

“Men of Excellence Appear from Korea”



Yongwang is the King of Dragons, living deep under the sea in his underwater palace. His dragon lords have no wings, but rise like clouds above the earth, protecting and blessing the people with health, prosperity, and rain. The divine dragons of Yongwang move in the deepest seas, heavenly lakes, and grandest rivers of Korea, sustaining the life of the country. When King Munmuu died in 681, after uniting all of Korea under one rule, he was buried in the East Sea, where his spirit lived on as a Dragon Lord, ready to protect his country from invasion.

But dragons don't live only in the great rivers and vast seas. Where there is water, there is a dragon. Some dragons lie submerged in even the shallow places.¹



As King Gongmin met with Yi Jachun, it was a dangerous time for Yuan. Not only were they under assault by domestic rebellion, but Chinggisid rulers were increasingly angering old allies like the northern Yi clan. In earlier years, the Mongols typically found Koreans quite culturally sophisticated and a loyal partner, after their long resistance was finally defeated. Korean military men could hope for promotion and even title within the Yuan system. The scholar poet Yi-Kok described Yuan openness to Korean achievement, with Mongol leaders celebrating talent from wherever it might appear.

*In matters of civilization, there is no north or south...
To the Sagely Court come the ten thousand countries.
Men of excellence appear from Korea.²*

Some such “men of excellence” hailed from the Yi clan, but unfortunately for the Yuan, by the time of Yi Seong-gye’s

ascent they were no longer able to recognize Goryeoan excellence when it came before them. Through the 14th century, Chinggisid policies increasingly privileged Mongol populations over other peoples that they governed. For example, a 1315 policy banned “northern Chinese, Goryeo men, and southern Chinese” (but not Mongols) from wearing extravagant clothing.³ By the 1350s, under intense pressures from the Red Turban rebellion and devastating disease and famine, Yuan rulers retreated into nativism. Yuan overseers became increasingly discriminatory and demeaning towards Korean military officers, court officials, traders, and scholars. Just about the time that King Gongmin of Goryeo invited Yi Jachun to conversation in Gaegyeong, in fact, Yuan leaders announced a new policy by which they would separate migrants from natives on family registers, while making numerous privileges available only to Yuan natives. Coveted military titles and government positions now seemed destined only for descendants of a few Yuan family lines and commanders of Korean ethnicity would be left behind.⁴

It was a serious blow to any future ambitions of the family Yi within the Yuan system, delivered at just the time that King Gongmin of Goryeo was opening his own palace doors for an eventful conversation with an ambitious northern strongman. The situation would lead Yi Jachun and his son Seong-gye into an increasingly oppositional stance towards Goryeo’s old Yuan “allies”—the very ones they grew up with and served beside in earlier days on the Plains of Hamhung. The Yuan rulers would come to regret Yi’s growing anger at their treatment of Goryeo, for the Yi clan boasted an illustrious line of military strongmen and had developed a small private army of its own in the Hamhung highlands, independent of either Yuan or Goryeo.⁵ It was to these private Yi forces, increasingly alienated from Yuan, that Goryeo’s King Gongmin appealed in that fateful meeting with Yi Jachun in 1355.

“Your grandfather and father were outside [our] kingdom,” King Gongmin admitted while welcoming Yi Jachun to his halls, “but their hearts were in our royal family.” Yi Jachun agreed that his family had always remained loyal to Goryeo in the end. So then, let us talk, the two men decided.

Through the 1355-1356 winter and spring, King Gongmin conspired with Yi Jachun to end the dominance of the Yuan and their Ki-family supporters in Goryeo. In private meetings, they talked about a military attack on a key Yuan fortress up north: Ssangseong, the very place where Yi Ansa had once surrendered to a Yuan general. Also on the King's mind was a coming attack on the Goryeo Ki family who were closely tied to Yuan power. Both King Gongmin and Yi Jachun agreed that the time was ripe to attack Goryeo's Yuan collaborators and to mount an assault on the Yuan's Ssangseong commandery—not far from Hamhung where the Yi clan was based.

Gongmin had previously relied on Yi Jachun to lead military expeditions to pacify the “unruly fierce people” of the northern lands, and Gongmin needed him again. “I want you to go back to your post [in northern Ssangseong] right away and pacify our people,” Gongmin dictated.⁶ It was a treacherous command, because Yi Jachun's post up north was actually as a Yuan military officer—a *mingghan* “chief of 1,000”—helping to guard the very fortress he was now being ordered to take from the Yuan. But the King reached out to request the military forces commanded by Yi Jachun in his frontier base, and the northern strongman was intrigued by the opportunity.

King Gongmin elevated Yi Jachun's rank to Grand Master and ordered him to use his personal army to help other Goryeo forces defeat the Yuan commanders at Ssangseong. Yi Jachun agreed, bowed his head, and swore loyalty to the Goryeo king. To mark the solemn occasion of Yi Jachun betraying his Yuan position and going to battle against the Mongol empire, the King bestowed Yi with a purple golden pouch decorated with figures of fish.⁷ Yi Jachun mustered his men and raced to meet other Goryeo armed forces already in the field near Ssangseong, under the command of Goryeo general Choe Yeong. At his side was his twenty-year old son, Yi Seong-gye.

