1402, Muhak softly cajoled the former king to come home. Muhak often berated King Taejong's failures and weaknesses during these talks, which Taejo liked. But he also argued that Taejo had no choice. If he wanted to salvage some good for the dynasty he had worked so hard to found, he needed to return to the capital and support King Taejong. It is a tragedy to say it, Muhak admitted to Taejo, but the brutal and disrespectful Taejong is the only son left who actually matters to the dynasty you founded. There is no other option, for all the other

sons who might have taken the throne are either dead or afraid of dying.

“Frankly speaking, Yi Bang-won made a lot of mistakes, but Your Majesty’s beloved sons are all dead except for him,” Muhak noted. “If Your Majesty ended up abandoning this son (Taejong) too, who will carry out the cause Your Majesty has worked so hard for all this while? Rather than leaving the work in another’s hands, it will be better to let Your Majesty’s own bloodline handle it.”<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, Muhak cajoled, you can return to the capital you founded—Hanyang—because King Taejong is moving the capital back there after all. King Taejong hoped that his plans to return the capital to Hanyang, and to build a new royal residence for his father there, would help soften the former king’s will. Though King Taejong ascended the throne in Suchang palace in Gaegyeong (where his brother had returned the Joseon capital), a large fire erupted and burned down the whole palace soon thereafter. It was bad energy to build the new kingdom on the ashes of the old, so Taejong decided once again to move the capital back to Hanyang, just as his father had done. It took a few years of debate with some of his ministers, but in the end Taejong concluded that Hanyang was intimately tied to the opening of the new dynasty and reflected the will of his father. Therefore, he planned to return the capital to Hanyang, where the ancestors were enshrined in Jongmyo.<sup>32</sup>

Monk Muhak’s reasoning about preserving the Yi dynasty was sound, and in December of 1402 Taejo finally agreed to come back to the Hanyang area and be greeted by his son. Monk Muhak travelled with Taejo as far as Seogyang (modern Pyongyang), before saying goodbye and returning to life at Hoemsa and Geumgansan temples.<sup>33</sup> Further south, King Taejong happily prepared a huge, decorated tent of celebration out on the road to the capital to welcome his father back personally.<sup>34</sup>

The Narratives of Yeollyeosil (*Yeollyeosil Gisul*, dating back to early Joseon) provide one accounting of the events of this uneasy reunion, focusing on the high drama of the moment. Though this account may well be apocryphal and isn’t backed up in other historical records, including the

Annals of the Joseon Dynasty (the *Sillok*), it has provided the basis for centuries of Korean retellings over the years (including several loose historical TV dramatizations in the modern era).

According to these folktales, one of Taejong's advisors was very cautious about the return of Taejo to the capital. This councilor warned that the abdicated King Taejo was still very angry and that Taejong should be ready to take cover behind a large tree if Taejo took out his bow. Taejong agreed with this advice and built his welcoming tent around a large tree trunk.

Sure enough, the stories say that when his father showed up, the retired King's anger flared. He took out his legendary bow and fired several shafts at his son, the new King. But Taejong hid behind the big tree trunk, and the tree took all the arrows. Taejo eventually released all the anger burning inside him and accepted it all as the will of Heaven. He did not rise in violence against his son again.

After firing his arrows, Taejo walked up to King Taejong and took the royal seal out of his robes. "This is what you want, so take it now," he said, laying the seal before the new king. Taejong refused to pick it up three times, and fell into tears, trying to get his father to sit down for the banquet. The tense standoff continued.

Then Ha-ryun, Taejo's close aide, whispered to "give him a drink of liquor!" So King Taejong had a eunuch go to the former king and offer some wine. Taejo took the drink, and then several more, and grew more compliant. He sat down to the banquet, softly saying that "everything is Heaven's will."<sup>35</sup>

Historical records suggest that Taejo continued to drink all night, growing quite drunk and morose. But at least the father and son were reunited, and the founding King was setting eyes on his old capital once again.

### Temple Solace



*Zealous to deliver the suffering people,  
He fought on the mountains and plains.  
Oh, how many times did he go  
Without food and drink?*

*When you sup on Northern viands and southern dainties,  
When you have superb wine and precious grain,  
Remember, My Lord,  
His fortitude and fervor*

*- Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven  
Canto 113*



When Taejo first returned to the Hanyang area, it was proposed that perhaps the former King could take up residence in the old house of his deceased son, Bang-beon, who had been murdered in the First Strife of the Princes. But Taejo would not consider such a possibility. So King Taejong resolved to build new residential buildings in the small Deoksogung side palace that he began to expand specifically for his father to live in while in Hanyang.<sup>1</sup> While a permanent new residential structure was being built, Taejo lived for a time in a tent on the Deoksogung grounds.<sup>2</sup>

But this arrangement didn't last long. The fact is that Taejo didn't enjoy being back in the capital, nor being close to his son, King Taejong, who had caused him such pain. At one festive occasion after returning to Hanyang, Taejong and his ministers were celebrating and dancing up a storm. King Taejong happened to mention how great it was that his father had returned to the capital, "and has become comfortable." "It is the will of Heaven" that things turned out the way they did, Taejong said as he invited his associates to drink and dance. Taejo grew angry at the hubris and insult and suddenly drew

his sword, rebuking Taejong, and ordering him never to say that again. Both Taejo and Taejong ended up in tears.<sup>3</sup> On another ceremony uniting the two Kings, Taejo provoked everyone by staring at the sky for a long time. Then he looked to Taejong and asked him coldly: “How many of your relatives are left alive to help you?” Then he gave some blunt advice.

Some [of your relatives] are already dead and some are exiled. There are many helpers around when things go well, but few helpers are around when things go poorly. There is no such thing as a relative who helps when dead. So if you preserve your relatives, there will be fewer national catastrophes, fewer celestial disturbances and less havoc on earth.

Hearing this cold reminder that the family tragedy remained very much alive, Taejong became shocked, shed tears, and withdrew.<sup>4</sup>

With a dark mood like this, it is not surprising that King Taejo didn't spend much time joining court soirees, though he had returned to the capital area. Instead, throughout 1402 and beyond, Taejo mostly spent his days and nights at the nearby Buddhist temple of Hoemsa on Mt. Soyosan.\* The Hoemsa temple was one of the largest in Joseon, located right between the two capitals of Hanyang and Gaegyeong, about 80 li from both. It must have pleased the former King Taejo that Monk Muhak spent substantial time at Hoemsa as well, typically splitting his duties between Hoemsa and Geumgangsán, the east-coast temple where Taejo once performed the Maitreya ritual. Through winter and early spring of 1402, Taejo mostly used Hoemsa temple as his retreat.<sup>5</sup> “I am now too worn out for diligent effort and have put off the heavy burden, wishing

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\* Taejo visited many other temples during this time as well. For example, he often spent time at Heungcheonsa, erected in honor of Lady Kang. He visited Mt Geumgang as well, the east coast site of the old Maitreya rituals just before he became King. See *Taejong Sillok* 1:1 [1401] (3.1.1) (3.11.1).

only to devote myself entirely to the service of Buddha, prostrating myself before him morning and night," the former King explained.<sup>6</sup> On the slopes of Soyosan, Taejo constantly gave prayers to his deceased wives and murdered sons.

King Taejong came sometimes to Soyosan to offer supplicating meals to his father and sent ministers begging him to enter the capital, but to no avail. "I'm out of the palace because I don't want to be with you, who has killed my son-in-law, as well as Bang-seok and Bang-beon," Taejo bluntly informed his son. "I will follow them soon, so there is no need to be in the palace."<sup>7</sup>

Though the Confucian students of Sungkyunkwan mostly denounced Buddhist practices, King Taejo remained a devout Buddhist until the end of his days. It is ironic that the founding King retreated to Buddhist meditations in his final years, since his Confucian *sadaebu* had endeavored to turn Joseon firmly against Buddhism from the earliest days of Taejo's reign. In the very first list of key principles that Taejo received from the *sadaebu* after taking the throne, there were denunciations of Buddhism. "The so-called Buddhism is a religion that originated in a barbarian country," the advisors critiqued, bemoaning how Buddhist temples now rose all over the country. And although Buddhism originally taught people to seek austerity, "obtaining a pure mind and restraining desires," retreating into remote mountains and "eating nothing but vegetables and drinking nothing but water," that is hardly what monks in our country do.

They themselves amass fortunes and enjoy womanizing, riding fat horses, and wearing light robes. Their immoralities know no limits, undermining the state and making the people sick, and no problem is more serious than they.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout Taejo's reign, the Confucian scholars were relentless in such critiques of how the Buddhists were undermining national will and wealth and needed to be removed from prominence in public life. In their otherworldly dedication to the Buddha, monks were accused of harming the



relationship between father and son, and between ruler and subject. They undermined the people's commitment to daily weaving and farming. When the public granaries became empty, people still offered food to the monks, who never seemed to go starving.<sup>9</sup>

In their first advisement to the king, Taejo's Remonstrators with the Office of Inspector General advised that Taejo should gather all the monks together and test them for their sincere commitment to Buddhist ideas. Those found virtuous could be sent to remote mountains to practice pure Buddhism, while the others could be forced to abandon their robes, grow their hair back out, pick up a shovel, and get to work building the country with the rest of the people.<sup>10</sup>

A representative critique by the students of the Confucian academy was that deleterious Buddhist monks should be stripped of their religious exemption from military duties and driven out of their temple life. "We should make them return to their home villages, force them to join the military, burn their books, use their lands for military rations, redistribute their slaves, melt their statues and bells for coins, confiscate their utensils, take over their buildings for government and educational use, and ban their funeral rituals," went one critique. "Then, in a few years, the human mind would be corrected".<sup>11</sup>

King Taejo was non-plussed with such dire proposals. "What kind of books did these people read to dislike Buddha so much?" he once wondered.<sup>12</sup> Taejo was a practicing Buddhist, so none of these dire proposals went too far while he ruled.<sup>13</sup> He did reduce state support for some temple activities, returned some temple lands to state ownership or taxable status, and considered requests to abolish various Buddhist festivals. He also required some monks to serve in the military and provide corvée labor for public works.<sup>14</sup>

But overall, Buddhism flourished throughout Taejo's reign, and he himself was a dedicated supporter. He appointed Monk Muhak his Royal Preceptor and Monk Chogu as the State Preceptor. The *Taejo Sillok* mentioned 60 different times that Taejo sponsored Buddhist rituals or hosted monks for banquets during his six-year reign; sometimes hundreds of monks at a time would come to his banquets.<sup>15</sup> Taejo even

encouraged his royal guards to chant Buddhist sutras during their work hours, “making the sound of bells and drums ring throughout the whole capital,” much to the chagrin of his Confucian Remonstrators who found it a dangerous diversion from guard duties.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, Taejo sponsored printings of the *Koreana Tripitaka* with his own funds and oversaw the transport of the *Tripitaka*'s wood printing blocks from Seoul to Haeinsa temple, far down the peninsula. In his first year of reign, Taejo made a votive text for the printing of the *Tripitaka*, over the objections of his *sadaebu*. The text was enshrined at Haeinsa, sharing Taejo's prayer: “when I think of my lack of virtue, the burden becomes too much to bear, thus I still rely on the power of Buddhist skillful means (*upaya*)...I hope that through the secret protection and the wide spread of the dharma cloud, all things will flourish and bless the country and benefit the people.”<sup>17</sup> King Taejo even had a Buddhist temple built in the very center of the capital to offer daily prayers to the deceased Lady Kang's tomb, and sponsored other new temple projects after he had abdicated the throne.<sup>18</sup>

But things were changing with the coming of King Taejong. The Confucian scholars ramped up calls for a more thorough cleansing of Buddhist influence, while King Taejong (an accomplished Confucian scholar himself, who never appreciated Buddhism) hungrily eyed the substantial land holdings of Buddhist temples up and down the peninsula. Three years into Taejong's reign, immediately after the retired Taejo had returned most of the way to the capital and prayed at his nearby Buddhist shrine, the hammer fell. In the 4th lunar month of 1402, King Taejong's Office of Astronomy and Geomancy proposed to abolish almost all Buddhist temples in Joseon, and confiscate their land, save for seventy temples.<sup>19</sup>

The former King in his temple was deeply angered by the proposal, so much so that he started a hunger strike. By the seventh lunar month of 1402, the retired Taejo was eating very little, would eat no meat at all, and was growing more and

more gaunt.\* Alarmed, King Taejong rushed to the temple and begged his father to begin eating meat and to recover his health. He prostrated himself and offered a gift of four fine horses to encourage the King to eat well again. The weakened Taejo replied that he would not eat meat and that he would starve himself to death unless his son rescinded the order to confiscate temple lands and returned lands to the monks. Furthermore, “you should not push monks and nuns to get certificates, and not forbid women from going to temples and also you should build temples to continue my will.”<sup>20</sup>

Confronted by his father’s immoveable will, Taejong bowed to filial piety, agreed to the old King’s demands, and issued an edict to restore the temple lands. Taejo then began to eat well again and even broke Buddhist precepts by eating meat. For the time being, the campaign against the Buddhists slowed down, and hundreds of Buddhist temples and shrines across the country were saved.<sup>21</sup>

After these events, King Taejo finally agreed to travel to Hanyang more often, living in the small palace of Deoksogung that King Taejong had built specifically as a home for the former king. When Taejo arrived to move some things into Deoksogung, most of the ministers were terrified and wouldn’t even go to see him. What if the former king held them responsible for the events of the Strife(s), or for working with King Taejong? No one dared to visit Taejo, and the founding King was left alone in his empty palace.

Finally, just two ministers—Gilchang and Okcheon—went to welcome the former King back to the capital. “They came running and confessed with tears. I only consider these two loyal,” Taejo later said, remembering how the three of them sat down together and had drinks until dawn.

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\* There were several other times that King Taejo swore off meat and alcohol as part of his Buddhist sensitivities. See, for example, *Taejong Sillok* 6:3 [1403] (12.17.1), where Taejo drank a bowl a tea and then announced, “from now on, I will not eat alcohol and meat.” But this hunger strike occasion in 1402 was unique because Taejo was choosing to eat so little as to threaten his health, as part of a protest against his son’s policies.

### The Pampas Grass of Hamhung



*At Pu-Byeok Pavilion*

*Passing by Yeongmyeong Temple the other day  
I ascended to Pu-byeok Pavilion.  
The moon was floating above the castle ruin.  
Clouds encircled the moss-grown steps.  
The legendary stallion is gone forever.  
Where are the successive monarchs loitering now?  
I sigh, standing on the moonswept stairs.  
The mountains are still green, the stream continues to flow.*

— Yi Saek<sup>1</sup>



His final years were a lonely time for the former King, even when returning for short visits to the capital. Most ministers were avoiding him. His two wives had died. Two of his sons had been murdered. One son had become alcoholic, left the family due to loyalty to Goryeo, and died young. One daughter had shaved her head and went into seclusion as a monk. One son was banished due to the Second Strife of the Princes while another sat on the throne in violation of Taejo's wishes. His good friends Jeong Mong-ju and Jeong Do-jeon had both been murdered by his own son.

In the winter of 1402, the Jurchen warrior Yi Chiran died. This was Taejo's oldest friend and blood brother, the boy he had grown up beside and wrestled with over draughts of deer's blood in the mountains of Hamyong-do. In his death bed request to King Taejong, Yi Chiran asked only to be remembered with the traditions of the north and finally to be restored to his homelands.

Your minister is originally a man of the homeland who is dying in a foreign land. Please burn my corpse and return me for burial to the homeland. Your majesty, please have your officials bury me according to the practices of my country. And please, your majesty, rule with prudence and cultivate your virtue and preserve Joseon for all time.<sup>2</sup>

In 1405, Taejo's closest spiritual advisor Monk Muhak also passed away. Now Taejo was quite alone, looking longingly towards the pampas grasses of his northern homeland, where he hoped one day to join his blood brother in rest. He spent his last years mostly in seclusion and sorrow. In the spring of 1406, when a festive celebration of the new Deoksogung palace occurred, Taejo grew bittersweet. "When I was young, how would I have known there would be today?" he asked. "I just wanted to live long, but now seventy has passed and I'm not dead yet." While the former king pondered all that had passed, everyone at the party had a great time, "raising their glasses several times" until they became very drunk. Suddenly, Taejo stood up with a loud declaration to the current king Taejong and all the younger officials. "You all fall short of my knowledge and skills! If you want to learn, I will teach you!" In good humor, the partygoers commenced to wage drunken martial contests with the aged former monarch. Perhaps the contestants showed due honor to the elderly founder, for in the end he won all the contests. A sodden Taejo put on nice silks and rode home on horseback, followed by his servants on foot.<sup>3</sup>

But such happy occasions were rare. The former King grew increasingly annoyed with big affairs and court politics, and avoided both. On one occasion in 1405, he planned a quiet trip to the hot springs and grew exceptionally annoyed when a long line of officials showed up to see him off, and many servants tried to follow him to the springs. "I tried to go quietly, without word of mouth," a prickly Taejo complained. "Why is there all this hassle just to go out?" He ordered the servants to clear out and not follow him and told everyone be less troublesome in general.<sup>4</sup>

Taejo enjoyed hiking the mountains without entourage and praying quietly at Buddhist temple. He once sought the temple monks for advice regarding all that had been lost. "Your servant is honored to become a long-lived man, conquering the South and destroying the North. But he has committed so many murders that the more he looks back on it all, the more anguish he feels." What can I do, Taejo asked, to settle my soul? The monks urged him to enter the mountains, cut his hair, and pray endlessly to Buddha to avoid bad karma after death. Taejo agreed and bowed his head. He entered the mountains, "forgetting the world's work and entering the nirvana path."<sup>5</sup>

So things continued until the dead of winter of 1408, when *Jeoseung Saja* \*—that grim herald of the Korean underworld—finally began to call on the aged Taejo. In mid-January Taejo fell seriously ill. He suddenly could not stand or talk normally; it seems the former king had experienced a stroke. Though Taejo survived his stroke, he became bedridden. He was so incapacitated that he couldn't even rise to receive his son, King Taejong, who left in tears when he tried to pay a visit to the Deoksogung palace where Taejo was lying in bed.<sup>6</sup>

King Taejong was so worried over his father's condition that he sought otherworldly help, forgiving and releasing several prisoners in an appeal to Buddha's mercy. Showing his filial piety to the gods, Taejong burned incense in the courtyard in front of Taejo's healing room and sought to take his father's suffering into himself by burning holes on his forearm with lit incense.<sup>7</sup> Together with these spiritual pleas, Taejo was likely given tea of boiled chrysanthemum leaves, a common remedy at the time for such illnesses.<sup>8</sup> Still, Taejo's condition lingered into February and then into March and April. More prisoners were forgiven and released. More incense was burned into King Taejong's filial forearms.<sup>9</sup> On April 19<sup>th</sup>, five well-wishers came to the Deoksu palace and

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\* *Jeoseung Saja* is the herald of the underworld, a guide to the afterlife, akin to the Grim Reaper of Western mythos.

offered a small statue of Buddha to the former king, but he could not rise to look at them.<sup>10</sup>

Things became worse in May. By mid-May, the Joseon court fell under a state of emergency, for it was clear that *Jeoseung Saja's* shadow had fallen over The Grand Progenitor's bed, and the herald of the underworld would not be leaving alone. Taejo was brought to Cheondeok palace for care, but nothing could be done. Hundreds of monks gathered in the courtyard to pray for the former King's health. King Taejong made one last desperate appeal to heavenly mercy. Pleading for the Heavenly King to restore his father to health, Taejong dramatically forgave even the most serious of criminals in his own earthly realm. He forgave "rebellion, beating and killing grandparents, or parents, wives killing husbands, *nobi* (slaves) killing their masters, robbery, or illegal production of salt."<sup>11</sup>

But none of it mattered. In the end, Taejo could not take food or even sit up. On May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1408, as the rain poured outside, the ailing king looked up twice at those around him and then passed away. His son, King Taejong, beat his chest and dropped to his knees, wailing.<sup>12</sup> A court eunuch went out onto the palace rooftop and vigorously shook out the royal robes of the King, calling three times for the spirit of the deceased king to come back into the palace.<sup>13</sup> Then all the people knew. King Taejo, the "Destiny-opening" founder of what would be Joseon's 500-year dynasty, lay dead.

