

Royal Intrigues: Reform and Resentment in Late Goryeo



*The wind that blew last night
Brought snow and frost,
And the great spreading pines
have all fallen to the ground.
No need to speak
The fate of flowers yet to bloom.*

— Yu Eungbu¹



There were high honors when the hero of the Liaodong expedition returned to Gaegyeong in 1370. General Yi was received by the royal carriage at the gates, and the streets were filled with cheering crowds. He was named a merit subject and granted land and enslaved servants. In addition, General Yi was appointed a grand councilor of the Chancellery that managed Goryeo's most important political affairs. The northern general now had a top government post and a permanent home in the capital city.²

But it was a capital city divided and not everyone appreciated the wreck that Yi Seong-gye's military victories were making of Goryeo's previous political arrangements. General Yi's return from successful battles north of the Yalu, deep in old Yuan territory, was a sign of how seriously things were changing in Goryeo itself. As the old Yuan rulers retreated, it brought serious challenges to those Goryeo elites who had accommodated themselves quite nicely to Yuan influence, building up their own great wealth and privilege.

Now, as Yuan influence waned, Goryeo experience its own increasing hostility between the established (but waning) power of the pro-Yuan aristocratic elites, secure in their vast

wealth and political favors, and the rising influence of austere Confucian scholar-officials, who had a vision of building a more virtuous and socially harmonious Goryeo in the wake of the Mongol retreat. The established aristocrats who had done so well under Yuan rule were known as the *gwonmun sejok**—influential families with vast land rights, hundreds of enslaved persons, and personal connections to the heights of government power.³

The rising Confucian scholars who challenged these aristocrats were known as the *sadaebu*,[†] and gathered around the influence of Sungkyunkwan, the highly regarded National Confucian Academy that increasingly called for a scouring of corrupted national politics.⁴ Although many of these *sadaebu* themselves came from rich and powerful Goryeo families, and intermarried with established lineages,⁵ a growing divide was emerging between the elite scholars who dedicated themselves to study and a Confucian revival and the less studious aristocrats who spend much of their time on hunts, festive banquets, and amassing of more land and slaves. Yi Seong-gye was rising in the world of Gaegyeong politics himself, but what world would he join? The splendid luxury and established power of the *gwonmun sejok*, or the spartan austerity and misty dreams of the Confucian scholars?

* *Gwonmun sejok* means “powerful hereditary families,” though the term (and related terms like *gwonmun*, *gwonsin* and *gwonsega*) came to be understood as a pejorative describing a range of powerful elites who abused their position and not just referring to the old, hereditary families. *Gwonmun sejok* has come to be used in a broad range of scholarship to describe a degenerate social class of late Goryeo aristocrats, typically with vast, inherited wealth and an endless hunger to amalgamate power through corrupt and oppressive practices. Duncan, J., *The Origins of the Joseon Dynasty*, p. 87.

† The *sadaebu* (literally meaning “scholar officials”) were scholars who rose to government position through the examination system, proving their literary, administrative, or technical skills by demonstrated merit. These *sadaebu* were part of the flourishing Confucian literary network of their day, having attended Confucian academies before they could take a qualifying civil service exam.

Legacies of Yuan: The Wealthy and the Weak

For one hundred years following King Gojong's submission to Mongol invaders in 1259, Goryeo had been thoroughly dominated by Yuan oversight. In exchange for their submission and regular tribute, Goryeo's royal house had been guaranteed dynastic continuity, but at the cost of a radical shrinking of its independent authority. During the period of Chinggisid intervention (1259-1356), the Yuan court supervised the installation and political machinations of seven consecutive Goryeo kings. Before being installed as king, the Goryeo crown prince had to reside in the Yuan capital and was required to marry a Mongol princess: Goryeo had become the Yuan's "son-in-law nation."⁶

During this time, the Yuan court deposed and installed Goryeo kings at will. Several kings were forced to abdicate when they ran afoul of Yuan desires, and one king (Chunghye, r. 1330-1332, 1340-1344) was beaten so severely when deposed that he died while being taken back to the Mongol capital. King Chungjeong (r. 1348-1351) was also probably poisoned by Yuan officials when he was deposed and taken back to their capital.⁷ Tributary missions to the Yuan were frequent and even sitting Goryeo kings often lived in Daidu for months at a time, in submission to the Yuan Emperor. Goryeo had become a weak shell of a nation and the Goryeo royal family became thoroughly Mongolized.⁸

