

## Pirates, Gunpowder, and the Brave Baby



*There was a time when General Yi was hunting down a huge Japanese pirate invasion led by Ajibaldo, who was so young they called him the “Brave Baby.” General Yi came upon a small village and let his troops rest. As his men slept, village roosters started crowing near midnight. General Yi took it as a sign from the Heavens that the day should start early. He roused his troops and began marching south in the middle of the night, as if it were daybreak.*

*He soon learned that the Japanese pirates were also marching through the night, preparing a surprise attack on the nearby city of Namwon. Due to Yi Seong-gye’s nighttime march, he caught the pirates by surprise, laying into the Japanese forces in a narrow gorge just as the sun rose. More roosters started crowing all around, encouraging the Korean attack.*

*The battle was fierce, but General Yi won the day. After the victory, General Yi stopped again at the local village to praise the roosters that had woke him in the middle of the night. He declared them to be heroic incarnations of heavenly dragons and renamed the village as Yonggye-ri, the “Dragon-Rooster Village.”<sup>1</sup>*



After a time, court politics stabilized following King Gongmin’s assassination. Prime Minister Yi In-im rose to political dominance beside the young King U, and the reformist dreams of the Confucian *sadaebu* were submerged with the arrest, torture, and exile of many of their most prominent proponents (most notably, Jeong Do-jeon). No one could challenge Yi In-im’s dominance and the *gwonmun sejok* remained certain of their privilege. Goryeo kept delivering just enough tribute to Ming to keep them from considering invasion. In any case Ming

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forces were preoccupied with defeating Yuan remnants and fully pacifying Liaodong lands north of the Yalu which they had occupied after Yi Seong-gye had returned south of the Yalu in 1370.<sup>2</sup> Through the 1370s, the northern border remained uneasy, but stable.

But other military threats emerged. Goryeo's worst military crisis in the years following King U's accession was the constant threat of devastating pirate raids along Korea's 16,000 li (8,600 kilometers) of jagged coastline and hundreds of islands. The decline of unified Yuan rule on the Korean peninsula had been accompanied by growing instability in Japan. In 1333 Japan's Kamakura shogunate fell and was followed by decades of warfare between northern and southern dynasties in the Japanese islands. In this unstable situation, ungoverned piracy flourished. With alarming frequency, dozens or even hundreds of pirate warships would appear on Korea's shoreline in huge raids, plundering granaries, enslaving locals, and burning villages. It would sometimes get so bad that miles of Korean coastline would depopulate as people fled inland for months.<sup>3</sup> The scholar and poet Gwon Geun presented Goryeo's view of the situation:

*In the east beyond the sea,  
There live a wicked people called Japanese.  
Having never been exposed to the influence of  
sages,  
They are always brutal and cunning.  
Invading and plundering the neighboring  
countries,  
They live in the mountains along the sea.<sup>4</sup>*

Due to their oft-short stature, Goryeo called them "Wakou pirates" ("dwarf pirates"). These pirates were mostly Japanese, but there were also many raiders from southern China, Mongolia, and various other marginal islands across the local maritime. Pirate forces often included southerners from Korea as well, including Tamna (Jeju) island.<sup>5</sup> Political instability in Japan, China and Goryeo had driven thousands to desperation and opportunism in ungoverned areas and they took to coastal raiding for rice, beans, and slaves.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, constant

warfare in Japan drove various military factions to raid the Korean coast in search of troop rations, military supplies, and new soldiers to enslave.<sup>7</sup> A Japanese governor of Kyushu island lamented that he would like to control these pirate rebels, but local instability prevented him. These pirates were not regular Japanese forces, he maintained, but “evil Japanese people of the Western Sea amid this confusion and not ordered by us...We promise to Heaven and Sun that the piracy will be forbidden when Kyushu is recovered.”<sup>8</sup>

The Goryeo royal court was ineffective in organizing a response. In the early 1350s, King Chungjeon (r. 1348–1351) had ordered provincial elites (*hyangni*) to send forces to drive off the pirates, but most *hyangni* ignored the King’s authority and refused to give up private troops to the cause. When King Chungjeon tried instead to conscript local farmers by force (and without pay), it led to a massive peasant rebellion in 1351, driving thousands into the arms of the Red Turban movement growing in China. It was this very rebellion that had led the Yuan court to dethrone King Chungjeon and install King Gongmin on the Goryeo throne in 1351.

