

## 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.