Many Goryeo elites found ways to benefit from the situation. Some Goryeoans of means and status would travel to Yuan as envoys, delivering large tribute. They would request Yuan officials to grant them and their relatives all manner of favors back in Goryeo: land titles, tax exemption, government posts, and immunity to corvée labor. One Goryeo envoy in 1354 presented a list of 300 associates to be granted government posts and sinecures in Goryeo in return for his tribute and loyalty to the Chinggisids. Some Goryeo high-flyers chose to live in the glorious Mongol capital for some time, supporting lives of luxury with high taxation on their private holdings of Goryeo lands back home.⁹

Goryeo's powerful landowners became known as the *gwonmun sejok*—the landed aristocrats of late Goryeo. This

class became known as a parasitic power in Goryeo that took corrupt advantage of overworked and overtaxed peasants and avoided any service to the Goryeo state themselves.¹⁰ These families had produced great fortunes for generations, cunningly amassed huge farms which they kept off the official tax rolls, and constantly robbed peasants of their small lands, converting them into enslaved workers on *gwonmun sejok* holdings. Many of these *gwonmun sejok* were closely allied to the Chinggisids, such as the Goryeo Ki clan before their purge. Many central government ministers, provincial governors, and lower-level functionaries traced their power to such *gwonmun sejok*-Yuan relations, using corrupt connections to avoid legal punishments and obligations, while exploiting commoners at will. The *gwonmun sejok* were so immune to control by the Goryeo crown that many families built their own private militias and refused to submit any soldiers or even taxes to help the state repel threats, such as constant piracy attacks on coastal lands.¹¹ They had become something of an impregnable, closed circle of immensely powerful elites, beyond the reach of the Goryeo crown or public morality.¹²

For commoners, this situation looked bleak. Instability, over-taxation, economic despair, and threats of enslavement to Goryeo's *gwonmun sejok* were so pervasive that people were known to castrate themselves trying to get admitted to the Goryeo or Yuan court as eunuchs. At least in that case, people would be provided with food and clothes, and a possibility of respect and advancement. Families similarly sent their young daughters to Yuan, hoping they would find opportunity as servants or concubines, rather than being enslaved or starved in Goryeo.¹³

Common families had few options to avoid such sad fates. Because so much land was taken by corrupt aristocrats, commoners had little land to farm for themselves, without owing crushing tax debt to the *gwonmun sejok* who claimed rights to tax the land. At the same time, so much land was taxed privately by the *gwonmun sejok*, and thus unavailable for state taxation, that the Goryeo crown had no money to pay soldiers in times of crisis. Instead, farmers were conscripted without pay to fight off constant Japanese piracy attacks, while elite families protected themselves with private forces. When

people couldn't pay their tax obligations to the *gwonmun se jok* who "owned" their land, or couldn't pay back loans with usurious interest rates, they became harassed until starving or enslaved. Many people left their lands altogether and wandered homeless.¹⁴

A Small Efflorescence: The Coming of Neo-Confucianism

King Gongmin was a reformer who tried to change some of these dynamics. Soon after accession in 1351, Gongmin openly blamed subservience to the Yuan as fostering domestic corruption. He eliminated Mongol music from the court, replaced Mongol dishes with traditional Korean foods on the royal menu, and began to wear the royal robes of old Goryeo again, which were abandoned when Yuan fashion washed over the court: "it was a gesture to regain minimum self-esteem as Goryeo."¹⁵

Gongmin's reformist impulses were accompanied by a rising new force in the hearts of the Korean literati—neo-Confucianism. Decades earlier, the scholar An Hyang (1243-1306) took a hugely consequential trip to China. This scholar had returned with Confucian works of Zhu Xi, which catalyzed a wave of Confucian scholarship on the Korean peninsula. Scholars of the age were excited to discover high-minded texts offering practical precepts on "how to become human" by behaving more virtuously in daily life, which they found an exciting alternative to the self-interested corruption of Goryeo political elites and the other-worldly prayers of the Buddhist monks.¹⁶

Following An Hyang's efforts, several scholastic missions were dispatched to south China in the early 1300s to purchase Confucian books and scrolls and return them to Goryeo. After being forced by the Yuan court to abdicate Goryeo's throne, the former King Chungseon (r. 1308-1318) returned to Daidu where he built the Hall of Ten Thousand Volumes as a library of Confucian materials, helping transmit Confucian scholarship to Goryeo.¹⁷ Goryeo's scholars began to speak of Chinese classic Confucian civilization as "*zhonghua*" (in Korean, *chungwha*), the "central efflorescence" that illuminated the universe. They sought to make Goryeo the "small efflo-

rescence,” transmitting the brilliance of Confucian virtues to their little corner of the world.¹⁸

The calligraphy brushes of Goryeo’s flowering community of scholars were an inspiring counterpoint to the corruption of the *gwonmun sejok*. The Chinese classics offered venerable wisdom and practical advice on how to restore order to the state and how to prioritize idealism and virtue versus corruption and excess. A growing circle of scholars, studying in private training centers (*sahak*), became increasingly enthused by the Confucian moral philosophy of self-cultivation, defined by deepening one’s moral wisdom, virtue, and propriety in the basic relations of life.¹⁹