With local elites shielding their private lands from state taxes and refusing to give up their private militias to help defend the coasts, pirate attacks exploded in the mid- to late-1300s. Dozens would happen every year. By 1360, most Korean coastal rice storage facilities had been eliminated and moved inland to protect them from raids.<sup>9</sup> By the 1370s, it was common to have 30-50 serious raids a year. In the summer of 1375, for example, half of all entries in the Koryosa pertained to pirate raids.<sup>10</sup> General Yi had been sent to drive one small northeastern raid away in 1371 (on the Yeseong River northwest of today’s Seoul), where he had effectively terrorized Japanese sailors with his reputation and by casually shooting pinecones out of the trees over their heads.<sup>11</sup>

A more serious test was to come in 1377, with the Battle of Mt. Jirisan. In 1376-1377, Japanese pirate attacks escalated—there were more than 100 attacks at 200 locations—especially along the coast in Seosan (near Pyeongtaek, about 60 miles south of today’s Seoul) and in Jeolla province near Namwon and Unbong.<sup>12</sup> In one devastating attack, several thousand pirates invaded Naju and Buyeo

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on the Southwest coast in July of 1376, raiding up and down the peninsula and then moving inland to cross from Jeolla to Chungcheon province. These raiders terrorized the locals and lived off whatever they could plunder. The land became so devastated and dangerous that Goryeo farmers stopped cultivating and began “looking at clouds and rainbows” for deliverance.<sup>13</sup>

After several months of ineffective resistance by local leaders, General Choe Yeong volunteered to raise a national force versus the pirates and headed to battle in 1377. He was 61 years old, a member of a long-time influential family, and the top General of Goryeo. Among his ten subcommanders was General Yi Seong-gye. Enjoying early success, Choe Yeong's forces drove pirates out of the Sogang River basin near Gaegyeong. He then sent Yi Seong-gye south to the Yeongnam and Honam areas, where strong Japanese forces still plundered.<sup>14</sup>

In May of 1377, General Yi caught up with these pirates near Jirisan mountain, far south down the peninsula. When Yi first encountered a detachment of these pirates, their force was located some distance away. Confident in their distance, one pirate drew down his pants, bent over, and slapped his buttocks to taunt General Yi. That was a mistake. Yi Seong-gye drew his great bow, aimed high, and fired a heavy bolt into the pirate's rear end. Yi's antagonist dropped dead, and his pirate allies fled for cover.<sup>15</sup> The panicked pirates fled up a mountainside, and took cover amid steep rocks, brandishing their spears like the back of a porcupine. None of Yi's troops, including even one of his own sons, was able to successfully charge up the steep rocks and reach the enemy troops. So Yi said he would lead the charge himself. He pulled out his great sword and began to beat the hind end of his horse with the flat of the sword, yelling and encouraging it to clamber quickly up the rise and jump over the rocks, with his troops following behind. As the *Koryosa* records, “the sun was in the middle of the sky, and the light of [Yi's] sword was like lightning.” The general's assault so terrorized the pirate detachment that many fled and fell off the cliff to their deaths.<sup>16</sup>

In a later engagement with the main force of Japanese marauders that year, Yi Seong-gye told his troops that he

would aim only at the left eye of his opponents. According to the mythologizing accounts in both the *Koryosa* and the *Taejo Sillok*, Yi shot seventeen carefully aimed arrows. When the battle was over, among all the dead were seventeen pirates laying with arrows penetrating their left eye sockets.<sup>17</sup>

After this rout, Yi's soldiers chased the pirates down to a rugged area in the rocks, where the pirates had built a stronghold behind a tangled wall of brushwood. Yi approached the makeshift fortress and began to mess with the raiders' minds. He stationed some troops left and right of the cave, and then moved right in front of the cave with one hundred cavalries. As the pirate forces angrily brandished spears behind their brush barricade, Yi calmly removed the saddles from his warhorses, set them to grazing, and took a leisurely break. Right there in front of their brush barrier, Yi set up a picnic table. He laid out a nice banquet and sat down to enjoy a meal, ordering music to be played. He and his fellow soldiers began to eat and drink merrily.