On the day of the King's death, his body was bathed and his hair washed clean with boiled birch and rice water. His fingernails and toenails were clipped, and the nail bits placed inside inner pockets of his clothes. Rice and a single pearl were placed inside his mouth. Then the King's sons fasted for three days. On the third day, the King's body was wrapped with 19 layers of clothes. On the fifth day, an additional 90 layers of cloth were wrapped around the King's body, and tied up with fabric, before the King was placed in a coffin.<sup>14</sup>

After the initial five days, a white silk was prepared and wrapped around the King's spirit tablet. The spirit was then taken to rest in *Honjeon* (the Royal Spirit hall, located in the palace). At the same time, Taejo's body was separately placed into a coffin and kept in *Binjeon* (the Royal Coffin Hall). King Taejo's body and spirit would remain in these halls for five

months until the funeral began.<sup>15</sup> The body was preserved through the hot Hanyang summer by being enclosed in a bamboo casing and laid upon an icetray in one of Hanyang's two icehouses. The ice in these houses had been hacked out of the frozen Han River in the winter, stored through the summer in huge slabs.<sup>16</sup>

This was just the beginning of a ritual period lasting three years, in terms of complete entombment of the King's body and enshrinement of the spirit in the Jongmyo Ancestral Shrine.<sup>17</sup> Mourners during much of this time (all the princes, princesses, queens, concubines and high officials) wore coarse hemp cloth and abstained from music, weddings, celebrations, sexual relations, horseback riding, alcohol, spice, slaughtering of animals, or eating of meat.<sup>18</sup> The court issued a decree prohibiting dance, theater, musical performances, alcohol, weddings, or the butchering of livestock for three months. For five days after a King's death, markets were closed and essentials could only be acquired through the black market.<sup>19</sup> Violation of mourning rules could result in loss of office.<sup>20</sup> When one high ranking official was given the job of announcing King Taejo's obituary to China, he unwisely tried to take contraband merchandise with him. But such merchandising was disallowed during the mourning period and when his violation was discovered the official was impeached and dismissed from office.<sup>21</sup>

Construction of Taejo's tomb on Mount Geoman east of Hanyang (near today's city of Guri) began in July, two months after his death.<sup>22</sup> Though King Taejo had helped choose this site himself, in later years he grew disenchanted with resting for eternity near the capital. Throughout his final years, Taejo entreated his son King Taejong several times to bury his remains not in Hanyang, but up north in his hometown of Hamhung, under the silver pampas grasses of his youth. But Taejong found it inappropriate to bury the dynasty's founder in a far-away frontier town. The "*Grand Progenitor, Destiny-Opening, Divinely Martial, Great King*"<sup>23</sup> must be buried near the capital of Hanyang, he ordained. So tomb construction began on Geomansan, not far from Hanyang's eastern gate.



Thousands of laborers worked the project, which took a month and half to complete.\* Royal sculptors prepared stone monuments surrounding the tomb, while royal painters covered the interior walls of the tomb with a blue dragon of the east, white tiger of the west, red phoenix of the south and black warrior of the north. The ceiling was painted with the sun, moon, constellations, and Milky Way.<sup>24</sup> The tomb's funerary inscription told how "Our progenitor was first in battle...his awesome reputation began to spread...He was victorious wherever he turned."<sup>25</sup>

On the day of Taejo's funeral (September 4, 1408), his son King Taejong wore white mourning robes and a white headpiece.<sup>26</sup> A small army of 218 soldiers conveyed the massive coffin palanquin. These soldiers had to work in six separate shifts to cover the 30 li (about 15 kilometers) between the capital and the tomb location, so 1,308 soldiers in total were involved in carrying the coffin. In front of the coffin came a long procession of smaller palanquins carrying ceremonial objects

One for the Chinese emperor's letter of approval; one for the jade book on which the late King's elevated titles are engraved; one for his posthumous titles written on strips of jade called *sichaek*; one for his posthumous gold seal; one for the folded and tied silk cloth in lieu of the spirit tablet; five palanquins for burial objects of many kinds such as small scale sets of porcelain dishes and bowls, those made of bamboo, of wood,

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\* Though the records don't say exactly how many laborers were involved, for the later funeral of King Injo in 1649 official records tell us that 6,438 people were mobilized to prepare events of the day, while 2,848 laborers worked to construct the royal tomb (Yi, S. "Introduction to the UigweRoyal Documents of the Joseon Dynasty," n.d.; See also Korean Cultural Heritage Administration, "*Donggureung Iyagi*" ["The Story of Donggureung"] [https://royaltombs.cha.go.kr/tombs/selectTombInfoList.do?tombseq=104&mn=RT\\_01\\_01\\_01](https://royaltombs.cha.go.kr/tombs/selectTombInfoList.do?tombseq=104&mn=RT_01_01_01)).

[statues of] wooden slaves; a small sedan chair containing layers of the late king's costumes; *yoyeo* for formal ceremonial costumes, one daily outfit and other items of leisure such as musical instruments; one carrying eulogies written on the jade book.<sup>27</sup>

In front of it all went a troop of musicians, playing the sad sounds of mourning. Behind it all came the wailers, whose grief could be heard far and wide. Thousands of onlookers observed the procession. When the procession arrived at the tomb, four demon quellers were called forth. These *bansangi* went down into the empty tomb, wearing fierce golden masks with four eyes, draped with bear-hides, and wielding long weapons. They bravely chased away any evil spirits lurking in the dark, preparing the way for the King above.

Temporary spirit tablets of mulberry wood were inscribed here and taken back to the Royal Spirit Hall in the palace, where the spirit of Taejo would live until it was enshrined in Jongmyo, as a permanent resting place, 27 months later.<sup>28</sup> Finally, Taejo's body in its coffin was lowered to his underground palace—the tomb of King Taejo, named *Geonwolleung*. A tablet was included to memorialize the achievements of the founding king.

*He had a heart of gold. He faced the declining last years of the preceding dynasty, he was able to settle many difficulties, and created a large kingdom... In the martial arts, he was like wind and thunder. He lighted the world like the sun and the moon...He repaired and renewed the country's name...He made the life of the people comfortable, and because he has opened up our inexhaustible luck, we are truly rooted in the heart of prosperity. First and foremost, his grace fell upon the animals and the plants...He gave many blessings to preserve his offspring for 100 billion years.<sup>29</sup>*

As evidence of his filial piety, King Taejong supplemented his father's well-crafted tomb site with dedication of nearby land for a relocated Buddhist temple (Gaegyeongsa), to which he assigned 150 enslaved persons to assist several hundred monks in their regular prayers for the soul of his father.<sup>30</sup>

Taejong even sought a way to honor his father's wish for burial under the northern pampas grass. Though King Taejong would not suffer his father's body to be taken far north for burial, he did arrange for the transit of cartloads of dirt and pampas grass from Hamhung to the capital of Hanyang (a journey of about 500 li or 250 kilometers). He then covered the tomb of his father with the silver grass of home. He also arranged for numerous pine trees to be planted all around *Geonwolleung*, in tribute to his father's origins in the pine-covered mountains and his pen name of Song Heon ("Pine Tree").<sup>31</sup> Watchers were set about the tomb of King Taejo, and the mourners returned to the capital. The mourning period continued for 27 additional months, when the auspicious day for permanent enshrining of the King's spirit in Jongmyo would arrive.<sup>32</sup> By that time, the silver pampas grass of Hamhung must have grown high above the bucolic burial mound of Korea's dynastic founder.

## A Tree With Deep Roots



*Tribute to Yi Seong-gye Upon Defeating the Pirate Invasion*

*Everyone felt your strength and leadership...  
The island barbarians turned pale  
when they saw your majestic army  
And neighboring countries held their breath and trembled.  
Everyone in the court stands in line to praise you,  
and that's because  
You have rendered service to the country,  
which will last forever.*

— *Kim Kuyong, Goryeo State Finance Commission*<sup>1</sup>



King Taejo planted deep roots for a dynasty that endured. Lasting 518 years, from its founding in 1392 to its demise in 1910 when colonial Japan annexed the Korean nation, Joseon became one of the longest-lasting and most exquisitely realized Confucian dynasties on earth. Though many of the old elite families of Goryeo reappeared as influential positions after the rise of Joseon, the situation had changed dramatically. Borders were more secure, taxes had become fairer and more rational, land reform stabilized the national economy, the agricultural situation had dramatically improved, a commitment to the written law had expanded, and the ideological empire of Confucianism swept over the nation.<sup>2</sup>

For most people in Joseon, life had improved. For several hundred years after Taejo's rule, Joseon experienced a golden era without foreign wars, and filled with scientific and literary achievement. During that time, Korea eagerly took up neo-Confucian philosophy and crafted one of East Asia's most highly developed civilizations. Social reforms and agricultural innovations dramatically reduced the corruption and widespread famine of the late Goryeo years. Scholars, artists,

scientists, and farmers all found new horizons opening before them. State support for studies among communities of virtuous Confucian scholars dramatically expanded, as the Joseon government established several national and regional schools and developed more rigorous and centrally managed merit exams to enter into government administration. In 1393, King Taejo sent medical instructors to every province to enhance the medical profession. In 1397 he supported the publication of a "Collection of Native Prescriptions to Save Life."<sup>3</sup> Building on this tradition, thousands of scrolls and books were published during the decades following Joseon's founding, using a movable metal type that Koreans invented more than a hundred years before Gutenberg created his device.

King Taejo's grandson, King Sejong, continued this scholarly dedication by establishing his "Hall of Worthies," or *Jiphyeonjeon*. Sejong established this royal research institute in 1420, filled it with talented scholars, and set them to work on all manner of historical, philosophical, and practical research projects. In one astonishing achievement, Korea's written language of Hangeul was invented whole cloth by this Hall of Worthies. Before Hangeul, the only option for reading and writing in Korea was to master Chinese iconographic language, with its thousands of different symbols. Hangeul has only 24 letters, is much easier to master than iconographic Chinese, and is attributed with a significant rise in Korean literacy.<sup>4</sup>

It is fitting that the very first book ever printed in Hangeul was *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, a series of lyric Cantos telling the grand story of King Taejo, his four divine ancestors, and his son, King Taejong. The Cantos say these men were six divine dragons: "Their works all have the favor of Heaven."<sup>5</sup> Yi Seong-gye's ancestors were all "submerged dragons." With the coming of King Taejo, the dragon took flight, and the foundations of Joseon were laid down, strong and enduring. Canto two of the Songs celebrates how the spirit of King Taejo would come to nurture his people for a long time.

*A tree with deep roots  
 Because the wind sways it not  
 Blossoms abundantly  
 And bears fruit.  
 The water from a deep spring,  
 Because a drought dries it not,  
 Becomes a stream  
 And flows to the sea.<sup>6</sup>*

Today, King Taejo's deep roots remain under his burial mound of *Geonwolleung*, exquisitely maintained just as it was over 600 years ago. There are 119 royal tombs and burial mounds constructed throughout the Joseon dynasty for the Kings, Queens, crown princes and princesses of Joseon. Among all those royal burial mounds, silvery pampas grass grows on Taejo's tomb alone. The founding King always wanted to be buried under the pampas grass back home in Hamhung, so in the end his rebellious son, King Taejong, brought pampas grass from Hamhung to cover his father's burial tomb in the capital. Though all the other royal burial mounds have short, well-tended green grass, it is fitting that this tomb alone has the more rugged, tall grass of the wild. In the spring and summer, the green pampas stems grow unbroken and untamed above Taejo's burial mound. In the fall, the tall feathery grass turns purple and silver, waving in the wind. The great general of the northern borderlands never did make it home in the end, but a bit of home made it to him.

Though the King under this mound died lonely, the choices he made had consequence and bequeathed benefit to his country. Joseon became a "land of scholars"<sup>7</sup> built by a military general from the unschooled north. Facing so many hard and complicated moments, this general and king took up the burden of history and made choices to create more value than he destroyed. Most important of all these choices, standing on the banks of the Yalu river in 1388, Yi Seong-gye made a momentous decision whose consequences reverberated across the centuries—the *Wihwado Hoegun*.

More than five hundred years later, when famed Korean independence activist Kim San told the story of Korean rebellion against the Japanese colonial forces that terminated

the Joseon dynasty (in his biography, *Song of Ariran*), it is telling that Kim dedicated his story “To the Return of Exiles across the Yalu River.”<sup>8</sup> Kim San spent much of his biography reflecting on his own choice to cross the Yalu River into Manchu lands while being pursued by Japanese forces, and he dreamed of a day when the freedom fighters could return from the Yalu to put things right.

In 1927, Korea’s freedom fighter Kim San came to the same Yalu River as King Taejo did in 1388, and he recalled the choice of Yi Seong-gye so many years ago. He faced the hard decision of whether to cross the Yalu River into China, to live and fight another day, or return to Korea to face Japanese troops right then and there. In his biography, while facing execution in 1937, Kim offered a fitting summary of such moments of choice on the riverbanks of history.

*A man's name and his brief dream may be buried with his bones, but nothing that he has ever done or failed to do is lost in the final balance of forces. That is his immortality, his glory or shame. Not even he himself can change this objective fact, for he is history. Nothing can rob a man of a place in the movement of history. Nothing can grant him escape. His only individual decision is whether to move forward or backward, whether to fight or submit, whether to create value or destroy it.*<sup>9</sup>

Yi Seong-gye was a warlord who created more value than he destroyed. A submerged dragon who marched to the Yalu and returned. A King who rose above Goryeo’s end days and forged a new way. Still today, the general’s choice blossoms abundantly and bears fruit.

## ***Reference Matter***





## NOTES

### A Note on Formatting

The following endnotes provide abbreviated citation material (e.g., author last name and article or book title). For complete author names, publication dates, and other publication information on the works cited in endnotes, see the bibliography.

All references from the *Taejo Sillok* refer to the English edition of the *Taejo Sillok* translated by Choi Byonghyon (2014 translation, Harvard University Press). The reference style for material taken from that edition of the *Sillok* is as follows: *Fascicle: Year of Reign* (e.g., 14:7) followed by the date material, using the following format: *year.lunar month.day* (e.g., 1398.6.12).

All references to *Joseon Wangjo Sillok* materials other than those of King Taejo refer to the Korean language *Sillok* materials provided by the Korean National Institute of History and available here: <http://eSillok.history.go.kr/>. The reference style for these materials is *fascicle: article number* (e.g., 3:5), followed by the date entry in brackets, using the following format: *[Year] (reign year.lunar month.day)*. Example reference: *Taejong Sillok*, 6:3 [1403] (12.17.1).

References to the *Koryosa* (History of Goryeo) refer to the digital version of this text, made available by the National Institute of Korean History. Those materials are available at: <https://db.history.go.kr/KOREA/item/level.do?itemId=kj&types=r>. The reference style for those materials is as follows: *Koryosa, Volume number, month.year, URL location*. Example reference: *Koryosa*, v. 30, 11.1375.  
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## NOTES

### *Preface*

- <sup>1</sup> Palais, J., "Record Keeping in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Korea," p. 584.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 583.
- <sup>3</sup> For details on the production process of the *Joseon Sillok*, see Choi, B. "Translator's Introduction," *The Annals of King Taejo*; Reynolds, "Culling Archival Collections in the Koryŏ-Chosŏn Transition"; Kim, J. "Archives, Archival Practices, and the Writing of History in Premodern Korea"; Vermeersch, "Archival Practice in Premodern Korea: Record-Keeping as Archive and Historiography"; Yi S., "Introduction to the Uigwe Royal Documents of the Joseon Dynasty"; Hur, "Veritable Records (*Sillok*) of the Joseon Dynasty."
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> Reynolds, "Culling Archival Collections in the Koryŏ-Chosŏn Transition" 2019, p. 214.
- <sup>7</sup> For details on the production process of the *Joseon Sillok*, see Hur, *op. cit.*; Choi, B. "Translator's Introduction," *The Annals of King Taejo*; Reynolds, *op. cit.*; Kim, J. "Archives, Archival Practices, and the Writing of History in Premodern Korea," 2019; Vermeersch, "Archival Practice in Premodern Korea: Record-Keeping as Archive and Historiography," 2019; Yi S., "Introduction to the Uigwe Royal Documents of the Joseon Dynasty," 2008.
- <sup>8</sup> Choi, B. *op. cit.*
- <sup>9</sup> Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 242
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.
- <sup>12</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.6.12). This same reference applies for the remainder of the King's conversation.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Chapter 1*

- <sup>1</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, "Cheongseo." ["General Introduction"], Kindle loc. 420.
- <sup>2</sup> For an excellent discussion of these regional politics, see Robinson, D., *Empire's Twilight*.

<sup>3</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo.” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 341.

## Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup> Grayson, J., *Myths and Legends from Korea*, “Part II.E: Foundation Myths,” esp. p. 31; Janhunen, J., “Tracing the Bear Myth in Northeast Asia”; Cho, H., “The Significance of Perceptions of Baekdusan in Baekdu-related Myths,” Allen, C., “Northeast Asia Centered Around Korea.”

<sup>2</sup> Palka, E. and Galgano, F. *North Korea: A Geographical Analysis*, Chapters 3 & 9.

<sup>3</sup> Alston, D., “Emperor and Emissary: The Hongwu Emperor, Kwŏn Kŭn, and the Poetry of Late Fourteenth Century Diplomacy,” p. 131.

<sup>4</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.9.26).

<sup>5</sup> Lee, D., Ha, T., Hong, S., and Song, H., *Jeonbukjiyeokui Joseon Tajoe Eujeok* [The Remains of King Taejo in North Jeolla Province], pp. 199–221.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107–114.

<sup>7</sup> Kota, N., “Ssangsŏng Ch’onggwambu as the Border between Koryŏ and Yuan Dynasty.”

<sup>8</sup> Ulhicun, A. and Shi, J., “Manchuria from the Fall of the Yuan to the Rise of the Manchu State (1368–1636),” p. 28;

Weatherford, J., *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, Part I.