Early in King Gongmin’s reign, this emerging “reading class” sought strategies to break out of their private study halls and impact broader Goryeo society.²⁰ The great scholar Yi Saek was one of these ambitious reformers, who had studied Confucian texts for three years in Daidu between 1348-1351. He took the Confucian civil exam in Yuan China, placing both first and second place at different stages. Upon his return to Goryeo, Yi Saek submitted an appeal for government reform to King Gongmin. “The study of national literature, the foundation of cultivating customs, and able men are the foundation of politics and education,” his appeal claimed.²¹ Therefore, almost all people holding government posts should pass a civil service exam, rather than being appointed corruptly through family connection or payment of bribes. Furthermore, the only people eligible to take the exam should have studied at a recognized Confucian academy, and any high government official must have studied at the national Confucian academy. Goryeo should expand its education system, grow state support of the national academy, and re-establish a system of royal lectures for top officials to receive instruction in the Confucian classics.

It was a bold proposal, exciting the reformist King Gongmin. In 1367, Gongmin re-established the government-authorized Sungkyunkwan as the national Confucian academy. He established the royal lectures, through which leading scholars would edify the king and his court with discourses on history, Confucian classics, and proper behavior.²² Two years later a reformed and more rigorous three-stage civil exam-

ination system was introduced to determine eligibility for government posts.²³

With royal patronage, the new Confucian Academy became a sanctuary for high learning, fostering a rising class of idealistic scholars and reformers. Director Yi Saek attracted hundreds of scholars to the halls of Sungkyunkwan. About 200 students were enrolled at any one time, and all of them had to pass rigorous entrance exams in literature or Confucian classics.²⁴ Yi Saek imagined an academy to surpass the Ten Thousand Scroll Hall in Beijing, filled with books “as precious as gold and jade” and scholars “as splendid as a phoenix.”²⁵ Students engaged in spirited, all-night poetry, debate, and drinking sessions.²⁶ Dazzling scholars like Jeong Mong-ju, Cho Chun and Jeong Do-jeon became well-known for their erudition at the academy, passing reinvigorated exams in Confucian precepts and gaining admission as Goryeo’s virtuous and philosophical civil servants.

A new path to social prestige and mobility had been opened up in Goryeo, filled with men* of talent—a chattering class of Confucian idealists. The Halls of Sungkyunkwan gave a base of influence to the idealistic social reformers and a revolution of rising expectations washed over the literati.²⁷ The Confucian idealists argued that Goryeo had to fully reform its government, promoting men of virtue and deep study, rather than favoring the wealthy and influential families who had done so well under Yuan rule.

The scholars became openly critical of old alliances with Yuan, which they believed had led Goryeo to advance men without merit, and to become a vulgar country “full of bandits.”²⁸ Corruption is everywhere, the scholars argued. Goryeo elites use violence and illicit land titles to enslave people. Agriculture is collapsing as people are not allowed to farm freely. We can’t pay or train adequate soldiers, so invasions by Red Turban raiders or Japanese pirates are

* Only men were allowed into the Confucian academy, as Confucianism of that time was thoroughly patriarchal and consigned women to subservient social roles, including requiring women to mostly stay hidden in the sphere of the private home while leaving all public affairs to men.

constant.²⁹ Moreover, Heaven itself is punishing us with frequent “flooding, drought and disease” due to disharmony between Goryeo’s corrupt elites and the virtuous will of Heaven.³⁰ Through such damning critiques, the scholars became a serious force to be reckoned with, using the Confucian classics to give themselves “ideological claims to political power that the military and old aristocracy could not possibly have matched.”³¹

The Firebrand Jeong Do-jeon

An archetypal Confucian idealist and radical crusader was the *sadaebu* named Jeong Do-jeon, who would come to play an oversized role in Yi Seong-gye’s life.³² Jeong Do-jeon was born about 1337 to a family of mid-level government functionaries without much wealth or status. His family’s modest income left them often hungry as Jeong was growing up, and he could only rely on his own talent and studious diligence to change his lot in life.³³ As he spent endless hours of study, he became affectionately known by his penname “*Sambong*” (“Three Peaks”), referring to a three-peak mountain near his hometown.