Back in the capital, King Gongmin moved against the Goryeo Ki family. When he received news that the Yuan court had posthumously bestowed imperial favor and royal titles on Empress Ki's Goryeo ancestors, Gongmin sensed something worse might be coming and decided to act first.⁸ Just nine days after hearing about the Ki family's new royal titles, in May of 1356, King Gongmin held a royal banquet for high-ranking

state officials. Several members of the family Ki attended, all of them well-connected to members of the Yuan court. Taken by complete surprise, three members of the Ki family were murdered with iron hammers on the spot during the banquet, as was another Korean supporter of their clan.

In the days to come, nineteen more supporters of the Ki clique were hunted down and executed, and many others were banished. One of those executed was a daughter of the Yuan emperor's consort, another was father-in-law to the Yuan heir-apparent in Daidu, and one was Empress Ki's elder brother.⁹ As the Ki family and their supporters were killed or banished, their slaves and property in Goryeo were seized by the state, while the "sons and daughters of good families" who were held in service to the Ki family were returned to their Goryeo parents.¹⁰ A public edict was issued, claiming that the Ki family "abused the laws of the country by relying on their prestige surpassing that of the king, and selection of officials was made according to their pleasure...If someone else owned land, they took it, and if someone else owned slaves, they took them." The Goryeo Ki family had been both purged and disgraced, while King Gongmin announced that "I pledge to brighten up the laws...so that the whole country can start over together."¹¹

Meanwhile up north, about one month after the purge, in July of 1356, Goryeo's forces under the command of General Choe Yeong attacked the Yuan's Ssangseong fortress at night. The fortress was commanded by Cho Sosaeng, the great grandson of Cho Hwi who first surrendered to the Yuan in 1358. His forces were entirely isolated. According to the *Koryosa*, many residents of the area, who had previously "ran away and hid in the valleys" to avoid the Mongols had now come out in force and celebrated Goryeo troops, declaring "The King of Goryeo is our true king."¹² Goryeo's Yuan forces in the field had already surrendered to the surprise attack by Goryeo forces, and the situation inside the fortress was hopeless. Inside the fortress was Yuan *mingghan* commander Yi Jachun and his son, Yi Seong-gye, at their imperial posts. As General Choe Yeong's forces began their assault on the Mongol fortress, commander Yi and his son Seong-gye were said to have quietly moved through the Yuan troops defending the

walls and came to the front of the fortress. There, they secretly opened the gate.

Goryeo forces poured inside, and pro-Yuan troops were routed. Cho Sosaeng and other fortress leaders disappeared, leaving their wives and children behind as they fled north, towards friendly Yuan forces commanded by a Jurchen warlord named Nahachu.¹³ By the end of the campaign, Goryeo's commanders had roared across the northern lands, recapturing many border fortresses and destroying numerous Yuan postal relay stations across the Yalu river in Liaodong—places where horses, dogs, and reindeer were maintained to help travelers cross these cold lands.¹⁴ Northern provinces were occupied by Goryeo forces all the way to the Yalu River.¹⁵ These territories had been previously seized by the Yuan during the reign of Goryeo's King Gojong, the *Taejo Sillok* reports, “and it took ninety-nine years to recover them all.”¹⁶

Predictably, the Yuan's Empress Ki—though of Goryeo heritage—reacted with rage. Her family had been purged, her elder brother killed, and Goryeo troops were attacking Yuan forces in the field. The Yuan court announced that 800,000 troops were on their way to punish Goryeo and install a new king. Fearful residents of Goryeo's capital began to flee for safety, carrying all they could on their backs and horses. But King Gongmin of Goryeo refused to back down. He expanded his own bodyguard units and mobilized his armed forces to meet the attack.¹⁷

But neither side really wanted this war. The Yuan were facing the powerful Red Turban Rebellion that had already depleted their resources, and the Goryeoans were vastly overpowered by Yuan forces. In the end, before further battles broke out, Gongmin offered to step down his military assaults on additional Yuan strongholds in the area and promised to keep submitting part of the northern territory's gold production to the Yuan as tax. Goryeo also promised to “forever serve as a screen against the seas,”¹⁸ meaning their troops would offer defense against pirating or Red Turban attacks on Yuan by sea. In turn, the Chinggisid court pardoned Gongmin and his officials of the crimes of executing the Ki family and attacking the borderlands.¹⁹ The Chinggisid court also agreed to the abolition of most Yuan myriarchies in

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Goryeo, recognition of Ssangseong and other northern areas as Goryeo territory, and elimination of Yuan envoys to Goryeo Buddhist monasteries.²⁰ The brewing crisis of all-out war was averted—but the Ki family was still purged, Yuan lands south of the Yalu were returning to Goryeo hands, the Yi family was rising, and the times were changing.