

Seong-gye the Cipher



*Clouds cluster thick.
 Where white snow melts in the valley.
 The lovely plum, where has it bloomed?
 I stand alone
 In the setting sun, not knowing
 Whither I should go.*

- Yi Saek¹



Goryeo was perched on a razor's edge, increasingly divided between *gwonmun sejok* elite and Confucian scholar—but where would General Yi cast his lot? Though Yi Seong-gye always respected the scholars, he could see as well as any that they were facing serious troubles in post-Gongmin Goryeo. After torture and exile, the ambitious moralizing of Sungkyunkwan fell silent for a time as the Confucian scholars descended into despair. Their reform plans lay in ruins. Though the scholars had proven their talent and merit by study and exam, the most ambitious reformers were increasingly locked out of government power as all the top positions went to the old aristocrats. Their economic fortunes looked bleak as the *gwonmun sejok* continued their illicit land grabs. And now their country was refusing to break ties with the Mongols and wouldn't recognize the rising force of the Chinese Ming.² Allying with the scholars of Sungkyunkwan did not look politically promising.

On the other hand, the northerner Yi Seong-gye was not familiar with the capital's blueblood society and must have been a bit uncomfortable in his early years at Gaegyeong, even after riding in as a conquering hero. Yi Seong-gye was a rugged frontier man in the big city, draped with northern attire and

manners, and speaking with a country tongue.³ He probably struggled amid the patriciate of Gaegyeong. Their court garments were exceedingly complex, their rituals impossibly precise, the etiquette quite delicate. There were different rules for whether one was walking or riding, for when to sit or stand, for how low to bow and to who. Rituals changed depending on who was in a higher or lower position, and who was older or younger. Expectations varied by time of day, area of the city, and occasion. Impossibly complicated as it was, officials were commonly impeached for not performing the full rituals, in just the right ways.

This was a foreign society to General Yi Seong-gye, and he was commonly disrespected and left behind in those days of his early military victories. For example, when he won a great victory against Japanese pirates in the south, Yi was only given some stony and infertile land as reward. Meanwhile, an officer from a traditional influential family of Goryeo received far better land, though he had performed more poorly in the military campaign. Yi had few social connections of his own. His wife, Lady Han, was a quiet northerner from a middling family in Hamyong province. His top military aide, Yi Chiran, was a Jurchen tribesman from the north. Some other Yi family and subordinates had been involved in various lowbrow conflicts, such as those of his petty raider cousins (Samson and Samgae) in the northeast. Another cousin would be imprisoned for killing a man in a brawl in 1376.⁴

But things started to change for Yi Seong-gye after his Liaodong military victories of 1370. When he returned to Gaegyeong, King Gongmin had promoted him as administrative grand councilor of the Chancellery (*Dodang*), at the same moment (1371) that he elevated the renowned scholar Yi Saek as Chancellery scholar. Gongmin was delighted at what he thought was a clever idea to bring the scholar and the northern warrior together onto one council.⁵

Around this same time, Yi Seong-gye's children also began marrying into the traditional Goryeo elite. Several of his sons married into established families, while a daughter became married to a nephew of Yi In-im, the most powerful member of *Dodang*.⁶ His eldest son, Yi Bang-woo, married King Gongmin's niece, making him a nephew-in-law to the king.

As the Yi family climbed the social ladder, Seong-gye himself found opportunity to take a second wife. Multiple wives were common in Goryeo, especially for elites, though Yi had just one wife, Lady Han, who he had married when he was 23 years old (in 1358). Lady Han was a northerner who remained at the Yi's hometown of Hamhung. But now, with Yi Seong-gye spending so much time travelling the Gaegyeong social circuit, new opportunities arose. On the heels of King Gongmin's murder (1374), Yi Seong-gye began a relationship with Lady Kang, member of a once powerful (though recently declining) *gwonmun sejok* family.

Lady Kang's family had once served as guards for Goryeo's King Chunghye (r. 1330–1332, 1340–1344). But when he was dethroned for his life of debauchery (e.g., he raped his deposed father's concubine), some of her family members were also executed. Her mother fled with her three-year old daughter (who would become Lady Kang) to her hometown of Goksa, where the family lived as declining elites due their former association with the corrupt court of Chunghye.⁷ Still, Lady Kang's brother had a large, rich house, and he had even hosted King Gongmin for a time when the King had to flee the Red Turban rebels.⁸

The legends tell us that Yi Seong-gye met Lady Kang by accident while hunting near her hometown. Chasing after wild animals, Taejo came upon a young woman at a water well. He asked for a bit of water. She drew him a cup of water, but before offering it, she carefully pulled leaves from a nearby willow tree and floated them upon the water. The General asked why she would do such a thing. She replied that the General seemed very thirsty and in a hurry, but she believed it better if he slowed down a bit and drank his water more mindfully—and the willow leaves would see to that. General Yi was smitten with the woman's beauty and wisdom, and soon asked for her hand in marriage.⁹ In this way, Lady Kang became General Yi's second wife, in 1376. The General was 41 years old and his new wife just 20.

Though the story is often told, it is unlikely that General Yi just ran into Lady Kang happenstance at a well and asked an unknown maiden to marry him. Both General Yi and Lady Kang had social prominence and moved in similar circles.