Though *Sambong* became highly achieved (passing the civil service exam and entering the Sungkyunkwan Academy in his early twenties),* some of the old aristocrats complained about his allegedly humble origins to hold him back. Though his family was of minor nobility, it was pointed out by some that *Sambong*’s mother was a concubine, rather than a first wife. Some of the established bluebloods who *Sambong* had grown up with knew of this background and used it to torment the young scholar (even though secondary wives/concubines

* The influential *sadaebu* (scholar-official) Gwon Geun wrote that “All who listen [to Jeong Do-jeon] are persuaded. reason, those who visit holding copies of the classics clog up the gates and lanes. Those who have studied with him and become prominent officials stand abreast one after the other. Even military men and mediocre scholars listen raptly to his lectures.” See Robinson, D. *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, p. 44.

were considered fully legitimate wives under Goryeo standards of the time).

After Sambong passed the civil service exam, and thus became eligible for government office, Wu Hyeon-bo (a Minister of the *Dodang* council) spread word of his concubine mother and there were suggestions that perhaps this concubine was lowly-born. Though concubines could be considered legitimate wives under Goryeo standards at the time, slave or low-born concubines did not have the requisite status as mothers of high officials. Spreading rumors of Sambong's possibly low birth, Wu Hyeon-bo and his three sons campaigned to refuse Sambong the royal seal of appointment, which delayed his position for some time. Finally, a very frustrated Jeong Do-jeon (whose mother was in fact not a commoner) received appointment to the Ministry of Rites. He would hold Wu Hyeon-bo's family in contempt thereafter, which they would come to regret.

At the Academy, and in his government position, Jeong Do-jeon was a relentless scholar and social critic. He would become so lost in his work that he would show up to study or his government post with mismatched shoes. He was known for pursuing a scholarship of practicality, engaging the world with specific ideas for reforms, rather than simply producing beautiful poetry or ethereal celebrations of virtue in the abstract. Sambong criticized many of his peers for losing their social purpose in their scholarship of aesthetics, "writing only with an emphasis on poetry and literature."³⁴ He called such scholarship "a ship without direction" and urged colleagues to join him in creating a community of practical reformers. "Morality without politics is nothing by empty ideology," he maintained, "and politics without morality is reduced to formal legalisms."³⁵ Sambong described how Some scholars thought the best day was to sit in a warm room reading a book of classic ideas. But he disagreed. Sambong urged his colleagues to get out of the study and into the real world: "it is the most enjoyable thing to hunt on the plains with yellow dogs and blue hawks in leather clothes on the first snowy winter day!"³⁶

Sambong embraced a mission of transforming society. He critiqued corruption everywhere and published works about how to reform the bureaucracy and reform social ills. He

argued that the elite establishment was abusing the people and illicitly growing wealthy. He maintained that the purpose of royal power should be to improve the lives of common people and teach them virtue by modeling Confucian propriety.³⁷ Government positions should not be determined by favoritism, bribery, and family heritage, he argued. Rather, appointees should have to pass exams relevant to their position. They should have excellent writing skills and be adept at law and mathematics. Where necessary, they should be “good at astronomy, geography, medicine or any other discipline.”³⁸

In 1370-71, when Yi Seong-gye came to Gaegyeong after the northern Liaodong campaign, Jeong Do-jeon was a teacher at Sungkyunkwan (together with notables like Yi Saek and Jeong Mong-ju) and was a Government Minister of Rites. He was also a committed social reformer and intellectual firebrand, which put him on the front lines of a brewing war between the Confucian *sadaebu* and the *gwonmun sejok* elites who maintained their Yuan allegiances of old. It would prove a precarious position in the civil war that was soon to engulf the Goryeo court.

Execution and Exile

The idealist aspirations of confident literati like Jeong Do-jeon fit well with King Gongmin's hopes for a reformed Goryeo. In his very first years of rule, Gongmin had tentatively pursued a land reform effort to take state lands back from some of the *gwonmun sejok*, though these efforts were quickly stymied by entrenched elites. He also had commissioned Yi Jachun and his son, Seong-gye, to help drive Yuan military forces out of Goryeo lands beginning in 1356 while simultaneously purging the excessively corrupt relatives of Empress Ki in Daidu from their Goryeo positions. In the following years, Gongmin had pursued other reforms like distributing stores of rice to the poor in times of famine, reducing taxes by one-third, and capping allowable interest charges on loans. In the mid-1360s, Gongmin established the Confucian academy of Sungkyunkwan. He also created a reformed and much more strict national exam system to rationalize the personnel system

which created a direct path for progressive scholars to win position and breach the walls of Goryeo's political system.³⁹

At the same time, King Gongmin also elevated the reformist monk Sin Don to become "Most Reverend Priest" and prime minister. Like the Confucians, Sin Don bluntly described "the recent collapse of the nation's discipline," criticizing how "greed has become a trend."⁴⁰ He had ambitious goals to drive out many old *gwonmun sejok* elites from government power, through such strategies as taking control of the personnel appointment system and conducting inspections of the work of local officials. Together with King Gongmin he pushed for appointment of more skilled military officers, supervised the work of a wave of new reformist judges, and began to inspect the jails for improperly imprisoned people. He also pushed an ambitious land reform movement between 1365 and 1371, attempting to return stolen land to farmers and the state, and reclassifying thousands of illicitly enslaved persons as free commoners.⁴¹ The plan was a huge blow to Yuan-allied *gwonmun sejok* landowners, and was pushed at the same time as General Yi Seong-gye was campaigning north of the Yalu, delivering massive blows to the old Yuan relationship that had supported many of Goryeo's *gwonmun sejok* for so long.

