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

[*]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

subjugated. Furthermore, a broad range of social reforms improved agricultural production, tax codes, land allocation, and legal procedures, ushering in 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,

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 Tajeo* 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."[1] 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

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.[2] 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.[3]

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")[4] 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.[5]

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."[6] 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.[7]

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."[8] 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

impartiality and operated with norms of recording affairs "with a straight brush"[9] (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-legitimating 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."[10] 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.[11] 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 Yeongsangun 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.

> *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.*[12] (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.[13]

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"!

* 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.