

## 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

---

\* 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 pigtailed 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.

## THE BOY IN THE BORDERLANDS

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.