During that same time (the spring of 1369) King Gongmin dispatched an envoy to Ming congratulating the Hongwu emperor on defeating the Yuan and on his accession to the Dragon Throne. The new Ming emperor responded in May of 1370 with an envoy to invest King Gongmin as the king of Goryeo, bestowing his family with 10 rolls of fine silk carpets. Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang also bestowed Gongmin with Ming caps and gowns for government officials, a Ming calendar, Ming musical instruments, and classic texts of Confucian thought and Han history. Gongmin announced that he would henceforth follow Ming, not Yuan, titles and calendars.⁴² Goryeo envoys were soon dispatched to request Ming musicians travel to Goryeo to teach Ming musical styles. Gongmin also implied that a tribute of warhorses bred on Tamna (Jeju) island (long controlled by Yuan horse ranchers) would soon be sent to Ming.⁴³

None of these ideas enthused the old *gwonmun sejok*. Many of the landed aristocrats had built their power on

control of land and alliance with the Yuan and they were not about to give up their privileged position easily. Though the Confucian scholars had an institutional base in Sungkyunkwan, the old aristocrats held more serious political power through land holdings and key posts in the Goryeo government. Though Goryeo was a monarchy, its most important political matters were managed by a cabinet known as the *Dodang*, a collective leadership council that had about thirty members in King Gongmin's time. The *Dodang* met regularly for management of all manner of Goryeo affairs: financial, criminal justice, personnel, agriculture, commerce, and foreign relations. Only rarely did the King step over the council and rule things directly. Goryeo's *gwonmun sejok* elites who dominated this council were not excited by the rise of the Confucian busybodies, nor with Gongmin's reformist initiatives and recent embrace of the Ming.⁴⁴

During this time, King Gongmin's position grew increasingly fragile. His efforts to drive out the Yuan and embrace the rising Ming dynasty earned him influential domestic enemies whose personal fortunes and long intimacy with the Mongols made them favor the Yuan. The anti-Yuan campaign also meant advancing the interests of the Chinese Ming, whose Red Turban rebels not too long ago had invaded and ravaged Goryeo lands. Goryeo's pro-Yuan elites could stir the pot with memories of King Gongmin's chaotic and demeaning flight from the capital, and Gaegyeong's subsequent destruction by Chinese Red Turban forces, just a decade ago.

There was also the troubling fact of Gongmin's increasing detachment from direct involvement in political affairs. While Gongmin had embraced the land reform efforts of monk Sin Don, and supported the Confucian scholars at Sungkyunkwan, his own political efforts became increasingly erratic. His decline began in 1365, when his beloved Mongol wife No Guk died in childbirth, and "King Gongmin looked blankly into space like a soulful doll."⁴⁵ Gongmin fell into grief and abstained from eating meat for the next three years. He built his deceased wife a shrine, hung a portrait of her that he had painted himself, and spent hours kneeling before the portrait in paralyzed grief.⁴⁶ In manic despair, he ordered a huge

temple built in honor of No Guk, though its massive scale and cost burdened an already overworked and hungry populace. Things got worse when the temple's main beam collapsed during construction, crushing 26 workers. Still, Gongmin pushed on and ordered the temple project to continue, at even bigger scale. An ill-wind spread among the people.⁴⁷

Though the King withdrew from direct involvement in state affairs and attended mostly to the queen's portrait and temple construction, his favored monk Sin Don continued to push reform: seizing illegal lands of the *gwonmun sejok*, redistributing them to the people, and improving the state's tax coffers.⁴⁸ These efforts earned him powerful enemies, and with the King's disinterested retreat from politics an opening was made for the *gwonmun sejok* aristocrats to accuse Sin Don of usurping royal power and conspiring to overthrow Gongmin. Abandoned in the end even by the erratic King, Sin Don was exiled to Suwon and beheaded in 1371, right about the time Yi Seong-gye had returned from his Liaodong campaign in the north. In Sin Don's place, a faction of Goryeo aristocrats, led by military General Choe Yeong and minister Yi In-im emerged to restore the *gwonmun sejok* authority of old. The reform efforts of the Gongmin era came to a halt.⁴⁹