As the pirates' unease mounted, Yi had his men approach the tangled brush barricade and calmly light it all on fire. As the General drank and sang loudly, the flames rose, and smoke filled the pirates' shelter. At the height of the song and flame, pirate arrows flew out aimlessly. One arrow actually struck a bottle of wine sitting right in front of Yi Seong-gye, but he simply ignored it, lifted his bottle to drink on, and sang all the louder. In the end, the Japanese had to flee their smoky oven in terrified disorder; almost all were cut down.<sup>18</sup>

In the months to follow, the legend of the clever General spread all about the Jirisan area. Everywhere he travelled, later court historians claimed that local people "waited for him like the rain during the drought and admired him like a rainbow in the sky."<sup>19</sup> The *Koryosa* records how "Taejo usually won the hearts of people, and his soldiers fought with an elite level, and there was nothing that he could not win."<sup>20</sup>

In the wake of these victorious battles over Japanese raiders, Goryeo's diplomatic envoys to Japan also enjoyed some success. The *sadaebu* (scholar-official) Jeong Mong-ju had been sent to Japan in 1377 to resolve the piracy situation. He returned in 1378 with a promise by a local warlord to control the pirates; this warlord also returned several hundred

Koreans previously taken prisoner in pirate raids. In appreciation, Goryeo sent the Kyushu warlord a gift of gold, silver, ginseng, and leopard furs.

But such diplomatic niceties couldn't be counted on without strong military defense on the ground, so both Choe Yeong and Yi Seong-gye advocated for stronger national defense. Choe Yeong's national navy had about 100 warships and 3000 sailors, but he wished at least to triple these forces for an effective defense against future raids.<sup>21</sup> One of his commanders suggested that this larger force could be used to take the battle right to the heart of the pirate strongholds, invading Daemado Island (Tsushima), known to be "a den of Japanese thieves."<sup>22</sup>

But in Gaegyeong, Yi In-im feared the establishment of such a large military force. A national army or navy like that could be turned against his own power, and Yi In-im was well aware that the oppressive corruption of his *gwonmun sejok* allies had fostered simmering unpopularity across the land. In any case, a large standing army in Goryeo had years ago been abolished by the Yuan court<sup>23</sup> so Choe Yeong was fighting against tradition. Plus, the state coffers were low and there was no appetite among his elite allies for the taxes on their lands that would be necessary to support such a large military force.<sup>24</sup> When Choe Yeong had earlier tried to build a 200-ship navy (under King Gongmin), there was no serious state support and poorly paid farmers had deserted the ship-building teams. Though a small expansion of naval forces occurred at Naju and Mokpo, Choe Yeong's ambitious ship-building plan collapsed.<sup>25</sup>

In similar fashion, Yi In-im stymied Choe Yeong's plans to raise an effective navy and army this time around. He wholly abolished what was left of the national army in 1379. Generals Yi and Choe had fought off the pirates this time around, but without a standing army, the country would just have to remain vulnerable to pirate raids in the future. Sometimes elite ministers would wave their old swords around in council meetings and threaten grand mobilizations against Japanese raiders, but there was no longer any royal army to rely upon.<sup>26</sup> The Goryeo court could only rely on private militias and whatever untrained and poorly led forces could be mustered

by conscription of farmers in times of need. One local marshal was famous for hosting “soju gatherings” (“drinking with his soldiers day and night, every day”), even as marauding pirates “slaughtered and burned” more than a dozen villages and military campus in his province.<sup>27</sup> Other commanders were known to drink heavily and fall asleep in the day, opening opportunities for pirate attacks.<sup>28</sup> Reflecting on such realities, one of Yi Seong-gye’s officers remarked on how battles against the pirates would be hopeless as long as only private elites and “incompetent generals have soldiers”<sup>29</sup>

While Yi In-im and his aristocratic allies were busy defunding Goryeo’s military, piracy attacks continued. Some officials grew increasingly outraged at how the Goryeo court lived in luxury while leaving the countryside largely defenseless against the pirates. “Japanese raiders are invading the county, and we eat here to our heart’s content and are not ashamed at all,” fumed one military official. “How can we be called human beings?” Yi In-im became furious that the critique was directed at him and sent the commander away into field combat.<sup>30</sup>