<sup>9</sup> Schmid, A. “Rediscovering Manchuria: Sin Ch'aeho and the Politics of Territorial History in Korea”; Seth, M., *A Concise History of Korea*, pp. 72–73; Kim, A. and Min, K., “The Problem of the Ethnic Composition of Palhae State”; Yun, P. “Manchuria and Korea in East Asian History”; Crossley, P., “Bohai/Parhae Identity and the Coherence of Dan gun under the Kitan/Liao Empire”; Choi M., “*Yongbieochunga Natanan Yeonalseonchoui Yongtojeonjenggwa Byeongeong*” [“A Study on the Territorial Wars and Northern Border in Yongbieocheonga”], p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> Hwang, K., “From the Dirt to Heaven,” p. 148.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, p. 114.

## NOTES

<sup>13</sup> Choi M., op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> Hwang, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> Robinson, D., *Empire's Twilight*, p. 100.

<sup>17</sup> Kong, B., "Mongolui Chimryakgwa Goryeo Muinjungwon mit Sambeolchoui Doseohaeyangjeonryak-geu dongasiajeok uiui" ["The Mongol Invasion of Goryeo and Goryeo's Island-Marine Military Strategy"].

<sup>18</sup> Agrawal, B., "Korea as a Focal Point of the Security Concerns of Northeast Asia," p. 40. See also Hulbert, H., *History of Korea: Volume I*, p. 199.

<sup>19</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 17, 8.1253; 12.1254.

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<sup>20</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 17, 10.1254.

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<sup>21</sup> Kota, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> For a book length treatment of, see Henthorne, W. *Korea: The Mongol Invasions*. For a short review, see Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, pp. 130–137.

<sup>23</sup> National Museum of Mongolia, "Mongolian Empire Exhibit."

<sup>24</sup> Kota, N., op.cit.; Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*.

<sup>25</sup> Ulhicun, A. and Shi, J., op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> Robinson, D., *Empire's Twilight*, pp. 28–34.

<sup>27</sup> Choi, M., op cit., p. 106.

<sup>28</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, "Cheongseo." ["General Introduction"].

<sup>29</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, "Cheongseo." ["General Introduction"], Kindle loc. 349.

### Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> Lee, H., "Yi Seong-gyeui Jeonseunggwa Uimi Yeongu" ["The Tradition of Yi Seong-gye's Myth and Meaning Analysis"]; See also Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, *Jeonbukuiro Tteonaneun Yi Seong-gye Yeoksa Yeohang* [The Historical Travels of Yi Seong-gye through Jeonbuk], p. 191.

<sup>2</sup> Seth, M., *A Concise History of Korea*, p. 120.

- <sup>3</sup> Im, Y. *Joseongukwang Iyagi I* [The Story of the Kings of the Joseon Dynasty], p. 17.
- <sup>4</sup> Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, p. 126; *Koryosa*, v. 11. 4.1170; 5.1170.  
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- <sup>5</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 11. 4.1170.  
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- <sup>6</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 11, 8.30.1170.  
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- <sup>7</sup> Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, pp. 125–27.
- <sup>8</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 11, 9.1170.  
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- <sup>9</sup> Throughout 1174, for example, the *Koryosa* is filled with entries regarding rebellions against Yi Ui-bang and his allies. See, for example, *Koryosa*, v. 12, 1.1174; 9.1174; 10.1174.  
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- <sup>10</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 12, 12.1174.  
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- <sup>11</sup> For details on the story of Yi Ui-bang, see Kamata, S., “Buddhism During Koryo,” pp. 50–51; Jang, S., “*Goryeo Myeongjong Okripui Jeongchiseryeoke daehan Jemunje*” [“Problems around the Political Powers Who Enthroned King Myeongjong in Goryeo”]; New World Encyclopedia, “Jeong Jung-bu.”
- <sup>12</sup> People and History Editing Committee, *Hwanggeum Daedulbo Jaeguk Yi Seong-gye* [Yi Seonggye: The Cornerstone of the Golden Kingdom], p. 16.
- <sup>13</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 353–370; *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Canto IV; Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, *Jeonbukuiro Tteonaneun Yi Seong-gye Yeoksa Yeohang* [The Historical Travels of Yi Seong-gye through Jeonbuk], p. 28.
- <sup>14</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 368.

## NOTES

<sup>15</sup> Crossley, P., op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Kim, B. *Wangjeongui Jogeon: Damronuiro Ikneun Joseonsidaesa* [The Conditions of Monarchy: Reading Joseon History Through Discourse], pp. 119–123; Bohnet, A., *Turning Towards Edification*, p. 14; Hwang, K., “From the Dirt to Heaven,” p. 149; Choi, M., op.cit., pp. 113–114.

<sup>17</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 370.

<sup>18</sup> For examples of the Mongol slaughter across the mainland, see *Koryosa*, v. 16, 7.1231. 11.1231;

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[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_016r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0050\\_0050](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_016r_0010_0020_0050_0050).

See also Henthorne, W., *Korea: The Mongol Invasions*, 1963;

Kong, B., “The Mongol Invasion of Goryeo and Goryeo's “Island-Marine Military Strategy.”

<sup>19</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 16, 6.1232.

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<sup>20</sup> *Koryosa Choryo*, abridged by S. Lee, p. 376.

<sup>21</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 17, 4.1355.

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<sup>22</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 16, 5.1233.

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see also v. 17, 3.1255.

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, *Koryosa*, v. 17, 2.1255; 3.1255.

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<sup>24</sup> *Koryosa Choryo*, abridged by S. Lee, p. 376.

<sup>25</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo.” [“General Introduction”], Kindle

loc. 370–382.

<sup>26</sup> Robinson, *Empire's Twilight*, pp. 28–24; Kim, J., Lee, J., and Lee, J., “‘Goryeoyang’ and ‘Mongolpung’ in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries”; Kota, N., op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo.” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 341–348, 379.

- <sup>28</sup> Lee, J., “Special Issue: Changes in the Korean Political System; Establishment of the Ssangseong General Office and its characteristics”; Han, I., op. cit., p. 20; *Koryosa*, op. cit., p. 363.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid. See also Ulhicun, A. and Shi, J., op. cit., p. 96.
- <sup>30</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.9.18)
- <sup>31</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo.” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 370–400. See also Kim, J., *Jeong Do-jeon Sidaerul Ilda* [Reading the Age of Jeong Do-jeon].
- <sup>32</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo.” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 370–427. See also Kim, J., op. cit.
- <sup>33</sup> Turnbull, S., *The Mongol Invasions of Japan 1274 and 1281*; Conlan, T., *In Little Need of Divine Intervention*.
- <sup>34</sup> Neumann, J. “Great Historical Events that were Significantly Affected by the Weather.”
- <sup>35</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo.” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 420.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., Kindle loc. 430.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., Kindle Loc. 483.
- <sup>39</sup> Ryu, K. and Kim, K., “*Joseon Taejodaewang Taesilui Hyungsikgwa Tteukseong*” [“A Study on the Type and Characteristics of the King Taejo’s Taesil in Joseon Dynasty”]; Shim, H. “*Joseonwangsil Tasilseokhamui Hyunhwanggwa Yangsikbyeonchun*” [“Taesil Seokham Styles of the Joseon Royal Family”]; Choi, H., “*Joseonsidae Taesile Gwanhan Yeongu*” [“A Study of Taesil Culture of Korea”].
- <sup>40</sup> *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, p. 113.
- <sup>41</sup> Little Korea, “National Intangible Cultural Property No.47 Gungsijang.”
- <sup>42</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 620. *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Canto 27.
- <sup>43</sup> Im, J., *Tajoegohwangje: : Joseongukwangpyongjeon 1* [King Taejo: First King of the Joseon Dynasty], p. 24.
- <sup>44</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 583.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 629.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.



## NOTES

<sup>47</sup> Kim, J., Lee, J. and Lee J., "'Goryeoyang' and 'Mongolpung' in the 13th–14th Centuries," p. 170; Kim, D. op. cit., p. 145.

<sup>48</sup> Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 33.

<sup>49</sup> Kim, J., op. cit., p. 170.

<sup>50</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, "Cheongseo" ["General Introduction"], Kindle loc. 530.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> As described in *Taejo Sillok*, "Cheongseo" ["General Introduction"] Kindle Loc. 341.

<sup>53</sup> Lee, D., Ha, T., Hong, S., and Song, H., *Jeonbukjiyeokui Joseon Tajo Eujeok* [The Remains of King Taejo in North Jeolla Province], pp. 199–221.

### Chapter 4

<sup>1</sup> Lee, H., "Yi Seong-gyeui Jeonseunggwa Uimi Yeongu" ["An Analysis of the Meaning of Myths about Yi Seong-gye"], Myth number 8–6.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Duncan, J., *The Origins of the Chosun Dynasty*, p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, pp. 2–6.

<sup>4</sup> Many of the details in the story of Empress Ki in this chapter were drawn from: Hwang, K., *A History of Korea*, Chapter 6; Robinson, D. *Empire's Twilight*, pp. 118–129.

<sup>5</sup> Robinson, D., *Empire's Twilight*, p. 121.

<sup>6</sup> Robinson, D., *Empire's Twilight*, pp. 118–121. McMahon, K., *Celestial Women*, pp. 58–60.

<sup>7</sup> Lee, H., "Political Power Groups of Koryŏ Dynasty after the Period of Yuan China's Intervention."

<sup>8</sup> Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, pp. 75–76.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.124.

<sup>10</sup> Duncan, J., op. cit. pp. 89–98.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>12</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 16, 5.1233.

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<sup>13</sup> Robinson, D. *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, pp. 2–3.

- <sup>14</sup> See, for example, Ahn Hyang, “The Spread of Neo-Confucianism” and Jeong Mong-ju, “The Development of Neo-Confucianism” in *Sources of Korean Tradition*, edited by P. Lee, W. de Bary, and Y. Choe, pp. 253–54; Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, pp. 152–158, 205–217.
- <sup>15</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, “A Literary Mirror to Order the World (1395).” In Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, p. 167.
- <sup>16</sup> Cited in Kang, J., op. cit., p. 158; see also pp. 111–112.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 191.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 155.
- <sup>19</sup> Duncan, J., op. cit., p. 174.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 175; Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 81.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 165.
- <sup>22</sup> Cited in Robinson, D., *Empire’s Twilight*, p. 55.
- <sup>23</sup> Schamiloglu, U. “The Impact of the Black Death on the Golden Horde: Politics, Economy, Society, Civilization.”
- <sup>24</sup> Kota, N., “Ssangsong Ch’onggwambu as the Border between Koryŏ and Yuan.”
- <sup>25</sup> Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 27.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 87.
- <sup>27</sup> Chong, K., “Revitalization of Ancient Institutions,” p. 79.
- <sup>28</sup> Lee, H., “Political Power Groups of Koryo Dynasty after the Period of Yuan China’s Intervention”; Kim, D. *Yi Seong-gyewa, Cho Chun, Jung Do-jeonui Joseon Wangjo Gaechan* [The Foundation of Joseon Dynasty by Yi Seong-gye with Cho Chun and Jeong Do-jeon], p. 59; Lee, S., *Gae-gyeongbutteo Hanyangkaji 1: Gweonryeoktujenguiro bon Joseon Tansenggi* [From Gaegyeong to Hanyang Vol. I: Power Struggle in Joseon], p. 99.
- <sup>29</sup> Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, p. 166; Lee, H. op. cit., p. 30.
- <sup>30</sup> *Koryosa*, 131:15a5-16a4, See also Robinson, D., *Empire’s Twilight*, p. 135; Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 77; Lee, H. op. cit., p. 30.

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<sup>31</sup> Bae, S. *Joseon Geonguk Janhoksa: Seolgyeja Yi Bangwonui Nanghokhago Oeroun Seontaek* [The Cruel History of the Foundation of Joseon], p. 45.

<sup>32</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 26. 7.1356.

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<sup>33</sup> *Koryosa*, cited in Chong, K., p. 36.

### Chapter 5

<sup>1</sup> “A dragon rises from a shallow stream” is a Korean proverb describing a situation where a person of humble background achieves great things. For more information on Yong-wang and Korean dragon folklore, see Mason, D., “King of the Dragons”; *Encyclopedia of Korean Folklore*, “Dragon King.”

<sup>2</sup> Robinson, D., *Twilight of Empire*, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> See Weatherford, J., *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, pp. 300–301; Tsai, W., “Ethnic Riots and Violence in the Mongol Empire: A Comparative Perspective,” p. 95; Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Kota, N., “Ssangseong Chonggwanbu as the Border between Koryo and Yuan Dynasty”; Park, H., “*Joseon Geonguk Cho Junganggun Yeongu*” [“A Study on the Central Army in the Early Joseon Dynasty”].

<sup>6</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo.” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 535. See also *Koryosa*, v. 26, 12.1355; 3.1356.

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<sup>7</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo.” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 535.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson, D, *Empire’s Twilight*, p. 124; Lee, H., “Political Power Groups of Koryo Dynasty after the Period of Yuan China’s Intervention,” p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 26, 5.1356.

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See also Robinson, D., *Empire’s Twilight*, p. 118. Kim, D., *Yi Seong-gyewa, Cho Chun, Jung Do-jeonui Joseon Wangjo Gaechan*

[The Foundation of Joseon Dynasty by Yi Seong-gye with Cho Chun and Jeong Do-jeon], p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 26, 6.1356.

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<sup>12</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 26, 7.1356.

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<sup>14</sup> Robinson, D., *Empire's Twilight*, p. 51.

<sup>15</sup> Yun, P., "Manchuria and Korea in East Asian History,"

p. 2-3; Choi, M., "A Study on the Territorial Wars and Northern Border in Yongbieocheonga."

<sup>16</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, "Cheongseo" ["General Introduction"], Kindle loc. 544; Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 134-139.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 141.

<sup>19</sup> For details on the military and diplomatic maneuvering after Goryeo's capture of Ssangseong, see Kota, N., op. cit.; Lee, J., "The Development of Diplomatic Relations and Trade with Ming in the Last Years of the Koryŏ Dynasty," 2006; Robinson, *Empire's Twilight*, pp. 128-9.

<sup>20</sup> Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 143.

## Chapter 6

<sup>1</sup> Lee, H., "Yi Seong-gyeui Jeonseunggwa Uimi Yeongu" ["The Tradition of Yi Seong-gye's Myth and Meaning Analysis"], Myth 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, "Cheongseo." ["General Introduction"], Kindle loc. 547.

<sup>3</sup> Jo, M., *Joseonui 2 yi Injadeul: Geudeulun eotteokke Gwollyeokjaga Doeotneunga?* [Joseon's Two Right-Hand Men: How Did They Gain Power?]

<sup>4</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, "Cheongseo" ["General Introduction"], Kindle loc. 638.

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- <sup>6</sup> For this quote and all the preceding details on this *kyokku* match, see *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo.” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 629–658.
- <sup>7</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 547–573.
- <sup>8</sup> Duncan, J., “The Social Background to the Founding of the Chosŏn Dynasty: Change or Continuity?” p. 57.
- <sup>9</sup> Choi, M., “*Yongbieochungae Natanan Yeonalseonchoui Yongtojeonjenggwa Byeongeong*” [“A Study on the Territorial Wars and Northern Border in Yongbieocheonga”], p. 119.
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- <sup>14</sup> Kang, D. and Jueng, W., “Semiotic research about dominant and counter-part Myths.”

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- <sup>2</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 659.
- <sup>3</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “*Cheongseo*” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 667; Bieler, S., “Private Armies in the Early Korean Military Tradition (850–1598).”
- <sup>4</sup> Clark, D., “Joseon’s Founding Fathers: A Study of Merit Subjects in the Early Yi Dynasty,” pp. 26–28; Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, p. 168; Bohnet, A., *Turning Towards Edification*, pp. 35–36;

- <sup>5</sup> Hwang, K., “From the Dirt to Heaven: Northern Koreans in the Chosŏn and Early Modern Eras.”
- <sup>6</sup> Clark, op. cit.; Bohnet, op. cit., p. 36; Chong, D., “Making Joseon’s Own Tributaries”; Yoon, H., “*Goryeo Mal Yi Seong-gyeui Ghwaldonggwha Joseon Geonguk Judo Seryeokui Gyeoljip Yangsang*” [“Military Action of Yi Seong-gye and the Gathering Base of Support in the Late Goryeo Dynasty”], p. 141.
- <sup>7</sup> Robinson, D. *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 205.
- <sup>8</sup> Robinson, D., *Empire’s Twilight*, p. 166; Im J., *Tajoegohwangje: Joseongukwangpyongjeon 1* [Taejo: King of the Joseon Dynasty], pp. 43–44.
- <sup>9</sup> Kang, J., op. cit., p. 159.
- <sup>10</sup> Robinson, *Empire’s Twilight*, p. 147.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 151–163.
- <sup>12</sup> Park, J., “*Goryeohugi Honggeonjeogui Chimipgwa Bepbui Gunsahwaldong*” [“On the Invasion of Red Turban Army(紅巾賊) in late Goryeo Dynasty and Military activities of Ahn-Wo (安祐)”]; Robinson, *Empire’s Twilight*, p. 166.
- <sup>13</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo.” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 666.
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- <sup>16</sup> Cited in Robinson, *Empire’s Twilight*, p. 263.
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- <sup>18</sup> Cited in Robinson, *Empire’s Twilight*, p.173.
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- <sup>22</sup> *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Canto 77.
- <sup>23</sup> People and History Editing Committee, op. cit., p. 43.
- <sup>24</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 675–684; Robinson, D., *Empire’s Twilight*, p. 157.

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- <sup>27</sup> Robinson, D., *Empire's Twilight*, p. 194.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 204–207.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- <sup>31</sup> Hwang, K., op. cit.
- <sup>32</sup> Ebrey, P. and Walthall, A., *Pre-Modern East Asia*, p. 179.
- <sup>33</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.7.26).
- <sup>34</sup> All the quotes in this paragraph are from *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 748–757. See also *Koryosa*, v. 30, 10.1376. [http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_030r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0050\\_0040](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_030r_0010_0020_0050_0040)
- <sup>35</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.7.26).
- <sup>36</sup> Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 160.
- <sup>37</sup> Lee, J., “The Development of Diplomatic Relations and Trade with Ming in the Last Years of the Koryo Dynasty,” 2006; Cho, M., “Goryomal-Joseoncho Guknaejungchijibaeseryeokui Daejunginsik” [“Diplomatic Relations with China in The Period of Late Goryeo and Early Joseon Dynasty”]; Robinson, D., *Empire's Twilight*, pp. 211–212
- <sup>38</sup> Robinson, *Empire's Twilight*, p. 212; Shin E., op. cit., p. 44.
- <sup>39</sup> Robinson, *Empire's Twilight*, p. 229.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>41</sup> General Yi was well known for often fighting at the forefront of his troops. See Yoon, H., “Goryeo Mal Yi Seong-gyeui Ghwaldonggwha Joseon Geonguk Judo Seryeokui Gyeoljip Yangsang” [“Military Action of Yi Seong-gye and the Gathering Base of Support in the Late Goryeo Dynasty”], p. 115.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 230–23.
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- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle loc. 773.
- <sup>45</sup> Lee, J., “Yodongjiyoe Dehan Joseoninui Insik: Sejongsilrokjirijiwa Donggukyeojiseungrameu Jungsimeuro”

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<sup>46</sup> Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, *Jeonbukuiro Tteonaneun Yi Seong-gye Yeoksa Yeohang* [The Historical Travels of Yi Seong-gye through Jeonbuk], p. 68.