Recognizing a dangerous situation and without a royal heir, an increasingly morose King Gongmin chose now to recognize a once cast-aside young boy as his son and heir. In earlier years, King Gongmin denied rumors that he had fathered baby Monino, who was born in the house of Monk Sin Don. But now Gongmin claimed the six-year-old Monino as his own son, making him eligible for designation as crown prince. Suspicions were high, as many believed Monino had been born to an enslaved woman in Sin Don's house (Banya), and that Sin Don (not King Gongmin) was the likely father. Still, Monino was now the claimed son of King Gongmin, which the King hoped would calm court intrigues about his successor.⁵⁰

To further protect his position, Gongmin also established a circle of personal bodyguards, the *Jajewi* or "Noble Youth Guards."⁵¹ His critics took note of the increasing number of young boys and men serving as palace guards and began to spread rumors. Reportedly, the King had pederastic relations with some of these young guards, while ordering others to

secretly lay with his palace consorts in an effort to produce additional royal heirs. Though there is no hard proof of these charges brought by factions opposed to Gongmin's rule, Gongmin's mental state seemed to concern many in the court.⁵² In fact, the very name "Gongmin" was actually a posthumous title bestowed upon him by the Ming Emperor, with the most likely interpretation being "pitiable" or "wistful," a title that summarized Gongmin's distressed frustration as besieged ruler.⁵³

During these uneasy days, Gongmin's anti-Yuan faction continued to push for deeper relationships with the Ming dynasty, now occupying the Dragon throne in Beijing. Yuan and Ming forces continued to struggle for supremacy in the Liaodong lands beyond the Yalu River, and both constantly appealed to Goryeo for allegiance and assistance. In 1371, Gongmin had announced that he would ally with the Ming, and use their title and calendar, while calling Yi Seong-gye's troops back from their campaign north of the Yalu River, leaving the lands to the Ming's growing power. The Ming dynasty was happy to accept Goryeo's allegiance, and immediately demanded that Goryeo prove its loyalty with tribute and military support in the Ming's campaign to destroy what was left of Yuan forces.

On April 13 of 1374, a Ming envoy arrived in Gaegyeong, requesting that Goryeo provide 2,000 strong horses from Tamna Island to support Ming war efforts. This island off the southern tip of Korea had been ruled by Yuan commanders since they conquered the peninsula one hundred years ago and was famous for its expert horse breeders. Mongol herders had been settling on the island for generations, and the Yuan court sometimes exiled disfavored Mongol elites to the island.⁵⁴ The southern island was culturally distinct from the Goryeo mainland and populated with many Mongol descendants or mixed Mongol-Tamna households (about 30,000 Mongols lived on the island at the time)⁵⁵ —it was not a willing partner in supplying war horses to the Ming. This was all the more reason for the Ming Court to demand that Goryeo rulers subjugate the island and begin delivering horses to Ming.

The Ming envoy, Chae-Bin, was arrogant and abusive. Passing through Goryeo territories on his way to Gaegyeong,

he thrashed anyone he found inadequately obsequious. Even though food was scarce, he demanded that local granaries be emptied when his party passed through so that huge feasts could be prepared. After Chae-Bin presented the Ming's demand for 2,000 Jeju warhorses to King Gongmin, another grand feast was arranged. During that feast on June 3 of 1374, a Goryeo *kisaeng* approached Chae-Bin and placed a flower in his hair. The hothead exploded. Yelling that it was degrading to have a lowly *kisaeng* touch his august person, Chae-Bin stormed out of the feast and angrily departed the capital, hurrying back to Ming. King Gongmin had to send soldiers to chase down Chae-Bin, calm his spirits, and cajole him to return to the capital where he could await delivery of the Jeju war horses. The envoy did return, but only after seriously beating a few of the people sent to retrieve him.⁵⁶

On July 12, the Jeju horses finally arrived—or at least 300 of them did. Down on Jeju island, the Mongol-allied horse-breeding elites (*hachi*) had refused to turn over 2,000 horses, so only 300 horses were delivered, and these were of poor quality. “How could we dare present horses pastured by Qubilai Khan to the Great Ming,”⁵⁷ the Mongol horsemen asked. Indeed, it seemed likely that the rawboned horses weren't from elite Tamna ranches at all.

Enraged, Gongmin's court decided to punish the Tamna Island horse-ranchers. In September-October 1374, a force of 300 ships and 25,000 soldiers was sent to Tamna under the command of General Choe Yeong to subjugate the island and enforce the King's will.⁵⁸ Soon thereafter, on September 2nd, Chae-bin (the abusive envoy) began heading back to the Ming with the 300 gaunt horses and a promise that more horses would be delivered after Choe Yeong's expedition to Tamna Island. A Goryeo envoy named Kim Ui was sent to escort Chae-bin back to Ming.