About one hundred mostly small-scale raids once again hit the coast between 1378 and 1380, enough to keep the local granaries empty.<sup>31</sup> In one representative case, the village of Heunghae (located in today’s eastern coast city of Pohang) used to be a bustling fishing village, surrounded by fertile lands—but many of its residents had been killed by Japanese raiders and their property was looted. By 1380, the village became empty and thorn bushes covered all the local roads.<sup>32</sup>

Following this new wave of pirating attacks, Goryeo had to mount a response. For his great success in the battle of Mt. Jirisan, Yi Seong-gye was appointed commander of forces in three southern provinces in August of 1380 (Yanggwang, Jeolla and Gyeongsang), with a charge to drive out any invading Japanese. This was Yi Seong-gye’s first independent military command of a large force in Goryeo territory. A court scribe was attached to him to keep close watch on the rising General and report all affairs back to Gaegyeong.

The elevation of General Yi happened at a critical moment, as Goryeo was facing its largest Japanese invasions ever. On Japan’s northern Kyushu, the ongoing Japanese civil

war had put the Lord of northern Kyushu (Shoni Yori-hisa) in a corner. He needed military supplies and food in a bad way, and Goryeo's vulnerable provinces beckoned. In May of 1380, 500 Japanese warboats landed in Jinpo, at the Geumgang river mouth border between Chungcheon and Jeolla provinces—a fertile, grain-producing area of the peninsula. Thousands of Japanese soldiers began plundering the area for grain, slaves, and supplies, heading inland to chase the fleeing locals.<sup>33</sup> It was the largest invasion of Japanese pirates to date, and would produce the largest engagements between Japanese and Korean military forces until the massive Imjin War battles more than 200 years later.

In fact, these invaders weren't really "pirates" at all. They were hardened and well-trained warriors, having participated in several civil war campaigns on Kyushu. They had serious military equipment and some of their leaders wore heavy armor, impervious to normal Goryeo arrows.<sup>34</sup> Confronting such a force, things didn't go well for the untrained and poorly equipped Goryeo army at first. One provincial force attacked Japanese land troops and lost badly, losing 500 soldiers. But as General Yi began to mobilize his own private troops to confront the massive forces from Japan, things began to turn around. It started in a Goryeo attack on the Japanese naval ships anchored at Jinpo, in the Geumgang river.

Goryeo's first victory in the struggle of 1380 was due to Korea's discovery of the secrets of gunpowder.<sup>35</sup> Visiting China as a travelling merchant, a clever tinkerer named Choe Musan had witnessed the wonders of gunpowder and fireworks. He was inspired, but Chinese authorities guarded gunpowder's formula closely and the Korean trader was unable to quickly replicate it. Choe resolved to figure things out on his own. He took what he could observe from China and conducted a series of personal investigations. Over time, and after bribing a wealthy Chinese merchant on a Goryeo trading island, Choe learned the secret of producing *yeomcho* (potassium nitrate, aka saltpeter). He added his own discoveries of how to mix it with sulfur and willow charcoal and produced Korea's first gunpowder. Between 1374 and 1376, Choe produced the world's first gunpowder outside of China and convinced the Goryeo court to establish an experimental Department of



Arms, under his direction. At Choe's government-sponsored Department of Arms (*Hwatong Dogam*), all sorts of powerful weapons of war were invented. Choe invented a "magical machine arrow" (*hwajeon*), capable of firing dozens of fiery arrows simultaneously. A cannon that shot fire barrels was invented (*hwatong*), as were mortar shells (*jilyeop*), rockets, and a signal gun called *shinpo*.<sup>36</sup>

Many of these weapons were first used at Jinpo, where they were unleashed against the 500 Japanese warships anchored there. In August of 1380, a small navy of about 100 Goryeo warboats sailed into the Jinpo harbor to shock the much larger Japanese armada. A heretofore unseen array of flaming arrows, fire barrels, mortal shells and fiery rockets rained down from the small Goryeo navy upon the Japanese boats. As hundreds of ships burned, the Koryosa reports that "smoke and flames covered the sky. Almost all of the Japanese were burned to death, and there were also many who drowned in the sea."<sup>37</sup> It was the first serious naval victory for Goryeo in the thirty years since Japanese pirates had started invading Goryeo coasts in earnest.

