

“It is You who will Accomplish my Will!”



Back in the days when tigers used to smoke, the fabled Mencius was born in China. His father died when he was very young, and his mother raised him alone. During his upbringing, his mother was determined that Mencius would become a great scholar, and so she observed his studies and how he played every day. At one time, Mencius and his mother lived near a cemetery and his mother observed that Mencius liked to play by imitating the funeral rites that he saw. “This will not do, for my son should be a scholar,” the mother said. And so they moved away from there. For a time, they lived near a marketplace, but young Mencius began to imitate the vendors there, especially play-acting as a butcher with sharp knives. “This is no place for a scholar,” his mother said and so they moved again. Finally, she moved near a school, where Mencius imitated the sincere scholars, reading and studying all day. “Mencius Mother, Three Moves,” became a popular saying regarding the dedication it took to raise a proper child. It reminded parents that study, not swordplay, was necessary to raise a serious scholar.¹



Border troubles seemed never-ending for Goryeo in these days, and General Yi could not enjoy his laurels for long. In January of 1382, the warrior Hobaldo of the Jurchen people roared south across the Yalu River and began plundering the borderlands. He only brought about 1000 troops, but these northern Jurchen were fierce fighters. One provincial commander had been ordered to defeat Hobaldo but failed. Now the Goryeo court turned again to Yi Seong-gye. He was named the provincial commander of the northeastern area (Dongbukmyeong) and ordered to drive Hobaldo out.² In July of 1382, as Yi Seong-gye mounted for war once again, the scholar Yi Saek bade farewell the Goryeo’s “god of war” with a poem and hoped for quieter days to come.

THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

Since Songheon outshines his colleagues by his
daring spirit,
He alone is entrusted with the great wall of ten
thousand li.
How busy he has been repulsing the enemies!
When he returns, we will enjoy spring-like days
of peace together.
Since the survival of the state is now at stake,
May you spearhead attacks like a god of war!³*

Another call to battle must have been wearisome for the General, but how much more so for his friend Yi Chiran, who was currently in mourning for his recently deceased mother. No matter, Yi Seong-gye simply couldn't do without the Jurchen warrior by his side. He sent an urgent message to Chongju, where Yi Chiran knelt in white mourning robes before his mother's tomb and ordered him to join the march to battle. "When state affairs are urgent, you cannot stay home wearing mourning clothes," General Yi said to his blood brother. "I want you to change your clothes and follow me."⁴ Upon receiving the order, Yi Chiran was in grief, bowing and crying to the heavens, but he had taken a vow to follow Yi Seong-gye everywhere. So the Jurchen warrior took off his white robes, took up his bow and arrow, and rode off to war.

Marching across the high mountainous borderlands, General Yi's army came upon Hobaldo on the Plain of Kilchu, where several small waterways come down out of the northeastern mountains before joining the East Sea. Yi Chiran's vanguard forces led the first attack, but they were utterly routed and forced to retreat. When Yi Seong-gye came upon the routed soldiers a bit later, they were quite demoralized. Across the plain, Hobaldo sat tall on a great black horse, wearing three layers of heavy armor and a mantle of bright red fur.⁵

"He's too strong," said some of Yi's captains. They feared that Hobaldo couldn't be beat. General Yi didn't ask any of his

* Yi Seong-gye's casual pen name, meaning "Pine Tree."

men to face the fearsome Hobaldo. Instead, he took his horse and rode out alone onto the field of battle. Rising to the challenge, the red-furred Hobaldo also rode out on his black warhorse, alone. The two generals solemnly faced each other on the Plain of Kilchu, their two armies some distance behind.

Suddenly, Hobaldo raised his great sword and bellowed, galloping fast towards Yi Seong-gye. Yi did the same and galloped straight at the speeding Hobaldo. The generals rushed by each other at full speed, their swords flashing in the sun, but both missed their blows. Hobaldo had fallen off his horse in the rush, so Yi spun around quickly on his horse and shot Hobaldo in the back before he could remount. But his armor was too thick, and the arrow just bounced away without harm. Hobaldo ignored it and leapt back on his black mount with a roar.

Undaunted, Yi Seong-gye fired another arrow into Hobaldo's horse, dropping it. Hobaldo fell to the ground. Yi rushed forward, drawing his great bow for a killing shot, but by that time Hobaldo's soldiers had reached him and were carrying him from the battle. As his own troops rushed in to help, Yi chased down the retreating forces. Hobaldo barely escaped with his life, fleeing back across the Yalu, and did not bother Goryeo again. To cap things off, on his way back to his home base near Hamhung, General Yi took the time to drive some marauding pirates out of a nearby coastal town, growing his local acclaim.

Yi Seong-gye then returned to the hometown fields of Hamhung that he always adored. Though Seong-gye's reputation was growing across the peninsula, there was no denying that General Yi's nostalgic memories and deepest foundation remained in the northeast territories that his troops and clansmen called home. Here, he could visit his “Hamhung wife” and his family home, which he had hardly seen in years.

While Yi rested in Hamhung, the King of Goryeo sent special honors, awarding General Yi with 50 pieces of platinum, five rolls of cloth, a jeweled saddle horse, and a new honorary title as a merit subject. He also invited Yi to return to Gaegyeong, where he could join the grand council of *Dodang*.⁶

THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

But Yi sought to stay home in Hamhung and rest. The Japanese pirates and northern tribesmen have been driven out, he claimed, and things are growing peaceful. I am no longer needed in the capital. "State affairs, formerly in disarray, are now in proper order, and the government is starting out anew...I entreat Your Majesty to accept my sincerity and release me from the heavy burden of responsibility. Then I may be able to make way for men of virtue and free myself...I would be grateful if Your Majesty would let me live out my days at home, praying for Your Majesty's good health."⁷

General Yi wished to lay down his sword for a time and visit his northern family. He was especially interested in checking in on his son, Yi Bang-won (born of Lady Han, in Hamhung). The seventeen-year-old boy had been exceptionally diligent in his Confucian studies and had recently taken the exam which could qualify him to enter the Confucian academy and high civil service. No matter his military victories, Yi Seong-gye always valued these scholastic pursuits best of all. General Choe Yeong and most other military officers didn't appreciate the Confucian classics as sincerely, but Yi Seong-gye treasured them and constantly told Bang-won to "study hard every day." Yi's greatest hope was that Bang-won would transcend a life of war and violence and win his family honor as a refined scholar. Often, when he saw Yi Bang-won studying the Confucian classics by candlelight, the great General would tear up and exclaim: "It is you who will accomplish my will!"⁸

That very spring of 1383, Yi Bang-won had passed the civil service exam and received a government appointment. On receiving notice at his Hamhung villa, General Yi gathered his son, Bang-won, and made the government messenger read the notice of Bang-won's meritorious appointment out loud, over and over again. The General's son would be a scholar after all, serving Goryeo's king with a bureaucratic post. Perhaps the General could lay down his sword for a time and watch his learned son rise among the literati of Gaegyong.