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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.[1]

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."[2] 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-14th 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.[3] 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.[4] 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.[5] 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.[6]

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.[7] 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.[8]

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."[9] Some estates grew so large as to encompass an entire province, turning local farmers into displaced tenants or homeless wanderers.[10] 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."[11] 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."[12]

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.[13] 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 14th 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.[14] 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.[15]

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."[16]

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."[17] 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."[18]

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.[19]

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.[20] 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.[21]

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

* 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.[22]

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.[23] 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.[24] 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."[25] 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.[26]

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.[27] 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.[28]

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.[29] 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.[30] 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.[31]

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.[32]

"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."[33] 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.