All five hundred Japanese ships were lost, but the main Japanese land force remained intact. The sea escape route was destroyed, so Japanese soldiers now battled their way inland, wreaking havoc where they went. According to the *Koryosa*, They killed the Goryeo children then had captured earlier, "and piled them up like a mountain, blood spattered wherever they passed."<sup>38</sup> Their commander sent notice to the Goryeo court that they didn't intend to leave the peninsula, and they expected ransom. They claimed they would soon capture a local fortress and threatened to invade the capital itself after that. They threatened that if members of the court wished to save their lives, they had better clear a path to Gaegyeong, and come out and bow down when the Japanese arrived.

The only thing standing between the Gaegyeong court and thousands of hardened Japanese soldiers was the army of Yi Seong-gye, now marching through the southern provinces, seeking battle with the Japanese invaders. On his journey through Goryeo's southern breadbasket, General Yi passed through the fertile rice fields and mountainsides of fruit trees that the Japanese raiders meant to plunder, coming at last to

his family's ancestral seat in Jeonju—the town his grandfather Yi Ansa had fled so long ago. General Yi paused here to bow down and pay respects to his original clan ancestor, Yi Han, who was buried in the area. He promised locals he would return soon and headed out to find the marauding pirates.<sup>39</sup>

As Yi moved south, following the Japanese trail, he saw only devastation. His scribe recorded the gruesome scene, likely exaggerating Japanese atrocities in the interests of further inflaming locals against the outside invaders.

[The Japanese] slaughtered or burned the districts along the seacoast, killing or capturing countless numbers of our people and devastating the villages and towns. Corpses were strewn everywhere, including in fields and on mountains, and the grain they spilled on the ground while transporting it to their ships at the harbor was piled as high as a foot.

The enemy also ruthlessly cut down young children, causing their corpses to form mountains, and all the areas that invaders had passed through were awash in blood. They even slaughtered two- or three-year old girls [as human sacrifices]. They first shaved the hair of the victims, slit open their stomachs, and removed the entrails. They then filled their stomachs with rice and wine and presented their bodies as a sacrifice to Heaven...

Surveying the corpse strewn landscape, [General Yi] was so saddened he could hardly eat or sleep.<sup>40</sup>

When Yi arrived in Namwon, near Mt. Hwangsan on August 6<sup>th</sup>, he knew the Japanese forces were near. A white rainbow hung across the sky, which a local fortune teller said was a sign of victory.<sup>41</sup> Planning a campaign of surprise, the General split

his troops into two. He sent a large force along a flat road at the base of the mountain as a lure, and snuck a smaller force along a small, twisting road above. Yi was sure that the Japanese forces would use this same hidden road to try to ambush his flatlands troops below, and he wanted to catch the Japanese forces by surprise up there. Hurrying with his personal troops along the twisting mountain path, General Yi was proven right. He soon came upon the mass of Japanese troops, high in the hills. Yi had surprised the Japanese, but he was still massively outnumbered, and the battle was fierce.<sup>42</sup>

At first, the Japanese troops were winning, as they fought from a vantage point higher on the mountain. But Yi's troops were excellent archers and several rounds of *yuyeopjeon* (small, willow leaf shaped arrows) turned the tide. The Japanese troops were forced to flee up the mountain. Yi Seong-gye pressed on. As the Japanese moved to higher ground, Yi blew his conch horn and charged up the hill, his troops rushing all about him like ants. During the fierce battle, one enemy got behind Yi with a long spear and stabbed at him, brushing his back. The soldier took aim again and prepared to run the General through. Yi had his back turned and didn't realize he was in danger. Saving the day, Yi Chiran—Yi's old boyhood friend—shot an arrow straight and true and cut the attacker down.

Still, enemy reinforcements poured down the ridge above. General Yi had two horses shot out from under him and was shot in the leg himself. But Yi pulled out the arrow mid-battle and continued to fight. As the Japanese troops surrounded the great General and Yi's forces quavered, Yi rose up strong. He pointed his sword to the sun and swore an oath to his comrades. "I want anyone who is afraid to die to withdraw now," Yi proclaimed, "because I intend to die here while fighting the enemy!" And then Yi laid into about eight hapless Japanese soldiers, dropping them all. His forces rallied and fought on.<sup>43</sup>