<sup>47</sup> Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 206.

<sup>48</sup> Im, J., op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> Park, S., “History of Astronomy in Korea.”

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, that interpretation in People and History Editing Committee, op. cit., p. 54.

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<sup>53</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 896.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. 902.

<sup>55</sup> Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 207.

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<sup>60</sup> Clark, D., “Joseon's Founding Fathers: A Study of Merit Subjects in the Early Yi Dynasty,” p. 26.

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## Chapter 8

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- <sup>2</sup> Lee, H., "Political Power Groups of Koryŏ Dynasty after the Period of Yuan China's Intervention," p. 34.
- <sup>3</sup> See Duncan, J., *The Origins of the Joseon Dynasty*, pp. 86–87; Kim, I., "Goryeomal Sadaebu Gyenyeumui Yeoksaseonggwa Jeongchijeok Bunhwae Daehan Nonui" [A study of Historical Concepts Regarding the Sadaebu and Political Power]; Kim, H., "Goryeomal gwonmunsejokgwa Sadaebuui Gaehyeokan Bigyo" ["A Comparison between the Gwonmunsejok and Sadaebu at the end of Goryeo"]; Shin, E., "Shindonjipgwongiui Jungchiwa Geu Uimi" ["Politics and Its Implications of Shindon Regime"]; Hong, Y., "Gongminwangde Hubanui Jungguk Unyounggwa Sindonui Jipjung" ["The Administration of Politics in the Late Period of King Gongmin and Concentration of Political Power in Shindon"].
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*.
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- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 30; See also Kim, J., *Jeong Do-jeon Sidaerul ilda* [Reading the Age of Jeong Do-jeon], p. 28.
- <sup>8</sup> Min, H., op. cit.; Lovins, C., "The King's Reason: Yi Seong-gye and the Centralization of Power in early Joseon," p. 53.
- <sup>9</sup> Kim J., op. cit. pp. 29–31.
- <sup>10</sup> Kim, H., "Goryeomal gwonmunsejokgwa Sadaebuui Gaehyeokan Bigyo" ["Comparison between the Gwonmunsejok and Sadaebu at the end of Goryeo"].
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- <sup>17</sup> Kang, J., op. cit., p. 149.
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- <sup>22</sup> Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 95.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid. See also Deuchler, M. op. cit., p. 4.
- <sup>24</sup> Kang J., op. cit. pp. 156–57; Lee, S., *Gae-gyeongbutteo Hanyangkkaji 1* [From Gaegyeong to Hangyang Vol. I], p.25.
- <sup>25</sup> Chong, K., “Revitalization of Ancient Institutions,” p. 55.
- <sup>26</sup> *Koryosa* 115: 10b–11a-c, cited in Shin, E., op. cit.; Kang, J., op. cit, p. 157.
- <sup>27</sup> Deuchler, M., op. cit.; Lee, S., op. cit.
- <sup>28</sup> Kim, D., op. cit.
- <sup>29</sup> Do, H., “Development of Sagonghak during the Transition from the Koryo to the Choson Dynasty,” p. 76.
- <sup>30</sup> *Koryosa*, 132: 6, cited in Shin, E., op. cit., p. 308.
- <sup>31</sup> Wood, A., *Limits to Autocracy*, p. 146–47.
- <sup>32</sup> For reviews of Jeong Do-jeon’s life, including many of the details covered in the next several paragraphs, see Kim, J., *Jeong Do-jeon Sidaerul ilda* [Reading the Age of Jeong Do-jeon]; Park, B., *Joseon Cheogoui Sasangbeom* [The Best Ideological Outlaw of Joseon].
- <sup>33</sup> Clark, D., “Chosŏn’s Founding Fathers: A Study of Merit Subjects in the Early Yi Dynasty,” p. 24; Chong, K., “Revitalization of Ancient Institutions,” p. 14.
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- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 337.
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- <sup>37</sup> Clark, D., op. cit., p. 24.
- <sup>38</sup> Do, H., op. cit., p. 78.

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- <sup>40</sup> Shin, E., op. cit., pp. 36–37.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 53. Also see Kang, J., op. cit., p. 167.
- <sup>42</sup> Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, pp. 195–96.
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- <sup>57</sup> Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 242.
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- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 246–253.
- <sup>61</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 29, 10.27.1374.  
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### Chapter 9

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<sup>9</sup> For one telling of this well-known story, see Gong, J. *Joseon Wangsil lyagi* [Stories of the Joseon Dynasty], pp. 19–20.

<sup>10</sup> Kang, H. *Tombstones without a Tomb*, pp. 41–43.

<sup>11</sup> Cho, M., *op. cit.*; Ji, D., *op. cit.*

- <sup>12</sup> Duncan, J., *The Social Background to the Founding of the Chosŏn Dynasty: Change or Continuity?* p. 75. Kim, D., “Goryeomal Lee Seong-gyeui Jeongjeock” [“Yi Seong-gye’s Political Opponents in Late Goryeo”]; Tae, S., “*Taesugyeong Honingwangyeui Chuireul Tonghae Bon Goryeomal Yi Seong-gyeui Jeongchijeok Sungjang*” [“Political Growth of Yi Seong-gye at the end of Goryeo through Marital Relation Trends”].
- <sup>13</sup> *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Cantos 17, 80, 117.
- <sup>14</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongso” [“General Introduction”], Kindle Loc. 1170.
- <sup>15</sup> Deuchler, M., *The Confucian Transformation of Korean Society*, pp. 89–90; Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, chapter 11.
- <sup>16</sup> *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Canto 82.
- <sup>17</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongso” [“General Introduction”], Kindle Loc. 1368. See also Baker, D., “Rhetoric, Ritual, and Political Legitimacy,” p. 159.
- <sup>18</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongso” [“General Introduction”], Kindle Loc. 2678.
- <sup>19</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongso” [“General Introduction”], Kindle Loc. 1170; Im, J., *Taegohwangje: Joseongukwangpyongjeon 1* [King Taejo: First King of the Joseon Dynasty].

### Chapter 10

- <sup>1</sup> Mason, D., “Hwangsan Victory Monument at Jiri-san’s Hwasu-ri Village”; Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, *Jeonbukuiro Tteonaneun Yi Seong-gye Yeoksa Yeohang* [The Historical Travels of Yi Seong-gye through Jeonbuk], pp. 161–63.
- <sup>2</sup> Choi, M., “*Yongbieochungae Natanan Yeonalseonchoui Yongtojeonjenggwa Byeongeong*” [“A Study on the Territorial Wars and Northern Border in Yongbieocheonga”]. Lee, J., “The Development of Diplomatic Relations and Trade with Ming in the Last Years of the Koryo Dynasty.”
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Koryosa*, v. 30, 7.1376.  
[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_030r\\_0010\\_0030\\_0070\\_0060](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_030r_0010_0030_0070_0060);  
 v. 30, 3.1377.  
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<sup>4</sup> *Taejo Sillok* 9:6, 1397.3.8.

<sup>5</sup> Song, J., “*Joseoncho Waegu hwaldonggwa Joseon–Ilbon Gwangye Yeongu*” [A Study on the Japanese Pirates’ (Wakou) Activities and the Chosun–Japan Relations in Early Chosun]

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78; Kim, P., “Choe Mu–Seon and The Early Era of Wokou Piracy,” p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Throughout the 1370s, the *Koryosa* is filled with entry after entry about raiding parties of Japanese pirates.

<sup>8</sup> Kim, J., *The Land of Scholars*, p. 201.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>10</sup> Kim, P., *op. cit.*; *Koryosa*, v. 30.

<sup>11</sup> Yoon, H., “*Goryeo Mal Yi Seong-gyeui Ghwaldonggwha Joseon Geonguk Judo Seryeokui Gyeoljip Yangsang*” [“Military Action of Yi Seong-gye and the Gathering Base of Support in the Late Goryeo Dynasty”], pp. 121–122.

<sup>12</sup> Im, J., *Tajoegohwangje: Joseongukwangpyongjeon 1* [King Taejo: First King of the Joseon Dynasty], pp. 75–81.

<sup>13</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 30, 5.1377.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 977.

<sup>16</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 30, 5.1377.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_030r\\_0010\\_0040\\_0050\\_0060](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_030r_0010_0040_0050_0060)

<sup>17</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 30, 9.1377.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_030r\\_0010\\_0040\\_0090\\_0010](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_030r_0010_0040_0090_0010); *Taejo Sillok*, Kindle loc. 985–1005.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. 1005; See also *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Canto 58.

<sup>19</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo.” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 985.

<sup>20</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 30, 5.1377.

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<sup>21</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 3.1380.

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<sup>22</sup> Lee, S., *Gae-gyeongbutteo Hanyangkkaji 1* [From Gaegyeong to Hanyang Vol. I], p. 122; Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center,

- Jeonbukuiro Tteonaneun Yi Seong-gye Yeoksa Yeohang* [The Historical Travels of Yi Seong-gye through Jeonbuk], p. 120.
- <sup>23</sup> Robinson, D., *Empire's Twilight*, p. 57.
- <sup>24</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 3.1380.  
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- <sup>25</sup> Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, op. cit., pp. 118–120.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 30, 12.1376.  
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- <sup>28</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 30, 3.1377.  
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- <sup>29</sup> Kim, D., *Yi Seong-gyewa, Cho Chun, Jung Do-jeonui Joseon Wangjo Gaechan* [The Foundation of Joseon Dynasty by Yi Seong-gye with Cho Chun and Jeong Do-jeon], p. 198.
- <sup>30</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 10.1379.  
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- <sup>31</sup> Song, J., op. cit., pp. 19, 26–29. For a detailed study of these pirating attacks, see Jeong, Y. “The Name of Ajibaldo of Waegu and Perspective of Goryeo People.”
- <sup>32</sup> Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, op. cit., p. 116.
- <sup>33</sup> *Koryosa*, op. cit., p. 471–2.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 475.
- <sup>35</sup> *Taejo Sillok* 7:4, 1395.4.19
- <sup>36</sup> Kim, P., op. cit.
- <sup>37</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 8.1380.  
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- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, op. cit., p. 222, 207.
- <sup>40</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1034–1059. See also *Koryosa*, v. 31, 8.1380.  
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- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., loc. 1043. See also *Koryosa*, v. 31, 8.1380.  
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- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., loc. 1062–1099; *Koryosa*, v. 31, 9.1380.  
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- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> For a detailed examination of the possible implications of this pirate’s name, see Jeong, Y., op. cit.



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<sup>45</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 9.1380.

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<sup>46</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1090–1099; See also Jeong, Y, op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 9.1380.

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<sup>47</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1090–1099.

<sup>48</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1099. *Koryosa*, v. 31, 9.1380.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1111.

<sup>53</sup> Lee, D., Ha, T., Hong, S., and Song, H., *Jeonbukjiyeokui Joseon Tajeo Eujeok* [The Remains of King Taejo in North Jeolla Province], pp. 68–69.

<sup>54</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo.” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1126; *Koryosa*, v. 31, 9.1380.

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<sup>55</sup> Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, op. cit., p. 21–24; 207; Lee, D., Ha, T., Hong, S., and Song, H., op. cit., p. 44. A re-enactment of the founder of the Han Empire (Liu Bang) reciting this song is in the historical drama *Wind Song*. A clip is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cISuzHPdy00>.

<sup>56</sup> Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, op. cit., pp. 104–05, 222.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>59</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1125–1135; *Koryosa*, v. 31, 10.1380.

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<sup>60</sup> All the poems below are in *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1135–1160.

## Chapter 11

- <sup>1</sup> For one version of this study see Mark, J., “Mencius.”
- <sup>2</sup> Lee, S., *Gae-gyeongbutteo Hanyangkkaji* [From Gaegyeong to Hangyang Vol. I], p. 154.
- <sup>3</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1194.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.; *Koryosa*, v. 31, 8.1383.  
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- <sup>5</sup> For details here and in subsequent paragraphs regarding Yi’s encounter with Hobaldo, see *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1194–1203; *Koryosa*, v. 31, 8.1383.  
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- <sup>6</sup> Im J., *Tajoegohwangje: : Joseongukwangpyongjeon 1* [King Taejo: First King of the Joseon Dynasty], p. 110.
- <sup>7</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1855.
- <sup>8</sup> Kim, D., *Yi Seong-gyewa, Cho Chun, Jung Do-jeonui Joseon Wangjo Gaechan* [The Foundation of Joseon Dynasty by Yi Seong-gye with Cho Chun and Jeong Do-jeon], p. 156.

## Chapter 12

- <sup>1</sup> Kim, S., “*Goryeosidaeu Jeonjeng, Jeonyeombyunggwa Ingu*” [“Wars, Epidemics and Reduction of Population during Goryeo Dynasty”], p. 59.
- <sup>2</sup> Kim, D., *Wangjeongui Jogeon: Damronuiro Ikneun Joseonsidaesa* [Conditions of the Monarchy: Reading Joseon History Through Discourse], p. 230.
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Koryosa*, v. 34, 12.1389.  
[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0110\\_0010;](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0020_0110_0010;)  
Kim, J., *Jeong Do-jeon Sidaerul ilda* [Reading The Age of Jeong Do-jeon], p. 44; Kim, D., op. cit.; Lee, S., *Gae-gyeongbutteo Hanyangkkaji 1*: [From Gaegyeong to Hangyang Vol. I].
- <sup>4</sup> Lee, S., op. cit., p. 514. Some studies find that Yi In-im himself wished for a more meritorious and balanced approach to government, but that his most influential allies among the

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gwonmun se jok (influential families) were hopelessly corrupt and had the political power to push Yi In-im to support their malfeasance. See Go, H. "The late Goryeo and Lee In-rim."

<sup>5</sup> Duncan, J., *The Origins of the Joseon Dynasty*, especially chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> Duncan, J., op.cit., p. 229; Kim, D., op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Kim, J., op. cit., p. 116.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.; *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.7.26).

<sup>9</sup> Kim, J., op.cit., p. 152.

<sup>10</sup> *Taejo Sillok* 6:3, 6.11.1394.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, *Koryosa*, v. 30, 3.1377.

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<sup>12</sup> Lee, H., "Political Power Groups of Koryo Dynasty after the Period of Yuan China's Intervention," p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 8.1380.

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<sup>14</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 10.1380.

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<sup>15</sup> *Koyosa*, v. 32, 3.1386.

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<sup>16</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 32, 2.1384.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_032r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0020\\_0010](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_032r_0010_0020_0020_0010)

<sup>17</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 4.1381.

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<sup>18</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 12.1380; v. 32, 8.1384; v. 32, 1.1385.

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, *Koryosa*, v. 32, 8.1387.

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<sup>20</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 32, 6.1384.

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8.1384.

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<sup>21</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 3.1380.

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, *Koryosa*, v. 31, 11.1381.

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- <sup>23</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 8.1380.  
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- <sup>24</sup> Cited in Kim, D., op. cit, p. 121. For examples of top advisors urging the King to refrain from constant licentious play, hunting, and rudeness, See *Koryosa*, v. 31, 7.1380.  
[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_031r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0070\\_0090](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_031r_0010_0020_0070_0090);  
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- <sup>25</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 33, 12.1388.  
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- <sup>26</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 32, 8.1384.  
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- <sup>27</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 3.1381.  
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- <sup>28</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 3.1383.  
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- <sup>29</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 6.1382.  
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 For another such entreaty, see *Koryosa*, v. 31, 11.1382.  
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- <sup>30</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 7.1383.  
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- <sup>31</sup> Kim, J., op. cit., 152.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- <sup>33</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 31, 5.1382.  
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- <sup>34</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, "A Letter of Gratitude (1385)." In Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, p. 56.
- <sup>35</sup> Jeong Do-Jeon, "Answering a Farmer (1376)." In *Sambongjip*, Vol. I, p. 116.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> Chong, K., "Revitalization of Ancient Institutions," p. 20.
- <sup>38</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, "A Letter of Gratitude (1385)." In Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, p. 56.

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<sup>39</sup> Cited in Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>40</sup> Kim, J., op. cit., p. 133.

<sup>41</sup> For a review of Jeong Do-jeon's time in exile and how he came to terms with its beneficial lessons, see Chang G., "*Naja hoejin Yubaesijeol Sambong Jeong Do-jeonu Yubaeji Saramgwau Sotong Gwajeong-Nongmine Daehan Insik Beonhwa Mich Jeongchaeseong Chajagagi*" ["Sambong Jeong Do-jeon's Mutual Understanding with a Place of Exile-Naju Sojaedong"].

<sup>42</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, "Answering an Elderly Farmer." In Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, p. 88.

<sup>43</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, "A Letter Regarding Naju (1375)." In *Sambongjip*, Vol I., pp. 95-97.

<sup>44</sup> Kim, J., op. cit., p. 133.

<sup>45</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, "Answer to a Farmer (1376)." In *Sambongjip*, Vol I, pp. 116-119.

<sup>46</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, "Family Woes." In Robinson, D. *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, p. 91; See also "Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival (1375)." In *Sambongjip*, Vol. I., p. 136.

<sup>47</sup> Cited in Kim, J., op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>48</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, "Naju (1375)." In Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, p. 64.

<sup>49</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, "Family Woes." In Robinson, D. *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, p. 91.

<sup>50</sup> Cited in People and History Editing Committee, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Kim, J., op. cit., p. 242.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Park, B., *Joseon Cheogoui Sasangbeom [The Best Ideological Outlaw of Joseon]*, p. 193.

<sup>53</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, "Staying with Sansa (1375)." In *Sambongjip*, Vol. I, p. 76. See also "Apology to a Goblin (1375)," p. 101.

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## Chapter 14

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<sup>14</sup> Duncan, J., *Origins of the Joseon Dynasty*, pp. 204–208.

<sup>15</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 33, 6.1388.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_033r\\_0010\\_0010\\_0070\\_0050](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_033r_0010_0010_0070_0050).

<sup>16</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 33, 6.1388.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_033r\\_0010\\_0010\\_0070\\_0050](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_033r_0010_0010_0070_0050);

See also Duncan, J., *op. cit.*; Kim, J., *Jeong Do-jeon Sidaerul Ilda* [Reading the Age of Jeong Do-jeon] p. 257.

<sup>17</sup> Jeong Do-jeong, *op. cit.*; Duncan, J., *op. cit.*, p. 207.

<sup>18</sup> Im, J., *op. cit.*, p. 22; Sin, D., *G2 Sidae Leadershipuiro Bon Joseonwang Seongjeokpho* [The Scorecard of Joseon Kings Seen Through the Leadership of the G2 Era], p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 33, 12.1388.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Kim, B., *op. cit.*, p. 193.

<sup>22</sup> For this quote and other details on the Kim Jeo incident, see *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1610–1620; *Koryosa*, v. 34, 11.1389,

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0100\\_0020](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0020_0100_0020).

For modern retellings of this incident, see Bae, S., *Joseon Geonguk Janhoksa* [The Cruel History of the Foundation of Joseon], pp. 84–85; Kim, Y., “*Joseon Taejo~Taejongdae Jeongchiwa Jeongchiseryeok*” [“Taejo and Taejong: Political Forces of Joseon”].