But things were not how they appeared. While King Gongmin was indeed trying to ally with the Ming and subjugate pro-Yuan elements on Tamna, other forces were moving among his ministers. Several of these ministers were allied with the pro-Yuan influential families of Goryeo and were desperate to find a way to restore relations with Yuan and turn their backs on the hated Ming, who were now

occupying lands north of the Yalu and threatening war on Goryeo if tribute weren't delivered.

In addition, according to historical records of the era, King Gongmin's own bizarre behaviors with his young personal bodyguards (the *Jajewi*) led to strange intrigues within the palace walls. These historical records present Gongmin as a homosexual or bisexual man, who was unable to produce an heir to carry on the Goryeo royal line. It is recorded that Gongmin enjoyed making himself up as a woman, "was not fond of sex and was unable to mount women."⁵⁹ He supposedly organized forced sexual relations with dozens of his young bodyguards, keeping himself excited during the act by watching other bodyguards having forced sex with young servant girls. He hoped in the end that one of his *Jajewi* would get one of the young girls pregnant, so he could claim the baby as his own and produce a (false) heir.

However, such accounts were written by court historians of the Joseon dynasty which overthrew the Goryeo ruling house, and who likely had goals to besmirch Goryeo royals and justify their downfall. Some scholars doubt the accounts of Gongmin's supposed sexual depravity, and the related story of frightened bodyguards and eunuchs being driven to murder him for personal reasons. An alternative reason for Gongmin's murder could be that he was increasingly allied with the Ming court, and the pro-Yuan elites of Goryeo wished to remove him and restore relations with the Chinggisids.⁶⁰

Whatever the actual mix of motivations that led to Gongmin's downfall, here is how the historical records of his time tell the story. In October of 1374, as the Ming envoy was returning home with the 300 horses, Goryeo's Gongmin discovered that one of his concubines was said to be pregnant with the child of one of his palace guards (Hong Ryun). Though the King wasn't upset that the concubine was pregnant (indeed, he wished for more royal heirs), he threatened to kill the palace guard all the same (together with palace bodyguards and eunuchs in the know), so that the secret of the royal heir's paternity would never come out. Rumors of the King's murderous intent began spreading among his *Jajewi* (personal bodyguards) and palace eunuchs.

Things were on a razor's edge when, on October 27th, 1374, a group of Gongmin's attendants surrounded the King's bed around midnight and stabbed him while he slept, spraying blood and brains all over the room.⁶¹ The 44-year-old Gongmin, twenty-three years a king, was dead. Those involved in the regicide included Hong Ryun, supposed target of Gongmin's anger over the concubine affair. The King's assassins fled but were rooted out after a palace eunuch discovered one assailant in hiding, his clothes still covered with the King's blood. The names of five other killers were extracted under torture. All six were beheaded and their heads hung in public places. Their children were hanged, their fathers were imprisoned, and other relatives were flogged, exiled, or sentenced to death. Their family property was confiscated, and their wives reduced to palace slaves.⁶²

A week later, on November 8th, the Ming envoy Chae-bin arrived at the banks of the Yalu River and prepared to cross into Liaodong. But there at the river, the Goryeo escort Kim Ui rose up and killed the Ming envoy and fled with 300 soldiers and all the horses across the Yalu to Yuan territory, where he turned over his plunder to Yi Seong-gye's old enemy, Nahachu.⁶³

Gaegyeong's political tables had turned. Goryeo's pro-Yuan faction had almost certainly played a role in Gongmin's assassination. Even though the direct assassins had been punished, and the whole thing was blamed on disgruntled young *Jajewi*, members of the broader clique of anti-Ming officials now had the upper hand and could pursue renewed relations with the Chinggisids.⁶⁴ That faction included Yi In-im, *Dodang's* thoroughly corrupt Prime Minister who disdained Gongmin's pro-Ming policies.

With Gongmin deceased, Yi In-im's faction quickly worked to enthrone the ten-year-old Monino as the new monarch—he was installed as King U three days after Gongmin's death. Yi In-im had a close relationship with the young boy and was confident that such a young king would allow his pro-Yuan faction to manipulate politics as they wished. Though U was King Gongmin's claimed son, rumors persisted that he was born to a monk's maid, so the sudden accession of a boy-king

with uncertain heritage, and under suspicious circumstances, caused some court unease.