Then, in the heat of battle, the enemy general appeared, clad in shining armor. This was Ajibaldo—famous for his unbeatable skill. He was just a boy, maybe 15 or 16 years old, but he had fought bravely in other battles and destroyed all he encountered. Koreans gave him the name of *Aji* (referring to

the Korean word “aji” for “baby”) + “baldo” (derived from the Mongolian word for “brave”).<sup>44</sup> When the “Brave Baby” appeared, Yi’s forces recoiled. The *Koryosa Choryo* records his features as “neat, fine, fierce, and valiant,” and notes that “the ground shook everywhere he went.”<sup>45</sup> As the *Taejo Sillok* records, “He was very handsome and matchlessly courageous. He brandished his spear fiercely, riding a white horse, and no one dared to challenge him.”<sup>46</sup>

As he cut down Yi’s forces, Ajibaldo had strong protective armor and a metal helmet, making it difficult to hurt him with arrows. No blow seemed to stop him. But General Yi was an excellent archer. He quickly made a plan with his Jurchen brother, Yi Chiran, and they went to work. “I will shoot the top of his helmet,” Yi Seong-gye said to Yi Chiran. “So when the helmet falls off, you shoot him immediately.”<sup>47</sup> According to the *Taejo Sillok*, Yi Seong-gye delivered a perfect arrow bolt that shot Ajibaldo’s helmet off his head. Quickly, Yi Chiran followed up with an arrow into the throat of the now exposed Ajibaldo. The great pirate commander collapsed and died.<sup>48</sup>

When Ajibaldo was cut down, the enemy despaired. Yi’s court scribe tells how “The enemy soldiers began to wail, and they sounded like ten thousand oxen bellowing together.”<sup>49</sup> The demoralized pirate forces fled, abandoning even their horses. They made it to a nearby riverbank, but it was no use. They were surrounded by Yi’s troops and driven into the river to die. Thousands were killed and “the mountain streams ran red with enemy blood for a week.”<sup>50</sup> General Yi had destroyed an enemy army at least four times the size of his own (some records say he was outnumbered 10 to 1). He gained 1,600 war horses from the Japanese troops and countless enemy weapons.<sup>51</sup>

As the court scribe assigned to follow General Yi reported: “Returning to his military camp, he let the military band play music noisily and the soldiers enjoyed themselves with a mask dance. Our soldiers cheered and presented decapitated enemy heads, which made a mountainous pile.” Some of the commanders serving under Yi Seong-gye had feared for their lives and run from battle at the very start of things. They were now in despair. They bowed their heads to the ground, even until they were bleeding, and begged to be forgiven. Yi said only

that he would report them to the court. “Your crime and your punishment are up to the government.”<sup>52</sup>

This battle of *Hwangsán Daecheop* was the decisive moment in defeating Japanese invasions of that time and General Yi’s star was rising fast.<sup>53</sup> No longer just a man of the north, Yi Seong-gye now had a reputation in the south and had become a national hero. The conquering general remained considerate as he prepared to leave the area. After the battle was over, some of his soldiers wanted to replace their heavy wooden tent poles with much lighter bamboo poles, plentiful in this area. Yi Seong-gye would not allow it. “It may be much easier to transport the bamboo poles since they are lighter than ordinary wooden poles,” he said. “However, bamboo is a product cultivated by the people and therefore does not belong to us. It will be sufficient if we can return home without losing what we brought.”<sup>54</sup>

On his way back to the capital, Yi Seong-gye made a slight detour to stop by his clan’s ancestral home of Jeonju once again. Locals gathered at the pavilion of Omokdae for a celebratory feast, just a few yards from the ancestral home of Yi Ansa, his great-great grandfather. During that feast, legend says Yi grew inebriated and boisterous. He even sang the same song that the founding emperor of Han China (Liu Bang) had once sang when he returned to his old village after a military victory (*Daepungga*—“Song of the Great Wind”). “Now that my might rules all within the seas, I have returned to my old village with power,” the song goes. “How can I assign my fierce warriors to guard the four corners of our nation?”<sup>55</sup>

The warrior from the north now had a national reputation. He had won battles across the peninsula, defeated the largest army of Japanese pirates ever, and answered the hopes of the people. He was singing songs of kingly power and having other visions as well. Just outside of Jeonju, in fact, General Yi happened to gaze upon the unusual double rounded peaks of Mt. Maisan (looking like two horse’s ears). He exclaimed that this mountain looked exactly like the mountain in a dream he once had where a divine spirit had given him a golden ruler in order to straighten out the country. The General engaged in long prayers on this portentous mountain, seeking divinations and guidance.<sup>56</sup>