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* See also Kim, D., *op. cit.*, p. 413.

<sup>24</sup> Kim, J., *op. cit.*, p.263.

<sup>25</sup> Im, J., *op. cit.*; Kim, D., *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”].

<sup>27</sup> Kim, J., *op. cit.*, pp. 264–5.

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<sup>28</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 34, 11.15.1389.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*; *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1620–30.

<sup>30</sup> For Jeong Do-jeon’s summary of the charges made by the nine meritorious retainers, see “A Letter Regarding Meritorious Retainers (1389),” in *Sambongjip*, Vol. III, pp.47-53. For persuasive reasoning about why the charges of King U and Chang’s “false” paternity were probably false political pretexts to advance the cause of the Yi Seong-gye faction, see Jeong, H. “Deconstructing the Official History of Koryō in Late Chosŏn”; Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 248.

<sup>31</sup> Kim, B., *Wangjeongui Jogeon: Damronuiro Ikneun Joseonsidaesa* [The Conditions of Monarchy: Reading Joseon History Through Discourse], p. 90.

<sup>32</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1753.

<sup>33</sup> Im, J., *op. cit.*, p. 276.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82. See also *Koryosa*, v. 34, 11.15.1389.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0100\\_0030](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0020_0100_0030)

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29; *Koryosa*, v. 34. 1.1390.

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<sup>36</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1645.

<sup>37</sup> Kim, B., *op. cit.*, p. 90; See *Koryosa*, v. 34, 12.1389.

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<sup>38</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 34, 12.1389.

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<sup>39</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 34, 12.1389.

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<sup>40</sup> For details on the Nine Meritorious Retainers of Hongguksa and their merit rewards, see *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo.” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1620–1680.

<sup>41</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 34, 12.1389.

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- <sup>42</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1601; See also *Koryosa*, v. 34, 12.1389.  
[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0110\\_0090](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0020_0110_0090)
- <sup>43</sup> Lee, S., op. cit., p.284.
- <sup>44</sup> Im, J., op. cit., p. 296.
- <sup>45</sup> Cited in Kim, B., op. cit, p. 87.
- <sup>46</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 34, 1.1390.  
[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0030\\_0010\\_0030](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0030_0010_0030)
- <sup>47</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 34, 3.1390.  
[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0030\\_0030\\_0090](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0030_0030_0090)
- <sup>48</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1716–1782.
- <sup>49</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 34, 1.1390.  
[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0030\\_0010\\_0120](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0030_0010_0120)
- <sup>50</sup> Kim, B., op. cit., p. 96.
- <sup>51</sup> For details on the Yun I/Yi Cho incident, see *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1797–1877. For a scholarly treatment, see Lee H., “*Gongyangwangdae Yunitpsicho Sageon*” [“King Gongyang’s Yoon Yi Cho Incident”].
- <sup>52</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1818–1829. See also Kim, D., op. cit.
- <sup>53</sup> Kim, D., op. cit.
- <sup>54</sup> Im, J., op. cit.
- <sup>55</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 34, 6.1390, 7.1390.  
[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0030\\_0040\\_0010](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0030_0040_0010);  
[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0030\\_0040\\_0010](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0030_0040_0010)
- <sup>56</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1818.
- <sup>57</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 34, 8.1390.  
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- <sup>58</sup> Shin, E., “*Shindonjipgwonggiui Jungchiwa Geu Uimi*” [“Politics and Its Implications of Shindon Regime”], pp. 37–42.
- <sup>59</sup> Kim, J., op. cit., p. 272.
- <sup>60</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 34, 11.1390.  
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- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*,  
[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0030\\_0120\\_0060](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0030_0120_0060)



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<sup>62</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1828–1937.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. 1875.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 34, 11.1390.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0030\\_0120\\_0010](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0030_0120_0010)

<sup>66</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1941–1945.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. 1962; See also *Koryosa*, v. 34, 11.1390.

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### Chapter 17

<sup>1</sup> Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Culture, “Dragon Fight.”

<sup>2</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 34, 6.1390.

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in Lee, D., *Bujauil Gil: Yi Seong-gye and Yi Bang-won* [Path of Father and Son: Yi Seong-gye and Yi Bang-won], p. 129; See also *Koryosa*, v. 34, 8.1389.

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<sup>4</sup> Im, J., *Tajoegohwangje: Joseongukwangpyongjeon 1* [King Taejo: First King of the Joseon Dynasty], p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> Kim, D., *Yi Seong-gyewa, Cho Chun, Jung Do-jeonui Joseon Wangjo Gaechan* [The Foundation of Joseon Dynasty by Yi Seong-gye with Cho Chun and Jeong Do-jeon], pp. 508–521.

<sup>6</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, “The Sambong Chip: On Land,” pp. 576–577.

<sup>7</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 34, 4.1389.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0040\\_0040](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0020_0040_0040)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Im, J., *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Han, H., “The Establishment of National Rites and Royal Authority during Early Chosŏn.”

<sup>11</sup> Kim, J., *Jeong Do-jeon Sidaerul Ilda* [Reading the Age of Jeong Do-jeon], p. 258.

<sup>12</sup> Kim, B., *Wangjeongui Jogeon: Damronuiro Ikneun Joseonsidaesa* [The Conditions of Monarchy: Reading Joseon History Through Discourse], p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, 170. For a more mixed review of the depth and importance of this act of burning the land records, and associated land reforms, see Duncan, J., *Origins of the Joseon Dynasty*, chapter 5 (especially pp. 208–211).

<sup>14</sup> Yoon, H., “The Eight Periods in the History of Korean Geomancy,” p. 45; Hwang, I., “*Bulgyogye Goseunggwa Gukdo Chundo-Goryo mit Joseonui Gukdoryul Jungsimuiro*” [“Prominent Buddhist Priests and the Moving of the National Capital City—Focusing on the Capital Cities of Goryeo and Joseon Dynasties”].

<sup>15</sup> Im, J., *op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>16</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1982.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1992.

## Chapter 18

<sup>1</sup> Masters of Buddhism, “The Short Story of Maitreya.”

<sup>2</sup> Suh, S., “Reliquary Set Offered by Yi Seonggye.”

<sup>3</sup> Joo, K., “*Yi Seong-gye Balwon Bulsaijangeumguui Yeongu*” [“A Study of Buddhist Reliquaries Donated by Yi Seong-gye”]. See also Robinson, D., *Empire’s Twilight*, p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> Baker, D., “Rhetoric, Ritual, and Political Legitimacy: Justifying Yi Seong-gye’s Ascension to the Throne,” p. 128.

<sup>5</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3, 1394.10.17; 3:2, 1393 12 (intercalary); 14:7, 1398.5.10–12.

<sup>6</sup> This mountain and its Buddhist monastery were renowned for their unique spiritual energy. For this reason, Empress Ki (the Goryeo-born consort of Yuan Emperor Toghon Temur) had once commissioned monks of the Geumgang monastery to pray for her child’s (Ayushiridara) long life. See An, C., *Legends of the Kumgang Mountains*; Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Culture, “Mt. Geumgang”; Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>8</sup> Lee, H., “*Yi Seong-gyeui Jeonseunggwa Uimi Yeongu*” [“Analysis of the Meaning of Myths about Yi Seong-gye”], Legend 8–4. See also Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, *Jeonbukuiro Tteonaneun Yi Seong-gye Yeoksa Yeohang* [The Historical Travels of Yi Seong-gye through Jeonbuk], p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Moon, J., “*Joseon Geongukgwa Yi Seong-gae Seolhau* *Jeongchijeok Hamui*” [“Foundation of Joseon and Political Significance of Tales about Yi Seong-gye”], p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Baker, D., op. cit., p. 134.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.; Joo, K., op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Baker, D. op. cit., p. 134.

<sup>14</sup> Joo, K., op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> Robinson, D., *Empire’s Twilight*, p. 75.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Moon, J., op. cit., p. 19.

## Chapter 19

<sup>1</sup> *The Story of Hong Gildong*, Translated by Kang, M., pp. 4–5.

<sup>2</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 35, 5.1391.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_035r\\_0010\\_0010\\_0050\\_0100](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_035r_0010_0010_0050_0100).

For a review of the large number of officials who returned to office not long after impeachment, dismissal and exile during the first years after the Wihwado Hoegun, see Kim, D.,

“*Goryeomal Lee Seong-gyeui Jeongjeock*” [“Yi Seong-gye’s Political Opponents in Late Goryeo”]; Kim, J., *Jeong Do-jeon Sidaerul Ilda* [Reading the Age of Jeong Do-jeon], p. 300.

<sup>3</sup> Im, J., *Tajoegohwangje: Joseongukwangpyongjeon 1* [King Taejo: First King of the Joseon Dynasty], pp. 148–152.

<sup>4</sup> Bae, S., *Joseon Geonguk Janhoksa* [The Cruel History of the Foundation of Joseon], p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> For discussion of the widening gap between the moderates and the radical during this time, see Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, *Jeonbukuiro Tteonaneun Yi Seong-gye Yeoksa Yeohang* [The Historical Travels of Yi Seong Gye through Jeonbuk], pp.

32–40; Im, Y., *Joseongukwang Iyagi I* [The Story of the Kings of the Joseon Dynasty], p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in June of 1391, Yi Seong-gye submitted yet another of his frequent resignation requests to the King. These requests were always turned down. See *Koryosa*, v. 35, 6.1391. [http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_035r\\_0010\\_0010\\_0060\\_0120](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_035r_0010_0010_0060_0120)

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *Koryosa*, v. 35, 7.1391.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_035r\\_0010\\_0010\\_0070\\_0020](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_035r_0010_0010_0070_0020)

<sup>8</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 2006.

<sup>9</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 35, 7.1391.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_035r\\_0010\\_0010\\_0070\\_0050](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_035r_0010_0010_0070_0050);

See also Im, J., op. cit., p. 159.

<sup>10</sup> Im, J., op. cit., pp. 160–182.

<sup>11</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, “A Literary Mirror for Ordering the World (1395).” In Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultous Age*, p. 177.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Jeong Do-jeon, “An Appeal to the King (4.27.1391)” and “A Public Appeal (7.1.1391).” In *Sambongjip*, Vol. III, pp. 61–71.

<sup>14</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, “A Letter to the Privy Council (1391)” and “Memorial (1391).” In Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultous Age*, pp. 46–55, 67–74. See also *Koryosa*, v. 35, 5.1391; 7.1391.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_035r\\_0010\\_0010\\_0050\\_0110](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_035r_0010_0010_0050_0110);

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_035r\\_0010\\_0010\\_0070\\_0020](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_035r_0010_0010_0070_0020)

<sup>15</sup> *Sambongjip*, Vol. III, pp. 86–87.

<sup>16</sup> *Koryosa*, as cited in *Sambongjip*, Vol. III, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 25, 9.1391.

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<sup>18</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 35, 10.1391.

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<sup>19</sup> Park, B., *Joseon Cheogoui Sasangbeom* [The Best Ideological Outlaw of Joseon], p. 98; Im, J., op. cit. p. 177; Jo, M., *Joseonui 2 yi Injadeul* [Joseon’s Two Right-Hand Men], p. 502.

<sup>20</sup> Im, J., op. cit., p. 173.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 175–77; Cho, M., “Goryomal-Joseoncho Guknaejungchijibaeseryeokui Daejunginsik” [“Diplomatic Relations with China in The Period of Late Goryeo and Early Joseon Dynasty”], p. 502; *Koryosa*, v. 35, 10.1391.  
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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Im, J., op. cit., p. 182.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Kim, J., op. cit., p. 317.

### Chapter 20

<sup>1</sup> Moon, J., “Joseon Geongukgwa Yi Seong-gae Seolhawi Jeongchijeok Hamui” [“Foundation of Joseon and Political Significance of Tales about Yi Seong-gye”], p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 35, 3.1392.

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See also *Taejo Sillok*, Cheongseo [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 2049.

<sup>3</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 35, 4.1392.

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<sup>4</sup> Bae, S., *Joseon Geonguk Janhoksa* [The Cruel History of the Foundation of Joseon], pp. 112–114; *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 2049–2060.

<sup>5</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 2040; Im, Y., *Joseongukwang Iyagi I* [The Story of the Kings of the Joseon Dynasty], p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 35, 4.1392.

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<sup>7</sup> Im, J., *Tajoegohwangje: Joseongukwangpyongjeon 1* [King Taejo: First King of the Joseon Dynasty], p. 94; Kim, J., *Jeong Do-jeon Sidaerul Ilda* [Reading the Age of Jeong Do-jeon], p. 324.

<sup>8</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 2081; See also *Koryosa*, v. 35, 4.1392.

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<sup>9</sup> Yi Bang-won, “*Hayeoga*,” translated by I. Pai, in Kim, S., “Have Koreans Forgotten their Poetic Sensibility?”; See also *The Book of Korea Shijo*, translated by O’Rourke, K., p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Jeong Mong-ju, “*Danshimga*,” in Jang, G., “In Search of the Essence of Shijo”; See also *The Book of Korea Shijo*, translated by O’Rourke, K., p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> For the quotes described in this paragraph, see also *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle Loc. 2095.

<sup>12</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 2122.

<sup>13</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 35, 4.1392,

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_035r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0040\\_0040](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_035r_0010_0020_0040_0040)

<sup>14</sup> Lee, S., *Gae-gyeongbuotteo Hanyangkkaji 1*: [From Gaegyeong to Hanyang Vol. I], p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 35, 4.1392.

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<sup>16</sup> Kim, B., op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 35, 4.1392.

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<sup>18</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 2124.

<sup>19</sup> *Koryosa*, Book 117, in McCann, D., op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 35, 5.1392.

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[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_035r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0050\\_0030](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_035r_0010_0020_0050_0030)

<sup>21</sup> *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Canto 78.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Kim, J., op. cit., p. 284.

## Chapter 21

<sup>1</sup> 6B.15, in *Mencius: An Online Teaching Translation*, translated by R. Eno, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 35, 6.1392.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_035r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0060\\_0010](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_035r_0010_0020_0060_0010);

<sup>3</sup> Im, J., *Tajoegohwangje: Joseongukwangpyongjeon 1* [King Taejo: First King of the Joseon Dynasty], pp. 215-216

<sup>4</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 35, 6.1392.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_035r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0060\\_0040](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_035r_0010_0020_0060_0040)

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Park, B., *Joseon Cheogoui Sasangbeom* [The Best Ideological Outlaw of Joseon], p. 217.

<sup>6</sup> Im, J., op. cit., p. 220.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 2177.

<sup>9</sup> *Taejo Sillok* 1:1 (1392.7.17).

<sup>10</sup> Kim, J., *Jeong Do-jeon Sidaerul Ilda* [Reading the Age of Jeong Do-jeon], p. 224.

<sup>11</sup> *Taejo Sillok* 1:1 (1392.7.17).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., see also Kim, J., op. cit., p. 234.

<sup>13</sup> *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Canto 14.

<sup>14</sup> *Taejo Sillok* 1:1 (1392.7.17).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 35, 7.1392.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_035r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0070\\_0030](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_035r_0010_0020_0070_0030)

<sup>17</sup> *Taejo Sillok* 1:1 (1392.7.18).

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<sup>1</sup> Grayson, J., *Myths and Legends from Korea*, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.7.26).

<sup>3</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.7.17).

<sup>4</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.7.26).

<sup>5</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, “A Note on Composing and Submitting an Explanation of the King’s Virtue (1392),” in Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:2 (1392.12.16).

<sup>7</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.9.18).

<sup>8</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.9.16).

<sup>9</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1390.2.7.18).

<sup>10</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.8.23); Kim, D., *Yi Seong-gyewa, Cho Chun, Jung Do-jeonui Joseon Wangjo Gaechan* [The Foundation of Joseon Dynasty by Yi Seong-gye with Cho Chun and Jeong Do-jeon], p. 360.

<sup>11</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1.1 (1392.8.23).

<sup>12</sup> Clark, D., “Joseon’s Founding Fathers: A Study of Merit Subjects in the Early Yi Dynasty,” p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.; Park B., *Joseon Cheogoui Sasangbeom* [The Best Ideological Outlaw of Joseon].

- <sup>14</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.9.21); Im, J., *Tajoegohwangje*: : *Joseongukwangpyongjeon 1* [King Taejo: First King of the Joseon Dynasty], p. 184.
- <sup>15</sup> Kim, J., *Jeong Do-jeon Sidaerul Ilda* [Reading the Age of Jeong Do-jeon], p. 8; Clark, D., op. cit., pp. 17–18; Kim, Y., “Joseon Taejo~Taejongdae Jeongchiwa Jeongchiseryeok” [“*Taejo and Taejong: Political Forces of Joseon*”], pp. 56–57.
- <sup>16</sup> Clark, D., op. cit.; Hwang, K., “From the Dirt to Heaven: Northern Koreans in the Joseon and Early Modern Eras.”
- <sup>17</sup> Kim, J., op. cit., p. 389; Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, *Jeonbukuiro Tteonaneun Yi Seong-gye Yeoksa Yeohang* [The Historical Travels of Yi Seong-gye through Jeonbuk], p. 146.
- <sup>18</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.9.21).
- <sup>19</sup> Im, J., op. cit., p. 186.
- <sup>20</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.9.28).
- <sup>21</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.9.26).
- <sup>22</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.9.26).
- <sup>23</sup> For details on many of the royal relatives of King Taejo see Ji, D., *Tajoedaewanggwa Chininchuk* [King Taejo and his Relatives: The First Royal Family of Joseon].
- <sup>24</sup> For details in the subsequent paragraphs regarding King Taejo’s choice of a successor, see *Taejo Sillok*, 1.1. (1392.8.20), especially footnote number 143; Kang, H., *Tombstones without a Tomb*, pp. 56–60.
- <sup>25</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1.1 (1392.8.20), see especially footnote 143; Im, J., op. cit., p. 259.
- <sup>26</sup> Bae, S., *Joseon Geonguk Janhoksa* [The Cruel History of the Foundation of Joseon], p. 198.
- <sup>27</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 8:4 [1404] (9:26.2).
- <sup>28</sup> Kang, H., op. cit., p. 50; See also *Taejo Sillok*, 1.1 (1392.8.20).
- <sup>29</sup> Lee, D., Ha, T., Hong, S., and Song, H., *Jeonbukjiyeokui Joseon Tajoe Eujeok* [The Remains of King Taejo in North Jeolla Province], pp. 215.
- <sup>30</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 3.6.1405. In *Sambongjip*, Vol. III, p. 271-2.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> Kang, H., op. cit., p. 60.
- <sup>33</sup> Im, J., op. cit., p. 188.



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- <sup>34</sup> For details on the anger of King Taejo's sons (by Lady Han), see Kang, H., op. cit., pp. 58–60; Kim, Y., “*Joseon Chogi Sangwangui Junchijeok Euisang*” [“The Status of the Abdicated King in the Early Joseon Dynasty”]; Kim, J., op. cit.
- <sup>35</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.10.22).
- <sup>36</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.12.28).
- <sup>37</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.1.1).
- <sup>38</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.7.20).
- <sup>39</sup> Huh, T., “*Joseonwangjo-ui Geongukgwa Gukho Munje*” [“The Foundation of Joseon dynasty and Problem of Naming”], p. 24.
- <sup>40</sup> Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, p. 177.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.2.15).