During the transition, one historical account says that the servant Banya (rumored to be Monino's mother) showed up to court, demanding to be recognized as mother to the king. She poured out a stream of curses that her (alleged) son was being made a court puppet. Yi In-im would have none of it. Now the dominant force in Goryeo politics, who "exercised power at will,"⁶⁵ the Prime Minister ordered Banya immediately executed. "To settle this issue quickly, kill Banya," he said. "Since the King's mother isn't clear, we need to quickly put people's suspicions to rest." One court minister spoke up snarkily to challenge Yi In-im's dismissal of Banya's claim "There are times when we aren't certain who the father is, but I've never heard of a case where we aren't sure who the King's mother is."⁶⁶ But this minister was in the minority. Yi In-im's will was done and Banya was thrown into the river to drown, while her supporters were exiled or beheaded.⁶⁷ Still, the minister's dissenting remark endured, and a dangerous cloud of suspicion lingered over young King U.

Securing the new order, Yi In-im quickly took over the personnel system, and reshuffled government appointments. He elevated 59 people with special merit awards and forged an alliance with General Choe Yeong, who had fought beside Yi Seong-gye in several important battles. General Choe—a member of Goryeo's old elite clans—was allowed to give awards of land and position to family and friends for their military merit against Japanese pirates, even though many of these people had never fought in the General's forces.⁶⁸ Coming together as the two pillars of the post-Gongmin era, Yi In-im and Choe Yeong agreed that Gongmin's land reforms (limited though they were) had to be reversed, and that Goryeo needed to re-establish its relationship with the Yuan dynasty.

The pro-reform faction of the deceased King Gongmin, including the Confucian scholars of Sungkyunkwan, were despondent—but there was nothing they could do. They had been systematically locked out of political power in Yi In-im's wave of merit awards and government posts. Almost none of the scholars were now sitting in on deliberations of the

Dodang, even more the center of Goryeo's politics now that a boy-king was on the throne.⁶⁹ Many of the scholars raised voices in dissent, refusing to support a proclamation of King U's ascension and protesting renewed relations with the Yuan.⁷⁰ "The Great Ming arose like a dragon," Jeong Mong-ju observed, and it is disastrous to anger them.⁷¹ One scholar, Park Sang-chun, lamented that the assassination of Gongmin would lead to disastrous conflict with Ming. "The emperor of the Ming will be more suspicious and the whole country will be angry!"⁷² But Yi In-im and General Choe Yeong squashed the protests. General Choe's forces showed up at the doors of Sungkyunkwan and ordered the arrest, torture and exile of dozens of scholars and other officials who resisted the new order or protested relations with Yuan.⁷³

A Goryeo envoy was sent to Nahachu up north, notifying him that things had changed in Goryeo, and opening the door to renewed cooperation with the Jurchen and Mongols. Yuan leaders were greatly pleased at Goryeo developments and quickly sent their own envoy south, to seal a newly friendly relationship with the young King U.⁷⁴

Still, the scholars protested. One of the most vocal and idealistic of the scholars was Jeong Do-jeon, who served as Minister of Rites and was in despair that the reforms of King Gongmin were going up in smoke. The Yuan oppressed and ruined our country for decades, Jeong Do-jeon cried out, and their allies surely were involved in murdering King Gongmin. "If you receive the Yuan envoy, the whole nation will fall into chaos!"⁷⁵

Delighted to further humiliate the scholars, Yi In-im refused to bend and ordered Jeong Do-jeon himself to greet the arriving Yuan envoy and escort him with honor to the palace. But Jeong Do-jeon was not a man for circumspect politics and he replied quite bluntly: "If I greet the envoy, I will cut off his head, and send it to Ming!"⁷⁶ Jeong Do-jeon had his supporters, but amid the fiery debates of *Dodang's* red-robed ministers, Yi In-im won the day. Jeong Do-jeon was stripped of his title for disobeying his superior and was exiled far to the south, where he would be forced to survive on "green vegetables and insects."⁷⁷

THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

As the popular scholar prepared to leave for exile to the farming village of Naju (Jeolla province) many government ministers regretted the harsh punishment of a respected thinker. Four officers joined Jeong Do-jeon at the East Gate for a round of farewell drinks, where they advised him to linger near the gates a bit longer. Things are calming down on the *Dodang* council, they explained, and Jeong might be allowed to stay in the capital after all. But Jeong was a zealot without compromise—someone who wouldn't kneel even when broken. The scholar stood up to leave. "My words and anger are for the sake of our county, which should stick to our beliefs. There was a royal order to leave, so how can I not leave immediately?"⁷⁸ As the sun fell, Jeong took up his bag and headed south through smoke-filled fields of rustic houses. I have become a stranger among "lonely birds," Jeong wrote. "As I suffer, it is hard to say farewell to my friends."⁷⁹ Goryeo's leaders "have abandoned their country and their king," Jeong lamented on his path to exile, and "all I have are poems."⁸⁰

He wouldn't see the capital city again for ten long years.