While the locals must have loved such talk of kingly portents emerging from their town, some of the Gaegyeong royals who heard of Yi's boisterous songs and strange dreams must have shivered. One of those Goryeo loyalists, the scholar Jeong Mong-ju, had actually fought beside Yi Seong-gye at the battle of *Hwangsan Daecheop*, and was there at the Jeonju pavilion to hear the drunken general sing of a great new country to come. Jeong Mong-ju was an idealist. He hoped to improve things in his country, and he admired General Yi, who he described as a sleek "peregrine falcon," and as a grand and resourceful dragon. "There is no hero like this," Jeong Mong-ju concluded.<sup>57</sup> Still this drunken talk of a great new country to come—that kind of revolutionary language—made Jeong Mong-ju nervous. Shortly after hearing Yi Seong-gye sing of the Great Wind, Jeong hiked up a local mountain to see if he could catch a vision of this beautiful new country people were dreaming of. But as he told in his poem written that day, all he could see was fog and clouds.

*On a hot day, I climbed to the top  
of a blue mountain,  
filled with curved valleys and yellow leaves.  
The high September wind is making wanderers  
feel bittersweet.  
Now at the summit, the beautiful sunset is  
covered by clouds.  
In the fog, how sad I can't see the lands of our  
country.*<sup>58</sup>

Down on the ground, word of Yi Seong-gye's great victory spread before him. When he arrived at the Imjin River near the capital, royal escorts awaited. At the Cheonsu gate of Gaegyeong, there were colorful decorations and musical entertainment to welcome the returning hero. General Choe Yeong was there to greet General Yi in formal attire. The Great General Choe, highest military authority in Goryeo, clasped Yi Seong-gye's hands, as Yi bowed his head in respect. "Who except you can accomplish such a great thing?" General Yeong asked in wonder, tears in his eyes.

Yi thanked the General and bowed his head more deeply. "I only followed your instructions and was lucky to win," he said. "I don't deserve such praise. The enemy is now suppressed. If they come back again, however, I will continue to take responsibility."

Choe Yeong was deeply impressed. "My dear general, you saved the country once more by winning this single battle. The state can rely on nobody but you!" Again, Yi Seong-gye refused to accept the praise.

In the royal palace, Yi was feted as the "general of the people," who now stood with the great general Choe Yeong as his only equal. King U bestowed 50 taels of gold upon Yi, but General Yi declined the award, saying "It is my duty as a general to kill the enemy. How do I dare accept it?"<sup>59</sup>

The greatest scholars and poets of Goryeo joined in the palace celebration and composed odes to Yi's greatness.<sup>60</sup> Gwon Geun, Libationer of the National Academy, offered his thoughts.

*Your bravery that cut the enemy raises the  
wind.  
The red bow in your hand shines with glory,  
And the arrows with white feathers look  
fiercely intimidating.  
Once you returned triumphantly, the state  
regained its peace.  
When you mounted your horse, we knew this  
would happen.*

Kim Kuyong, of the State Finance Commission, also gave a poem.

*Striking down the strength of the enemy's  
attack like lightning,  
Everyone felt your strength and leadership.  
The august mist spread to push away the  
poisonous vapors,  
And the frosty wind helped to add power to  
your authority.*

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*The island barbarians turned pale when they  
saw your majestic army, and neighboring  
countries held their breath and trembled.  
Everyone in the court stands in line to praise  
you.*

Even Yi Saek, founding director of the National Confucian Academy and greatest scholar of his time, joined in the praise.

*Since you cut down the enemy forces as if they  
were rotten trees,  
All the joy running through the country is due  
to you.  
Your loyalty reaches the sky, sweeping away  
the thick mist.  
And your majesty is so great that the wind on  
the sea is hushed.*

Yi Seong-gye was now a national hero of immense consequence. Yet the record shows that he rejected most financial reward and remained humble before the Goryeo court. Taking a break from politics and warfare for a time, Yi Seong-gye spent private time with his “capital city Madam,” Lady Kang. In 1381, one year after his great victory, Lady Kang of Gaegyeong gave birth to their first son, Bang-beon. The next year, Bang-seok was born. Yi Seong-gye now had two young baby boys with Lady Kang of Gaegyeong and his star was rising fast amid the dazzling world of Goryeo’s royal capital.