### Chapter 23

- <sup>1</sup> Moon, J., “*Joseon Geongukgwa Yi Seong-gae Seolhau Jeongchijeok Hamui*” [“Foundation of Joseon and Political Significance of Tales about Yi Seong-gye”], Legend 7.
- <sup>2</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.8.23).
- <sup>3</sup> *Jeonseogak Archives*, “Do Eung Wangji”.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 141.
- <sup>6</sup> Reynolds, G., “Culling Archival Collections in the Koryŏ–Chosŏn Transition.”
- <sup>7</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7, 1398.6.12. This same reference applies for the remainder of the King's conversation.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.3.21).
- <sup>10</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5.3 (1394.4.17).
- <sup>11</sup> Duncan, J., *The Origins of the Joseon Dynasty*, p. 65.
- <sup>12</sup> For a detailed treatment of the debates and decisions regarding what to do about the members of the Royal Wang family, and the executions that followed, see Park, E., *A Genealogy of Dissent*.
- <sup>13</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.8.20).
- <sup>14</sup> Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, p. 175.
- <sup>15</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.2.11).

- <sup>16</sup> Bae, S., *Joseon Geonguk Janhoksa* [The Cruel History of the Foundation of Joseon], p. 186.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.1.16).
- <sup>19</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.2.25–28) (1394.3.1–4, 7, 14).
- <sup>20</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.4.10).
- <sup>21</sup> Park, E., op. cit., pp. 36–7.
- <sup>22</sup> To review this debate, see entries on the following two dates, and several dates between: *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.2.25) (1394.4.14).
- <sup>23</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.4.15); Park, E., op. cit., pp. 36–40.
- <sup>24</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.4.20).
- <sup>25</sup> Park, E., op. cit., p. 41.
- <sup>26</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.4.20).
- <sup>27</sup> Park, E., op. cit. pp. 45–47; Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, p. 175.

#### Chapter 24

- <sup>1</sup> Bae, S., *Joseon Geonguk Janhoksa* [The Cruel History of the Foundation of Joseon], p. 16.
- <sup>2</sup> Moon J., “*Joseon Geongukgwa Yi Seong-gye seolhau jeongchijeok hamui*” [“Foundation of Joseon and Political Significance of Tales about Yi Seong-gye”]; Cho, H., “*Jeonseol Gyoyuk Siron–Chimadae Jeonseoleul Jungsimeuro*” [“The Significance of Perceptions of Baekdusan in Baekdu-related Myths”].
- <sup>3</sup> Moon, J., op. cit.
- <sup>4</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 578.
- <sup>5</sup> For a review of the function of these Cantos in legitimizing the Yi Dynasty with the sheen of magical divinity, see McCann, D., “Song of the Dragons Flying to Heaven: Negotiating History,” in *Early Korean Literature: Selections and Introductions*; Translator’s Commentary in *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Translated by J. Hoyt.
- <sup>6</sup> *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Canto 87.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Canto 84. For another report of this phenomenon, see *Koryosa*, v. 35, 12.1391.

[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_035r\\_0010\\_0010\\_0120\\_0060](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_035r_0010_0010_0120_0060)

<sup>8</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.7.17); Moon, J., op. cit., p. 15; Lee, H., “*Yi Seong-gyeui Jeonseunggwa Uimi Yeongu*” [“Analysis of the Meaning of Myths about Yi Seong-gye”].

<sup>9</sup> Moon J., op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Moon J., op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Walraven, B., “Religion and the City: Seoul in the 19th Century,” pp. 178–208.

<sup>12</sup> Lee, I., “*Yi Seong-gyewa Jeonju*” [“Yi Seong-gye and Jeonju”], p. 200.

<sup>13</sup> Jung, Y., “*Dwokgchui Geollipgwa Byeoncheone Daehan Yeongu*” [A Study of the Construction and Changes of Isanmyo].

<sup>14</sup> Ryu, K. and Kim, K., “*Joseon Taejodaewang Taesilui Hyungsikgwa Tteukseong*” [A Study on the Type and Characteristics of the King Taejo’s Taesil in Joseon Dynasty].

<sup>15</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.8.8).

<sup>16</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.9.18).

<sup>17</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.7.28).

<sup>18</sup> For an excellent discussion of these sentiments, see Deuchler, M., *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, e.g., p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.11.6).

<sup>20</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.11.7).

<sup>21</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.11.7); 3:2 (1393.2.10); 4:2 (1393.12.11); 5:3 (1394.2.18); 6:3 (1394.7.11).

<sup>22</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.8.9).

<sup>23</sup> Deuchler, M., op. cit., pp. 73–79; Janelli, R. and Janelli D., *Ancestor Worship and Korean Society*; Kang, H., *Tombstones without a Tomb*.

<sup>24</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.9.30).

<sup>25</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.10.9).

<sup>26</sup> For one detailed review of King Taejo’s search for a new capital, see Kim, H., “Controversy over the capital of Hanyang at the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty.”

<sup>27</sup> Many entries in the *Taejo Sillok* around this time describe the search for the site of a new capital in detail.

<sup>28</sup> For an excellent review of pungsu (geomancy) theory and practices in Korea, see the edited volume by Yooh, H., *Pungsu: A Study of Geomancy in Korea*.

<sup>29</sup> Lee, H., "Geomantic Discourse of the Joseon Confucian Literati," p. 338.

<sup>30</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1, 1392.9.30; Oh, S., "The Recognition of Geomancy by Intellectuals during the Joseon Period," p. 122; Yoon, H. "Principal Characteristics of Korean Geomancy," p. 106; Han, J. and Park T., "A Study on the Site Analysis of the Jongmyo Area," p. 43. Partly because the *ki* energy of Gaeseong was thought by some to be running out towards the end of the Goryeo dynasty, there were several unsuccessful attempts to shift the Goryeo capital to Seoul, long before Yi Seong-gye overthrew the Goryeo king. See Yoon, H., "The Eight Periods in the History of Korean Geomancy," p. 45.

<sup>31</sup> Mason, D., "Pungsu-jiri"; Baldacchino, J., "Moral geometry, natural alignments and utopian urban form," p 58; Yoon, H., "The Role of Pungsu (Geomancy) in Korean Culture."

<sup>32</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 6:3 (1394.7.11).

<sup>33</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3.2 (1393.2.5).

<sup>34</sup> Moon, J., op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> Kim, H., op. cit.

<sup>36</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.2.1).

<sup>37</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 6:3 (1394.8.12). For the detailed text of Jeong Do-jeon's reasoning on the site for a new capital, see "Appeal Against Muakcheondo (1394)." In *Sambongjib*, Vol. I., pp. 380-384.

<sup>38</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 6:3 (1394.8.24).

<sup>39</sup> Rii, H., "Jongmyo (Royal Shrine): Iconography of Korea". References to these geomantic forces cradling the capital city can be found in the *Taejong Sillok*, 17:27b [9.4.13].

<sup>40</sup> This phrase was used by the Confucian scholar Yi Im, in favorably commenting on the geomancers' choice of Hangyang as the new capital. See Yoon, I., "Geomantic Ideas in Taengniji Manuscripts," 353.

<sup>41</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 6:3 (1394.8.16).

<sup>42</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 6:3 (1394.12.3).

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> The concept of “geomantic migration” is discussed in Yoon, H., “Government Affairs Related to Geomancy During the Time of Pre-Modern Korea,” p. 77.

<sup>45</sup> Kim, J., *Jeong Do-jeon Sidaerul Ilda* [Reading the Age of Jeong Do-jeon], p. 371.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 369.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 371.

<sup>48</sup> Mason, D., “Ingwan-san Seon-bawi.”

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Hwang, M., “The Mudang: Gendered discourses on shamanism in colonial korea,” p. 33.

<sup>51</sup> Choi, G., “Changes in the Landscapes and Park of Namsan Mountain.”

<sup>52</sup> This story is told on the Seon-bawi “Seoul Folklore Material No. 4” informational plaque installed at the base of the rocks on Inwangsan.

<sup>53</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.9[Intercalary].19).

<sup>54</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:5 (1396.1.9); 9:5 (1396.2.27); Park, B., *Joseon Cheogoui Sasangbeom* [The Best Ideological Outlaw of Joseon], p. 62.

<sup>55</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 7:4 (1395.3.9).

<sup>56</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.10.6).

<sup>57</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.2.15).

<sup>58</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.9.3).

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Deuchler, M., *The Confucian Transformation of Korean Society*, p. 197.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Deuchler, M., op. cit., p. 133.

<sup>61</sup> Lee H., “Geomantic Discourses of the Joseon Confucian Literati,” p. 341.

<sup>62</sup> Choi, W., “Historical Geography and Pungsu(Fengshui) Discourse of Royal Tombs in the Joseon Dynasty”; Han, J. and Park, T., op. cit.; Lee, W., and Jin, Y., *Joseon Wangreung: Jamdeulji Mothaneun Yeoksa* [Royal Tombs of Joseon: A Sleepless History]; Zho, I., “Geomancy and Traditional Architecture During the Joseon Dynasty,” p. 166.

<sup>63</sup> Zho, I., op. cit., p. 167; Yoon, H., “Government Affairs Related to Geomancy During the Time of Pre-Modern Korea,” p. 48;

Yoon, H., *The Culture of Feng–Shui in Korea*, pp. 3–4;  
Baldacchino, J., op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>64</sup> Cited in Lee, H., op. cit., p. 338.

<sup>65</sup> Kang, M., and Lee, H., *Jongmyowa Sajik [Jongmyo and Sajik]*.

<sup>66</sup> Kim, Y., “Jongmyoeseo boda maneun ideuri ilmureul jeopal su itgil baramnida: Jongmyojeryeilmu jeonsugyoyukjogyo, gimyeongsuk” [“I hope that more people will be able to experience the dance at Jongmyo”]; Deuchler, M., op. cit.

<sup>67</sup> Details on the King’s purification rituals are reported in the *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.6.28). The impeachment of the officials is reported in the *Taejo Sillok*, 7:4 (1395.9.27).

<sup>68</sup> These ritual activities associated with the enshrinement of King Taejo’s ancestors at Jongmyo are described in the *Taejo Sillok*, 7:4 (1395.9.26–10.5). For a description of the expectation of fasting, see *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.6.28).

<sup>69</sup> Rii, H., op. cit., n.d.

<sup>70</sup> Son, M., *Like Life: Royal Portraits of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) in Ritual Context*, 2018, pp. 41–53.

<sup>71</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.6.28).

<sup>72</sup> For descriptions of these rituals in detail, see Son M., op. cit, pp. 41–53. Joseon developed its rituals based on guidance from ancient Chinese texts such as the *Li Chi, Book of Rites: An Encyclopedia of Ancient Ceremonial Usages, Religious Creeds, and Social Institutions*, trans. James Legge, pp. 364–372. See also: Son, M., “Jongmyojehyangeul Wihan Geureutgwa Dogu” [“Ritual vessels and utensils for the royal ancestral rites of Jongmyo”]; Son, M., “Joeonui Gukgauriye, Orye” [“State Rites of the Joseon Dynasty: Five Rites”].

<sup>73</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 7:4 (1395.10.5).

<sup>74</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1396.12.25).

<sup>75</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 7:4 (1395.10.5).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, “Kyöngbuk Palace.” In Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, pp. 83–84.

<sup>78</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 13:7 (1398.4.26).

<sup>79</sup> Alston, D., “Emperor and Emissary: The Hongwu Emperor, Kwon Kun, and the Poetry of Late Fourteenth Century Diplomacy,” p. 127.

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<sup>80</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:6 (1397.3.8); See also Alston, D., op. cit, p. 124.

<sup>81</sup> Im J., op. cit, p. 260; For another of Jeong Do-jeon's references to Confucian scholars as clouds "following the dragon" of King Taejo, see *Sambongjip*, Vol. I, "Introduction," p. 20.

<sup>82</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.10.5).

<sup>83</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, "Gyeonguk Palace (1395)." *Sambongjip*, Vol. I, pp. 396–397.

<sup>84</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.10.7).

### Chapter 25

<sup>1</sup> *Joseon Gyeongukjeon* (Governance Code of Joseon [1394]), SB7:1a, Quoted in Chong, K., "Revitalization of Ancient Institutions," p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center. *Jeonbukuiro Tteonaneun Yi Seong-gye Yeoksa Yeohang* [The Historical Travels of Yi Seong-gye through Jeonbuk], p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Yoo, K., "Foundation and Management of the Joseon Dynasty."

<sup>4</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, "Memorial (1391)." In Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> Deuchler, M., *The Confucian Transformation of Korean Society*; Deuchler, M., "Neo-Confucianism: The Impulse for Social Action in Early Yi Korea."

<sup>6</sup> Yoo, K., op. cit., p. 134.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, p. 160.

<sup>8</sup> Yoo, K., op. cit., p. 136.

<sup>9</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.7.28).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The text of the Governance Code of Joseon can be found in the *Sambongjip*, Vol. II. The 1394 Code aligned with principles outlined by Jeong Do-jeon in his related text, "A Literary Mirror to Order the World (1395)." See Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, pp. 95–177.

<sup>12</sup> Chong K., op. cit., p. 81

- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 2–3, 39–40, 57–60; See also Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, pp. 185–186; Park, B., *Joseon Cheogoui Sasangbeom* [The Best Ideological Outlaw of Joseon], pp. 81–84.
- <sup>14</sup> Chong K., op. cit., p. 85.
- <sup>15</sup> Kim Y., “*Joseon Taejo~Taejongdae Jeongchiwa Jeongchiseryeok*” [“Taejo and Taejong: Political Forces of Joseon”], p. 59.
- <sup>16</sup> Duncan, J., “The Social Background to the Founding of the Chosŏn Dynasty: Change or Continuity?” pp. 50–75.
- <sup>17</sup> Park, B., op. cit., p. 193.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 153.
- <sup>19</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.3.27).
- <sup>20</sup> *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, “Translator’s Introduction,” Hoyt, J., p. 16.
- <sup>21</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.7.28); 3:1 (1394.1.18); 8:4 (1395.7.30), 15:7 (1398.9.12).
- <sup>22</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.7.26); 1:1 (1392.9.21); 1:1 (1392.9.24); 3:2 (1393.4.27); 5:3 (1394.2.8); 5:3 (1394.4.11).
- <sup>23</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.4.11).
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.3.19).
- <sup>26</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.11.28).
- <sup>27</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.3.12).
- <sup>28</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.8.22).
- <sup>29</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 11:6 (1397.4.28).
- <sup>30</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15:7 (1398.9.12).
- <sup>31</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 11:6 (1397.2.11); 13:7 (1398.2.16)
- <sup>32</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.9.24).
- <sup>33</sup> Kim, S., “The Dispatch of Central Government Envoys (*Pongmyeong sasin*) during Early Joseon,” p. 43.
- <sup>34</sup> Kang J., *The Land of Scholars*, p. 207.
- <sup>35</sup> Duncan, J., *The Origins of the Joseon Dynasty*, pp. 209–210.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid; Park, B., op. cit., p. 229.
- <sup>37</sup> Robinson, D., *Empire’s Twilight*, pp. 208–209.
- <sup>38</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.12.27).
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.



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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. See also Kim, B., *Wangjeongui Jogeon: Damronuiro Ikneun Joseonsidaesa* [Conditions of the Monarchy: Reading Joseon History Through Discourse], p. 202.

<sup>41</sup> For example, in the summer of 1397, the Directorate for Adjudication of Slave Lawsuits submitted nineteen proposals concerning the ongoing problems of slave lawsuits. Every year of King Taejo's reign, multiple proposals were submitted to address this intractable issue. *Taejo Sillok*, 12:6 (1397.7.25).

<sup>42</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.1.15).

<sup>43</sup> Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, *Jeonbukuiro Tteonaneun Yi Seong-gye Yeoksa Yeohang* [The Historical Travels of Yi Seong-gye through Jeonbuk], p. 236.

<sup>44</sup> Kim, B., op. cit, pp. 230–231.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 180–189.

<sup>46</sup> Choi, M., “*Yongbieochungae Natanan Yeonalseonchoui Yongtojeonjenggwa Byeongeong*” [“A Study on the Territorial Wars and Northern Border in Yongbieocheonga”], p. 113.

<sup>47</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.12.16); 8:5 (1396.12.14)

### Chapter 26

<sup>1</sup> 3B.2, In *Mencius: An Online Teaching Translation*, translated by R. Eno, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> Kim, D., “*Goryeomal Lee Seong-gyeui Jeongjeock*” [“Yi Seong-gye's Political Opponents in Late Goryeo”], pp. 434–436.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. For a summary of this perspective, see Kim, I., “*Goryeomal Sadaebu Gyenyumui Yeoksaseonggwa Jeongchijeok Bunhwa Daehan Nonui*” [“A study of Historical Concepts Regarding the *Sadaebu* and Political Power”]. See also Duncan, J., *The Origins of the Joseon Dynasty*.

<sup>4</sup> Mencius, “The Well-Field System of Landholding” In *Sources of the Chinese Tradition*, edited by W. Bary, W. and Bloom, I., p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> Deuchler, M., *The Confucian Transformation of Korean Society*, p. 101.; See also Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, chapters 11–12; Yim, M., “The Establishment of Literati Governance Society in Early Joseon, and Its Continuation.”

- <sup>6</sup> *Sinjung Tongguk Yoji Sungnam*, “Royal Confucian Academy,” in *Sources of the Korean Tradition: Volume I*, edited by P. Lee, W. de Bary, and Y. Choe.
- <sup>7</sup> Deuchler, M., *The Confucian Transformation of Korean Society*, p. 94; Clark, D., “Joseon's Founding Fathers: A Study of Merit Subjects in the Early Yi Dynasty.”
- <sup>8</sup> Kang, J. *The Land of Scholars*, p. 211.
- <sup>9</sup> Gales, J., as cited in Cumings, B., *Korea's Place in the Sun*, p. 79.
- <sup>10</sup> Deuchler, M., *The Confucian Transformation of Korean Society*; Han, H., “The Establishment of National rites and Royal During Early Joseon.”; Chun, H. and Kwon, L., “A Study on the changes of the Five-class Mourning Costume-System in the Koryo Dynasty and the Early Years of the Joseon Dynasty”; Horlyck, C., “Confucian Burial Practices in the Late Goryeo and Early Joseon Periods”; Lukaczynski, J., “Korean legal thought under Yi dynasty as a reflection of Confucian worldview adopted in early Joseon period.”
- <sup>11</sup> Cited in Robinson, D., “Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age, p. 44.
- <sup>12</sup> Lovins, C., “The King's Reason: Yi Song-gye and the Centralization of Power in early Joseon,” p. 56.
- <sup>13</sup> Wang, S., “Co-constructing Empire in Early Chosŏn Korea: Knowledge Production and the Culture of Diplomacy, 1392–1592,” pp. 32, 118–119, 323–324; Bohnet, A., *Turning Towards Edification*, pp. 2–3.
- <sup>14</sup> Chong K., “Revitalization of Ancient Institutions,” pp. 41, 64.
- <sup>15</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.7.20).
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Cited in Deuchler, M., “Neo-Confucianism: The Impulse for Social Action in Early Yi Korea,” p. 82.
- <sup>18</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.7.28). See also Hahm, C., “Ritual and Constitutionalism: Disputing the Ruler's Legitimacy in a Confucian Polity,” pp. 152–159.
- <sup>19</sup> Lovins, C., *op. cit.*, p. 54; Park, H., “Munseum: Appointment by Lineage and Birth”; Kim, H., “*Goryeomal gwonmunsejokgwa Sadaebuui Gaehyeokan Bigyo*” [“Comparison between the Gwonmunsejok and Sadaebu at the end of Goryeo”].
- <sup>20</sup> Lovins, C., *op. cit.*, p. 57.