Their cousins had inter-married, and relatives of Kang's family had fought in Yi's army. The families were intertwined long before the "meeting at the well," and it is likely they knew each other for some time before this mutually advantageous marriage between two elite clans.¹⁰ General Yi was on his way up the social ladder, and he benefitted from connection to an established family. Lady Kang's family had become stagnant and declining, and she likely saw promise in the rising hero. Often, Yi Seong-gye would call Lady Han from the north "Hyang-cheo" ("My Hometown Wife")—she was mature, careful and withdrawn from political life. He would call Lady Kang "Gyeong-cheo" ("My Capital-City Madam")—she was young, bold, and ambitious.¹¹

With this marriage and those of his children, it could be said that the Yi family was joining, not challenging, the established elites.¹² But this wasn't so clear. For Yi Seong-gye was no sure friend of the decadent Goryeo aristocrats with their vast landholdings and luxurious parties in cloud brocade towers while common people starved. He had no record of illicit land seizures of his own, nor of corrupt favor-currying. His spartan military sensitivities were weary of aristocratic decadence, and troubled by common people facing hunger and constant threats of wars.

Though a general, he refused to eat meals while campaigning among starving soldiers, and typically showed more humility than hubris.¹³ While other generals were known to conscript many of their soldiers and beat them mercilessly to enforce order, Yi Seong-gye built a well-trained army of professionals and treated them with dignity. He mixed with his own soldiers easily and had a popular following.¹⁴ Most dangerously to the established Goryeo elites, most of Yi's soldiers were northerners, loyal to Yi Seong-gye more than to some abstract notion of the timeless Goryeo dynasty. Yi Chiran, Yi Seong-gye's boyhood friend, was one of these loyal northern warriors from the Jurchen tribe.

Moreover, compared to the failed royal elite and corrupted aristocrats of Goryeo, Yi Seong-gye much preferred the austere dedication and moral philosophizing of Confucian scholars like Jeong Do-jeon, and he was patron of the Sungkyunkwan academy.¹⁵ "Though he was busy at war, he

loved the scholars,” says one canto of *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven** (Hereafter, *Songs of the Dragons*). Another canto tells how Yi Seong-gye always honored the literati, no matter how powerful he became. “Seeing an old scholar, he kneeled down out of respect. How’s that for exalting the literati?”¹⁶ The *Taejo Sillok* also reports how “Taejo always had great respect for Confucianism. Whenever he took a break after throwing spears in his military camp, he called on Confucian scholars such as Yu Gyeong and others to discuss classical texts with him. He particularly enjoyed reading the *Daxue Yangi* (Extended Meaning of the Great Learning) by Zhen Dexia, so he read it until late at night, growing a dream of changing the world.”¹⁷

It isn’t surprising, therefore, that many of the old Goryeo patricians whispered that Yi Seong-gye was not a dependable Goryeo loyalist and could not be trusted. On several occasions Yi In-im had observed the martial talents and compelling personality of Yi Seong-gye as compared to unstable Goryeo monarchs and predicted a dramatic future: “This country certainly will be taken over by the Yi clan” he darkly warned his *gwonmun se jok* friends.¹⁸

Yi In-im was right to be concerned. The brittle Goryeo dynasty was tottering under the weight of internal tensions

* Canto 80. These songs, in the form of 125 Cantos, were the first document ever printed in Korea’s Hangeul script. This document was produced during the reign of King Sejong (Joseon’s fourth king, and the grandson of King Taejo). *Songs of the Dragons* celebrates the ancestral heritage and founding acts of the “six flying dragons” of Joseon. The six dragons are Yi Seong-gye, his four paternal ancestors, and his son Yi Bang-won who became King Taejong. “Flying to Heaven” refers to the rise of the Joseon dynasty in accordance with the Mandate of Heaven. In these Cantos, the history of the Yi family is presented as the divine history of country, blessed by six “dragons” who secure its borders from foreign powers and who demonstrate superior moral virtue in their behaviors so as to edify the people (See *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, translated by Hoyt, J.; Choi, M., “*Yongbiochungae Natanan Yeonalseonchoui Yongto-jeonjengwa Byeongeong*” [“A Study on the Territorial Wars and Northern Border in Yongbiocheonga”]).

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and world changes all about. Epic dynasties were falling and rising on their borders. Old sureties of enduring mandates to rule—whether in Daidu or Gaegyeong—were dissolving. Destructive invasions by the Red Turbans had weakened national will and treasury. The Goryeo king had been murdered by his own people. And now an uncertain boy King sat on the throne, dominated by his pro-Yuan Prime Minister Yi In-im. For their part, Ming leaders in China were hardly pleased with developments to their west. The pro-Ming King Gongmin had been assassinated and a young boy with suspicious royal lineage had ascended to the throne. Even worse, anti-Ming military officials seemed to have new prominence in Goryeo. The Ming court refused to recognize the legitimacy of U's rule, and storm clouds gathered.

As for his part in all this, Yi Seong-gye remained a cipher that none could read. He was famously quiet and reserved at important meetings. Sitting with squinted, serious eyes, he listened a lot and didn't say much. Whenever he finally spoke, people listened. The question was, what would he say?¹⁹