

### 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<sup>†</sup> 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.<sup>‡</sup> 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

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.