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<sup>21</sup> Palais, J., "Reviewed Work(s): *Chosŏn ch'ogi yangban yŏn'gu* [A study of the yangban in the early Chosŏn period] by Yi Sŏng-mu; *Kwagŏ* [The examination system] by Yŏksa hakhoe," pp. 194–195.

<sup>22</sup> Kang, J., op. cit., p. 108.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 213–214.

<sup>24</sup> Bohnet, A., op. cit., p. 10; Palais, J. op. cit.; Duncan, J. "The Social Background to the Founding of the Joseon Dynasty: Change or Continuity?"

<sup>25</sup> Kang, J., op. cit., p. 211.

<sup>26</sup> Bohnet, A., op. cit., p. 10; Palais, J. op. cit.; Duncan, J. "The Social Background to the Founding of the Joseon Dynasty: Change or Continuity?"

<sup>27</sup> Park, H. and Chizhova, K., "The Special Examinations (*pyeolsi*) in Early Joseon."

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.; Kang J., op. cit., pp. 207–209.

<sup>29</sup> For details on the exam process, see Kang J., op. cit., pp. 210–217; *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.7.28).

<sup>30</sup> Hyeon, S., "On the Civil Service Exams," in *Sources of the Korean Tradition: Volume I*, edited by Lee, P., de Bary, W., and Choe, Y., p. 301.

<sup>31</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.7.28).

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Nivison, D., "Introduction" and de Bary, W., "Some Common Tendencies in Neo-Confucianism," both in *Confucianism in Action*.

<sup>33</sup> Deuchler, M., "Neo-Confucianism: The Impulse for Social Action in Early Yi Korea."

<sup>34</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 6:3 (1394.6.1) (1394.6.26); Kim, E. and Kim Y., "*Hangukinui Bakuipungsoke Naejedeon Miuisik*" ["The Aesthetic Consciousness Latent in the Korean People's White Clothes Customs"].

<sup>35</sup> Kim J., *Jeong Do-jeon Sidaerul Ilda* [Reading The Age of Jeong Do-jeon], p. 341.

<sup>36</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 6:3 (1394.6.1).

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Kang, op. cit., p. 360.

<sup>38</sup> Chong K., "Revitalization of Ancient Institutions," p. 83.

<sup>39</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.8.28).

<sup>40</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1394.11.16).

- <sup>41</sup> Deuchler, M., “Neo-Confucianism,” op. cit., p. 83; Han, H., “The Establishment of National Rites and Royal Authority during Early Chosŏn,” p. 94.
- <sup>42</sup> Seong, H., “Heobaektong chip,” 10:12a–13b, In *Sources of the Korean Tradition: Volume I*, edited by P. Lee, de Bary, W. and Choe, Y., p. 314.
- <sup>43</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392:7.28).
- <sup>44</sup> Yi, S., “Euigwe and the Documentation of Joseon Ritual Life”; Son, M., “Like Life: Royal Portraits of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) in Ritual Context”; Joseonwangsilchukjae Design Yoso 1, “*Yiggwaerul tonghebon Joseonui Wangsilchukjae*” [“Royal Festival of Joseon Through Uigwe”]; Hahm, C., “Ritual and Constitutionalism: Disputing the Ruler’s Legitimacy in a Confucian Polity. By 1474, these rituals had been compiled into an authoritative code, the *Kukcho Oryeui* (“*Manual on the Five Rituals of Our Dynasty*”), with detailed guidance on how to conduct five categories of state rituals.
- <sup>45</sup> Nivison, D., op. cit., p. 6
- <sup>46</sup> Janelli, R. and Janelli D., *Ancestor Worship and Korean Society*, p. 177
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 6–7. For another review of the ideological transformation of Joseon and the growing ritual hegemony of Confucianism, see Deuchler, M., *The Confucian Transformation of Korean Society* and Kim, B., *Wangjeongui Jogeon: Damronuiro Ikneun Joseonsidaesa* [The Conditions of Monarchy: Reading Joseon History Through Discourse], pp. 90–109.
- <sup>48</sup> Deuchler, M., *The Confucian Transformation of Korean Society*, p. 128.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 81.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 109.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> Kang, J., op. cit., p. 190.
- <sup>53</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.11.12).
- <sup>54</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.11.14).

## Chapter 27

<sup>1</sup> *Sambong chip*, 7:5a, Cited in Chong, K., “Revitalization of Ancient Institutions,” p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> For a review of the Dodang Council’s political role in late Goryeo–early Joseon, see Duncan, J., *Origins of the Joseon Dynasty*, pp. 100–106; Lee, H., “Political Power Groups of Koryo Dynasty after the Period of Yuan China’s Intervention.”

<sup>3</sup> *Sambong chip*, 7:5a, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed description of this theory of government, see Jeong Do-jeon, “A Literary Mirror to Order the World (1395).” In Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, pp. 95–178.

<sup>5</sup> Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, pp. 189–190.

<sup>6</sup> Duncan, J., op. cit., p. 101. In 1400, King Taejong abolished the Dodang and replaced its deliberative function with a smaller-sized State Council. See Duncan, J., op. cit., pp. 229–231.

<sup>7</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.7.28).

<sup>8</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, “Literary Mirror to Order the World (1395).” In Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous World*, p.120.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>10</sup> Kang, H., *Tombstones without a Tomb*, pp. 117–118; Haboush, J., “The Confucianization of Korean Society,” pp. 84, 94–97; Nivison, D., “Introduction” in *Confucianism In Action*, pp. 13–24.

<sup>11</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, “Literary Mirror to Order the World (1395).” In Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous World*, p.152.

<sup>12</sup> Park, S., “*Tajoeui Gongron Jeongchi: Hyunanhaegyeol Saryereul Jungsimuiro*” [“Kongron Politics of the King Taejo: A Case Study of Solving Three Issues”]; Youn, D., “*Joseon Tajoe–Tajong Chise ‘Gong’ui Gyonggye Jitgireul Duleossan Gyeongjaeng: Gunsingan Geurigo Yangsagan Ginjanggwa Galdeung*” [“Competition over Drawing the Boundary of the ‘Public’ Sector in the Early Joseon Dynasty”]; Lee H., “*Joseonchogiui Gongronjeongchi Gongronui Jonjaeyangsikgwa Gongronjeongchiui Teuksusungeul Jungsimuiro*” [“Gong–Lon

Politics in early Joseon: Focusing on the Existence and Specificity of Form in Gong-Lon Politics”].

<sup>13</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.9.17).

<sup>14</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.5[Intercalary].16).

<sup>15</sup> Park, S., op. cit. Youn, D., op. cit., Lee H., op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Youn, D., op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> Lee, H., op. cit., pp. 12–14; See also Lee, P., de Bary, W., and Choe, Y., *Sources of the Korean Tradition: Volume I*, p. 263; Lukaczynski, J., “Korean legal thought under Yi dynasty as a reflection of Confucian worldview adopted in early Joseon period.”

<sup>18</sup> Lee, H., op. cit., p. 11

<sup>19</sup> Prk, B., *Joseon Cheogoui Sasangbeom* [The Best Ideological Outlaw of Joseon], p. 186.

<sup>20</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.10.7)

<sup>21</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.9.22). See also Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, *Jeonbukuiro Tteonaneun Yi Seong-gye Yeoksa Yeohang* [The Historical Travels of Yi Seong-gye through Jeonbuk], pp. 135–145.

<sup>22</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.5.7)

<sup>23</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 7:4 (1395.4.25); 5:3 (1394.1.13).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:5 (1396.1.24)

<sup>26</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:5 (1396.6.9).

<sup>27</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.10.7).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.10.7)

<sup>30</sup> For an example of one such prohibition of falconry and alcohol, see *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.8.17).

<sup>31</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.7.5).

<sup>32</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 7:4 (1395.4.25).

<sup>33</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 7:4 (1395.5.28).

<sup>34</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 12:6 (1397.10.5).

<sup>35</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 13:7 (1398.3.4).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.6.11).

<sup>38</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.3.29).

## Chapter 28

<sup>1</sup> This poem is by Jeong Inji, a prominent scholar-official of the 1400s, who supervised the production and enshrinement of a Royal Portrait of King Taejo in Taejo's birthplace up in Yeongheung prefecture. In the portrait, King Taejo sits on a dragon throne. He wears a red dragon robe, in a black silk cap with double crests. He stares straight ahead, in symmetrical pose, black beard, strong body, calm visage. On the back of this portrait Jeong Inji inscribed this poem, which was quoted by many later scholars. For examples of scholars quoting the poem, see *Ijae yugo* [Collective works of Hwang Yunseok (1729–1791)] vol 25 (1829); *Gwanam jeonseo* [Collective works of Hong Gyeongmo (1774–1851)] vol 22; *Bungno neungjeon ji* [Records of royal tombs and halls in Hamgyeong Province] (1758); *Yeollyeosil gisul* [Historical account of Yi Geungik (1736–1806)] vol. 1. All these works are summarized in Son, M., "Like Life: Royal Portraits of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) in Ritual Context," p. 144.

<sup>2</sup> Choi, M., "*Yongbieochungae Natanan Yeonalseonchoui Yongtojeonjenggwa Byeongeong*" ["A Study on the Territorial Wars and Northern Border in Yongbieocheonga"], p. 143.

<sup>3</sup> Bohnet, A., *Turning Towards Edification*, pp. 35–47; Chong, D., "Making Joseon's Own Tributaries."

<sup>4</sup> *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Canto 38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Canto 9. See also Canto 118.

<sup>6</sup> Duncan, J., "The Social Background to the Founding of the Joseon Dynasty: Change or Continuity?" pp. 57–58.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:5 (1396.12.14).

<sup>9</sup> Bohnet, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 30–34.

<sup>10</sup> Liu, J., and Piao, Y., "Expansion, Contestation, and Boundary Making: Chosŏn Korea and Ming China's Border Relations over the Yalu River Region," pp. 105–7.

<sup>11</sup> Choi, M., *op. cit.*, pp. 129–131.

<sup>12</sup> Ulhicun, G. and Shi, J., "Manchuria from the Fall of the Yuan to the Rise of the Manchu State (1368–1636)"; Kota, N., "Ssangsong Chonggwanbu as the Border between Koryo and

Yuan Dynasty.”; Bohnet, A., op. cit., p. 37; Choi M., op. cit., pp. 108, 135.

<sup>13</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:3 (1394.1.28).

<sup>14</sup> Hwang, K., “From the Dirt to Heaven”; Choi, M., op. cit., pp. 131–139; Han, S., “*Joseonjeongi* (朝鮮前期) *Dumangangyuyeok*(豆滿江流域) *ae natananeundu gaeui Joseon*(朝鮮)” [“Two ‘Joseons’ Appearing in the Tumen River Basin in early Joseon”].

<sup>15</sup> Bohnet, A., op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> Yi, G., “*Joseon Chogi* (*Taejodae–Sejongdae*) *Jui Daoejungbo sujiphaldong*” [“Collecting Foreign Information during the early days of the Joseon Dynasty (from Taejo’s Reign to Sejong’s),” p. 30.

<sup>19</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.5.23).

<sup>20</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.5.25).

<sup>21</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.6.1).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* In later communications, King Taejo repeated these same claims. See *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.2.19).

<sup>24</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.8.29).

<sup>25</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.7.28).

<sup>26</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.9.2) (1393.9.17) (1393.9.21) (1393.10.21) (1393.12.7).

<sup>27</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.1.12).

<sup>28</sup> All the quotes in the following paragraphs are taken from Taejo’s two communications with Ming, falling about a month apart. See *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.1.16) (1394.2.19).

<sup>29</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.4.4)

<sup>30</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.5.20).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 6:3 (1394.6.6).

<sup>33</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 6:3 (1394.7.13).

<sup>34</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 7:4 (1395.2.1).

<sup>35</sup> Lee, S., *Gae-gyeongbutteo Hanyangkkaji 1* [From Gaegyeong to Hanyang Vol. I], p. 276.

<sup>36</sup> Lee, D., *Bujai Gil: Yi Seong-gye and Yi Bang-won* [Path of Father and Son: Yi Seong-gye and Yi Bang-won], p. 424.



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- <sup>37</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 7:4 (1395.11.19).
- <sup>38</sup> Kang J., *The Land of Scholars*, p. 179.
- <sup>39</sup> Kim, B., *Wangjeongui Jogeon: Damronuiro Ikneun Joseonsidaesa* [The Conditions of Monarchy: Reading Joseon History Through Discourse], pp., 166–170.
- <sup>40</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:6 (1397.5.6).
- <sup>41</sup> Song, J., 2019. “*Joseoncho Waegu Hwaldonggwa Joseon–Ilbon Gwangye Yeongu*” [“A Study on the Japanese Pirates’ (Wakou) Activities and the Chosun–Japan Relations in Early Chosun”].
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- <sup>43</sup> *Koryosa*, v. 34, 2.1389.  
[http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj\\_034r\\_0010\\_0020\\_0020\\_0030](http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0020_0020_0030)
- <sup>44</sup> Kang J., *The Land of Scholars*, pp. 201–204; Song, J., *op. cit.*
- <sup>45</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 6:3 (1394.9.9) (1394.10.11).
- <sup>46</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.12.3).
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>48</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 11:6 (1397.5.22); 4:2 (1393.7.13).
- <sup>49</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.4.1) (1394.5.5); 9:6 (1397.5.5).
- <sup>50</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.5.5).
- <sup>51</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.4.1)
- <sup>52</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 12:6 (1397.7.11) (1397.8.23).
- <sup>53</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.12.9).
- <sup>54</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 11:6 (1397.11.2).
- <sup>55</sup> Song, J., *op. cit.*, p. 88; *Taejo Sillok*, 13:7 (1398.2.17).
- <sup>56</sup> Song, J., *op. cit.*, pp. 81–84.
- <sup>57</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.12.12).
- <sup>58</sup> Song, J., *op. cit.*, pp. 81–84, 57.
- <sup>59</sup> Bohnet, A., *Turning Towards Edification*, pp. 41–42.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>61</sup> *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Canto 75.
- <sup>62</sup> Chong, D., “Making Joseon’s Own Tributaries”; Bohnet, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 35–47
- <sup>63</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 7:4 (1395.1.19) (1395.2.7); 8:4 (1395.9[Intercalary].8); 10:5 (1396.10.18).
- <sup>64</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.5.3).
- <sup>65</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.12.14).
- <sup>66</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.4.25).
- <sup>67</sup> Bohnet, A., *op. cit.*, p. 49.

- <sup>68</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.12.14).  
<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>71</sup> Chong, D., *op. cit.*  
<sup>72</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.12.14).  
<sup>73</sup> *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, *op. cit.*, Canto 56.  
<sup>74</sup> Bohnet, A., *op. cit.*, p. 44.  
<sup>75</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.9.11).  
<sup>76</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 3:2 (1393.6.16).  
<sup>77</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.12.14) (1395.12.14); 9:5 (1396.3.29).  
<sup>78</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 6:3 (1394.7.13).  
<sup>79</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:6 (1397.4.26).  
<sup>80</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 6:3 (1394.7.6); 13:7 (1398.3.17).  
<sup>81</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 6:3 (1394.7.5).  
<sup>82</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 13:7 (1398.1.1).  
<sup>83</sup> For an example of this court reasoning, see *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.12.14); For a scholarly treatment, see Bohnet, A., *op. cit.*  
<sup>84</sup> Im, J., *Tajoegohwangje: Joseongukwangpyongjeon 1* [King Taejo: First King of the Joseon Dynasty], p. 266.

### Chapter 29

- <sup>1</sup> 3b.7, In *Mencius: An Online Teaching Translation*, translated by R. Eno, p. 67.  
<sup>2</sup> *Sambong Chip*, 7:5a, Cited in Chong, K., “Revitalization of Ancient Institutions,” p. 57.  
<sup>3</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.10.30).  
<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*; Park, B., *Joseon Cheogoui Sasangbeom* [The Best Ideological Outlaw of Joseon], p. 284.  
<sup>5</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:5 (1396.2.9) (1396.6.11).  
<sup>6</sup> Such highly regulated congratulatory memorials were called *piao* by Ming. Diplomatic messages—also highly regulated and ritualized—were described as *pyomun*. See Wu, S. Wu, S., “Transmission of Ming Memorials, and the Evolution of the Transmission Network, 1368–1627,” pp. 59–85.  
<sup>7</sup> Wu, S., *op. cit.*; Wilkinson, E., *Chinese History: A Manual*, pp. 534–535.

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- <sup>8</sup> Wang, S., “Co-constructing Empire in Early Chosŏn Korea: Knowledge Production and the Culture of Diplomacy, 1392–1592,” pp. 62–83.
- <sup>9</sup> *Taejo Sillok* 5:3 (1394.2.19).
- <sup>10</sup> Wang, S., op. cit., p. 63.
- <sup>11</sup> Alston, D., “Emperor and Emissary,” p. 115.
- <sup>12</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.7.8).
- <sup>13</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:5 (1396.2.5).
- <sup>14</sup> Lee, D., op. cit., p. 430.
- <sup>15</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:5 (1396.3.29).
- <sup>16</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:5 (1396.3.29) (1396.4.8).
- <sup>17</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:5 (1396.6.11); 10:5 (1396.8.6).
- <sup>18</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.7.4).
- <sup>19</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.7.19).
- <sup>20</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.7.17).
- <sup>21</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 11:6 (1397.4.20).
- <sup>22</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.7.20).
- <sup>23</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.8.9).
- <sup>24</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.8.13); Im, J., 2002. *Tajoegohwangje: Joseongukwangpyongjeon 1* [King Taejo: First King of the Joseon Dynasty].
- <sup>25</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.8.13 & 17).
- <sup>26</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.8.14–23).
- <sup>27</sup> Kang, H., *Tombstones without a Tomb*, 2017, p. 73.
- <sup>28</sup> In addition to eating no meat himself, King Taejo stripped the titles of some officials who chose to eat meat during the period immediately after Queen Sindeok’s death. See *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.9.13); 10:5 (1396.8.16).
- <sup>29</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 11:6 (1397.1.1–2).
- <sup>30</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 11:6 (1397.1.2–3).
- <sup>31</sup> *Hyeongjong Sillok*, (1669.1.14).
- <sup>32</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.11.9).
- <sup>33</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.11.9) (1396.11.23).
- <sup>34</sup> The *Taejo Sillok* reports on the successful travels of the poet envoy Gwon Geun, and provides a record of his poems, here: 11:6 (1397.3.8). For a detailed scholarly treatment of this journey, see Alston, D. op. cit.
- <sup>35</sup> Alston, D., op. cit., pp. 118, 135.

- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 135.  
<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 117.  
<sup>38</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 12:6 (1397.11.30).  
<sup>39</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:6 (1397.3.8).  
<sup>40</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:6 (1397.3.8); See also Lee, D., Ha, T., Hong, S., and Song, H., *Jeonbukjiyeokui Joseon Tajoe Eujeok* [The Remains of King Taejo in North Jeolla Province].  
<sup>41</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:6 (1397.3.8).  
<sup>42</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>43</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.11.4).  
<sup>44</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 11:6 (1397.3.8).  
<sup>45</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 11:6 (1397.4.20).  
<sup>46</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 11:6 (1397.4.14).  
<sup>47</sup> Yonglin, J., *The Mandate of Heaven and the Great Ming Code*.  
<sup>48</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>49</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 11:6 (1397.4.17).  
<sup>50</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 11:6 (1397.6.23).  
<sup>51</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.5.14).  
<sup>52</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>53</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.6.3).  
<sup>54</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.6.23–24).  
<sup>55</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>56</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>57</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.7.8).  
<sup>58</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.6.24). Jeong Do-jeon had also wrote up some guiding principles of military success that he titled “A True Method” of winning in war. See “A True Method (1392)” in *Sambongjip*, Vol. I, pp. 317–328.  
<sup>59</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.8.1).

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- <sup>1</sup> Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Culture, “Legends of Rivers and Waterfalls.”  
<sup>2</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:6 (1397.3.26).  
<sup>3</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 9:6 (1397.4.12).  
<sup>4</sup> Park, H., “*Joseon Geonguk Cho Junganggun Yeongu*” [“A Study on the Central Army in the Early Joseon Dynasty”], p. 93; Do,

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H., “Development of Sagonghak during the Transition from the Koryŏ to the Chosŏn Dynasty”, p. 87; Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*, pp. 183–84.

<sup>5</sup> Kim, Y., “*Joseon Taejo~Taejongdae Jeongchiwa Jeongchiseryeok*” [“Taejo and Taejong: Political Forces of Joseon”], p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.8.22). King Taejo was described as favoring Jeong Do-jeon’s *Pictures of Hunting Scenes* on several different occasions as a good foundation for military study and training. See *Taejo Sillok* 7:4 (1395.4:1); 10:5 (1396.11.30); 11:6 (1397.6.14).

<sup>7</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 4:2 (1393.11.12).

<sup>8</sup> Park H., op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> For episodes of the princes and other military commanders resisting Jeong Do-jeon’s and King Taejo’s efforts to impose centralized military training on the provincial forces and private armies of notable elites (including the princes), see: *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.7.25) (1398.8:1) (1398.8.4) (1398.8.7) (1398.8.9).

<sup>10</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 5:3 (1394.1.27–28).

<sup>11</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 6:3 (1394.11.4).

<sup>12</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 10:5 (1396.11.30).

<sup>13</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 7:4 (1395.4.1).

<sup>14</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 12:6 (1397.8.9).

<sup>15</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 11:6 (1397.6.14).

<sup>16</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 12:6 (1397.10.16).

<sup>17</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 12:6 (1397.9.27).

<sup>18</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 12:6 (1397.12.22).

<sup>19</sup> Park, B., *Joseon Cheogoui Sasangbeom [The Best Ideological Outlaw of Joseon]*. p. 323.

<sup>20</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 12:6 (1397.12.22).

<sup>21</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 13:7 (1398.8.1) (1398.1.24).

<sup>22</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 13:7 (1398.2.26)

<sup>23</sup> Park, H., “The Province Official’s Roles and Uniforms in the Enshrinement Rituals of the Royal Portrait of King Taejo in the Early Joseon Dynasty –Focused on the Sejong Chronicles.”

<sup>24</sup> A full diorama of this entire procession is presented at the Gyeonggijeon Royal Portrait Museum. The procession is also

described in Yi, S., “Introduction to the Uigwe Royal Documents of the Joseon Dynasty.”

<sup>25</sup> Cho, I., “*Gyeonggiyeon Tajoe Eojingwa Jinjeonui Seonggeuk: Junggukgwau Bigyonjeok Gwanjumeul Jungsimuiro*.” [“The Nature of Gyeonggiyeon Tajoe Royal Portrait and the Portrait Hall: Comparative Analysis with Chinese Examples”].

<sup>26</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 13:7 (1398.4.4.).

<sup>27</sup> For the following poems, see *Taejo Sillok*, 13:7 (1398.4.26) and *Sambongjip*, Vol. I, pp. 432-433.

<sup>28</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 13:7 (1398.2.5).

<sup>29</sup> Kim, D., *Yi Seong-gyewa, Cho Chun, Jung Do-jeonui Joseon Wangjo Gaechan* [The Foundation of Joseon Dynasty by Yi Seong-gye with Cho Chun and Jeong Do-jeon], p. 216.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Lee, J., “*Yodongjiyeoe Dehan Joseoninui Insik: Sejongsilrokjirijiwa Donggukyeojiseungrameu Jungsimuro*” [“Koreans’ Perception of the Liaodong Region During the Joseon Dynasty”].

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 13:7 (1398.3.20).

<sup>33</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 13:7 (1398.2.29).

<sup>34</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.5[Intercalary].29)

<sup>35</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.7.25–29).

<sup>36</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.6.19).

<sup>37</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.5.3).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

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

<sup>40</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.5[Intercalary].11).

<sup>41</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.6.21).

<sup>42</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.6.26).

<sup>43</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.6.6)

<sup>44</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.5[Intercalary].11).

<sup>45</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.7.5).

<sup>46</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.7.11).

<sup>47</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.5.16).

<sup>48</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.5.18).

<sup>49</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.8.1–9); See also (1398.7.25 & 27) (1398.8.1, 4 & 7); Park, B., *op. cit.*, p. 324.

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<sup>50</sup> Kim, Y., “Joseon Taejo~Taejongdae Jeongchiwa Jeongchiseryeok” [“Taejo and Taejong: Political Forces of Joseon”], p. 90.

<sup>51</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.8.14).

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<sup>1</sup> King Tanjong, “Listening to a Nightingale,” in *The Moonlit Pond*, edited by Lee, S., pg. 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 8:4 (1395.3.4).

<sup>3</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.9.26).

<sup>4</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.8.14). For other entries regarding the King’s lingering illness, see (1398.7.29) and (1398.8.3 & 6).

<sup>5</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.8.26).

<sup>6</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.8.22, 23 & 25).

<sup>7</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.8.26).

<sup>8</sup> Jeong Do-jeon, “Sambongjip: Founding Joseon,” p.287.

<sup>9</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15:7 (1398.9.1).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15.7 (1398.9.5).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15.7 (1398.9.7).

<sup>14</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15.7 (1398.9.10).

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<sup>1</sup> Pak, W., “Untitled,” in *The Moonlit Pond*, edited by Lee, S., p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Im, Y., *Joseongukwang Iyagi I* [The Story of the Kings of the Joseon Dynasty], p. 80; *Taejo Sillok*, 15.7 (1398.9.5).

<sup>3</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15.7 (1398.9.5).

<sup>4</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15:7 (1398.12.17).

<sup>5</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15:7 (1398.9.12).

<sup>6</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15:7 (1398.10.11) (1398.12.24); *Jeongjong Sillok* 2:1 [1399] (5.1.1) (10.19.7).

<sup>7</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15:7 (1398.10.9).

<sup>8</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15:7 (1398.12.15).

<sup>9</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15:7 (1398.10.10).

- <sup>10</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15:7 (1398.11.28).
- <sup>11</sup> Kim, Y., “*Joseon Taejo~Taejongdae Jeongchiwa Jeongchiseryeok*” [“Taejo and Taejong: Political Forces of Joseon”], p. 91; Park, H., “*Joseon Geonguk Cho Junganggun Yeongu*” [“A Study on the Central Army in the Early Joseon Dynasty”], pp. 94–95.
- <sup>12</sup> Gong, J., *Joseon Wangsil Iyagi* [Stories of Joseon Dynasty].
- <sup>13</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15:7 (1398.12.23).
- <sup>14</sup> For details on this rebellion, see excerpts of the *Jeongjong Sillok*, provided in *Sambongjip*, Vol. III, pp. 242-253.
- <sup>15</sup> Cited in Kim, B., op. cit., p. 198.
- <sup>16</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 15:7 (1398.11.7).
- <sup>17</sup> Kim B., op. cit., p. 41.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Cited in Kim, J., *Jeong Do-jeon Sidaerul Ilda* [Reading the Age of Jeong Do-jeon], p. 171.
- <sup>20</sup> Gong, J., op. cit., p. 25.
- <sup>21</sup> For evidence of Taejo’s desire to return to more simple and pleasurable times in the north, see *Taejong Sillok*, 1:1 [1401] (4.10.1) (4.16.1). For details on the Taejo’s November 1402 journey to Hamhung and associated events, see Gong, J., op. cit., pp. 28–29.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Gong, J., op. cit., p. 26; People and History Editing Committee, *Hwanggeum Daedulbo Jaeguk Yi Seong-gye* [Yi Seonggye: The Cornerstone of the Golden Kingdom], pp. 177–178.
- <sup>24</sup> Kim, B., op. cit.; Gong, J., op. cit., p. 26.
- <sup>25</sup> Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, *Jeonbukuiro Tteonaneun Yi Seong-gye Yeoksa Yeohang* [The Historical Travels of Yi Seong-gye through Jeonbuk], p. 57.
- <sup>26</sup> Gong, J., op. cit., pp. 31–38.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 30–31.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 34.
- <sup>29</sup> Gong, J., op. cit., pp. 32–35; Kim B., op. cit. p. 182.
- <sup>30</sup> Gong, J., op. cit., pp. 32–33.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.



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<sup>32</sup> Yi Seong-gye Leadership Center, *Jeonbukuiro Tteonaneun Yi Seong-gye Yeoksa Yeohang* [The Historical Travels of Yi Seong-gye through Jeonbuk], pp. 51–52.

<sup>33</sup> Gong, J., op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 1:1 [1401] (4.26–28.1).

<sup>35</sup> Ji, D., *Tajoedaewanggwa Chininchuk* [King Taejo and his Relatives: The First Royal Family of Joseon], p. 67.

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<sup>1</sup> Im, J., *Tajoegohwangje: Joseongukwangpyongjeon 1* [King Taejo: First King of the Joseon Dynasty], pp. 326–331.

<sup>2</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 10:5 [1405] (11.8.1).

<sup>3</sup> *Taejong Sillok* 5:3 [1403] (1:1:1).

<sup>4</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 8:4 [1404] (10.20.1).

<sup>5</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 2:1 [1401] (11.17.1) (12.1.11) (12.17.1) (12.21.2); Baker, D., “Rhetoric, Ritual, and Political Legitimacy: Justifying Yi Seong-gye’s Ascension to the Throne,” p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> Kang, H., *Tombstones without a Tomb*, 2017, p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> Kim, B., *Wangjeongui Jogeon: Damronuiro Ikneun Joseonsidaesa* [Conditions of the Monarchy: Reading Joseon History Through Discourse], op. cit., p. 378.

<sup>8</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.7.20).

<sup>9</sup> *Sejong Sillok*, 23: 27 a–b; 30a–32–b.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> *Sejong Sillok*, 23:30a–32b; Sin, C., “On the Deceitfulness of Buddhism,” in *Sources of the Korean Tradition*, edited by Lee, P., de Bary, W. and Choe, Y., p. 313; Deuchler, M., *The Confucianization of Korean Society*, p. 105.

<sup>12</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 2:1 (1392.12.6).

<sup>13</sup> Vermeersch, S., “Yi Seong-gye and the Fate of the Goryeo Buddhist System (918–1392).”

<sup>14</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.8.2&5).

<sup>15</sup> Baker, D., “Privatization of Buddhism in the Joseon Dynasty,” p. 155; *Taejo Sillok* 4:2 (1393.7.23).

<sup>16</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 7:4 (1395.5.28).

<sup>17</sup> Baker, D., “Rhetoric, Ritual, and Political Legitimacy,” p. 140; Joo, K., “A Study of Buddhist Reliquaries Donated by Yi Seong-gye,” p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 3:2 [1402] (2.2.2) (4.22.1).

<sup>19</sup> Vermeersch, op. cit. The scale of this proposed reduction on Buddhist temples was immense. The old Goryeo capital of Gaegyeong alone featured about seventy temples before the Goryeo dynasty was overthrown by Yi Seong-gye, so King Taejong’s proposal to allow only seventy temples across the entire Korean peninsula would force a dramatic reduction of Buddhist presence and influence. See Kim, J., *A History of Korea: From “Land of the Morning Calm” to States in Conflict*, p. 148.

<sup>20</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 4:2 [1402] (8.2.3–4, 7)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. After the influential Monk Muhak died in 1405, King Taejong would renege on parts of his promise to his father. He brought back a revised proposal to eliminate many Buddhist temples. This time the proposal allowed 242 temples (instead of the original cap of 70) and it also allowed new temples to be opened, so long as an old one closed to make room under the quota. King Taejo’s influence couldn’t prevent all harassment of Buddhism but made a significant difference in protecting Buddhist temples from the worst attacks of the Joseon Confucians. See Baker, D., “Rhetoric, Ritual, and Political Legitimacy.”

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<sup>1</sup> Yi Saek, “At Pu–Byeok Pavilion,” In *The Moonlit Pond*, edited by Lee, S., p. 30

<sup>2</sup> Bohnet, A., *Turning Towards Edification*, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 11:6 [1406] (4.4.3).

<sup>4</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 10:5 [1405] (9.7.1) (9.11.2).

<sup>5</sup> Im, J., *Tajoegohwangje: Joseongukwangpyongjeon 1* [King Taejo: First King of the Joseon Dynasty], p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 15:8 [1408] (1.19–20.1); Kang, Y., *Joseonwangdeului Sengrobyeongsa* [Kings’ Life, Illness and Death in Joseon], pp. 29–31.

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- <sup>7</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 15:8 [1408] (1.20.1) (1.22.1) (1.28.1) (3.2.1).
- <sup>8</sup> Kang, Y., op. cit., p. 32.
- <sup>9</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 15:8 [1408] (2.14.2) (3.2.1) (3.21.1) (3.24.1) (4.3.1).
- <sup>10</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 15:8 [1408] (4.19.1).
- <sup>11</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 15:8 [1408] (5.2.1).
- <sup>12</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 15:8 [1408] (5.24.2).
- <sup>13</sup> Yi, S., “Introduction to the Uigwe Royal Documents of the Joseon Dynasty,” p. 13.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14; Lee, W., “A rare look at Joseon king's funeral.”
- <sup>15</sup> For details on these royal burial rituals, see Seok, C., “*Joseon chogi Yugyojeong Guksanguiryeyi Geohaengyangsanggwaeu Teukjing*” [“The Progression and Features of Confucian National Mourning Rites in the Early Joseon Dynasty”]; Wachiratiengchai, M., “Dynamic Aspects of Death Wisdom Associated with Royal Funeral Rites”; Lee, W., “*Joseonsidae Mangjareul Wihan Eumsik: Guksangeul Jungsimuiro.*” [“Food Offering for the Dead during the Joseon Period: Focused on the State Mourning Ritual”]; Yi, S., “Introduction to the Uigwe Royal Documents of the Joseon Dynasty.”
- <sup>16</sup> Lee, W., and Jin, Y., *Joseon Wangreung: Jamdeulji Mothaneun Yeoksa* [Royal Tombs of Joseon: A Sleepless History].
- <sup>17</sup> Wachiratiengchai, M., op. cit.
- <sup>18</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.8.28); Seok, C., op. cit.; Deuchler, M., *The Confucianization of Korean Society*, p. 192.
- <sup>19</sup> Lee, W., and Jin Y., op. cit. For an example of a royal order to prohibit liquor and slaughtering of animals during this period, see *Taejong Sillok*, 15:8 [1408] (8.5.24).
- <sup>20</sup> See, for example, *Taejong Sillok*, 15:8 [1408] (5.24.2); 18:2a (9.7.9).
- <sup>21</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 16:44a (8.12.3).
- <sup>22</sup> *Taejong Sillok* 16:8 [1408] (7.9.1).
- <sup>23</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 341.
- <sup>24</sup> Yi, S., op. cit.
- <sup>25</sup> Robinson, D., *Empire's Twilight*, p. 266.
- <sup>26</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 16: 11b (8.9.9).

<sup>27</sup> Yi, S., op. cit., p. 14–15.

<sup>28</sup> Details of Taejo’s enshrinement at Jongmyo are reported in the *Taejong Sillok*, 20:7a [10.7.26]. For other details on the enshrining process, see Wachiratienchai, M., op. cit., p. 9 and Yi, S., op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 16:8 [1408] (9.4.2).

<sup>30</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 16:5b [8.7.29]; Gim, Y., *Sheaves of Korean Buddhist History: Joseon Bulgyosa-go*.

<sup>31</sup> *Taejong Sillok*, 17:9 [1409] (1.18.3).

<sup>32</sup> *Arirang News*, “Royal Tombs of Joseon Dynasty: Memory of Royals Live On”; Yim, S., “Peek Inside Korea’s Impeccable Royal Tombs,” *Korean Joongang Daily*.

### Chapter 35

<sup>1</sup> *Taejo Sillok*, “Cheongseo” [“General Introduction”], Kindle loc. 1144.

<sup>2</sup> Kim, B., *Wangjeongui Jogeon: Damronuiro Ikneun Joseonsidaesa* [Conditions of the Monarchy: Reading Joseon History Through Discourse], pp. 386–387.

<sup>3</sup> Kweon, C., “Preface to Compilation of Native Korean Prescriptions,” in *Sources of the Korean Tradition*, v. I, edited by Lee, P., de Bary, W., and Choe, Y., p. 309–10.

<sup>4</sup> For a collection of statements from world scholars about the impact of Hangul, printed upon the occasion of “Hangul Day” being designated a Korean national holiday in 2013, see Chung, A. “Hangeul now more than words,” 2013.

<sup>5</sup> *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Translated by J. Hoyt, Canto 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, Canto 2.

<sup>7</sup> Kang, J., *The Land of Scholars*; Deuchler, M., “Neo-Confucianism: The Impulse for Social Action in Early Yi”; Yim, M., “The Establishment of Literati Governance Society in Early Joseon, and Its Continuation.”

<sup>8</sup> Kim, S., and Wales, N., *Song of Ariran: A Korean Communist in the Chinese Revolution*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, “epilogue.”



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Yi Seong-gye (1335–1408) began life as an obscure warrior of Korea's borderlands, but rose to overthrow the 500-year Goryeo dynasty and become King Taejo, who founded the 518-year Joseon dynasty, Korea's final royal lineage and the longest lasting Confucian dynasty in history. King Taejo's momentous life intersected with watershed East Asian developments: the collapse of the Mongol Empire in Korea, the rise of China's brilliant Ming dynasty, the pacification of massive Japanese pirating operations, and the rise of Asia's most thoroughly realized Confucian society in Joseon. This biography tells the tale, ending with the tragic descent of King Taejo's own family into fratricide and grief.

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