12

Decadents and Exiles of Late Goryeo

"My dear Arjuna, how have these impurities come upon you? They are not at all befitting a man who knows the value of life. They lead not to higher planets, but to infamy.

O son of Prtha, do not yield to this degrading impotence, that it does not become you. Give up such petty weakness of heart and arise, O chastiser of the enemy."

— Bhagavad Gita

Except for his capital city madam and recently born baby boys in Gaegyeong, there probably wasn't much that attracted Yi Seong-gye to life in the capital. Regardless of Yi's military victories, the reality was that Goryeo in the 1380s was a collapsing society. For decades, the entire region had been devastated by the upheaval, warfare, and power vacuums of the Yuan-Ming transition. Goryeo faced constant warfare from the 1350s to the 1380s, including two massive Red Turban invasions, constant Yuan and Jurchen struggles up north, and hundreds of Japanese pirate attacks (there were 378 pirate attacks in the fourteen years of King U's reign). This warfare led to frequent famines and epidemics (twice as frequent in late Goryeo than earlier), which killed tens of thousands.[1] Moreover, the Mongol empire's regional retreat had led to collapsing trade networks and related economic crisis for the merchants and traders of Goryeo.[2]

Decades of political, cultural, social, and economic upheaval were the result, as Goryeo became a tumultuous pandemonium. Unfortunately, Goryeo's governing elites didn't have an answer. According to both the *Koryosa* and the *Taejo Sillok,* Prime Minister Yi In-im served as mastermind behind the throne of the young King U, but he was the foul head of a

rotting fish. No one moved up in government without paying him a bribe. The outcome of trials and prison sentences depended on who paid the most to Yi In-im.[3] No government policy could pass without his support. Yi In-im built his corrupt network by awarding land and government positions to hundreds who supported him, regardless of their merit. He punished who he wished and protected his supporters from the law. He allowed his allies to expand their private militias. Peasant farmers and small merchants were extorted and taxed massively to pay for it all.[4]

Yi In-im's key allies were the *gwonmun sejok* families, elite landowners who ruled through high positions in the central government. The richest of these families owned enough land to cover half a province, which reduced thousands of farmers to enslaved or indentured servants on their land, while taking massive land holdings off the state tax rolls. In Goryeo, the private "ownership" of land mostly meant ownership of taxation rights. Lands weren't typically owned in the fashion of being enclosed and restricted to use by non-owners—rather they generally remained open and farmable by locals, even when "owned" by others. But large parts of the product of these lands—the harvest—was "owned" by the *gwonmun sejok* in that these powerful families could tax the harvest of lands for their own private coffers and keep them immune from state taxation.[5]

The private right to collect taxes on various Goryeo lands had originally been granted to government and military officials as a form of pay for their service. But over time, these elites had converted these rights to permanent titles, holding taxing rights over vast swaths of land even when their service to the government was completed, and passing down these rights to their children as inheritance. In effect, they had converted once publicly owned state lands into private holdings, as manifested in the right to tax farmers who tilled the land.

Even worse for the farmers, multiple private landowners commonly claimed taxation rights over a single parcel of land. Farmers were commonly taxed numerous times for a single lot of land, with multiple private tax collectors showing up and claiming a chunk of the harvest. As the scholar Jeong Do-jeon

described the situation, "Since more than five or six owners of the land claim that other people's land is inherited from their ancestors…tenants must pay 80% to 90% of their income through taxes." People lamented that even if they made their crops grow "into the sky, they are not enough to support their parents" because of this multiple taxation system.[6] In the end, hardly any harvest at all was left to state tax collectors, or to the farmers, and famine spread. "Children were abandoned and dumped on the road, and the starvation was immeasurable."[7]

People who could not pay their taxes, even though starving, could be converted to enslaved persons by the *gwonmun sejok*. "The strong devoured the weak," court scribes wrote; by some estimates, one-third of Goryeo's population became reduced to slavery by the 1380s.[8] Thousands of commoners fled the land and wandered without a home.

Such a situation meant that the number of taxpayers declined dramatically by the mid to late-1380s. Moreover, once private families held taxation rights on plots of land, the state could not tax these lands or conscript enslaved persons working these lands into government projects. With lands, tax revenues and enslaved labor increasingly captured by private elites, there was no longer enough state resources to pay salaries to many officials or soldiers, to complete public works, or maintain a paid military. Officials began to receive their pay mostly through bribery, while soldiers had to be conscripted without pay during a crisis.[9] As the *Taejo Sillok* reports, this situation eroded the spiritual foundations of society.

> As the rules and regulations were in disarray at the end of the former dynasty, ignorant and petty people neglected their parents and relatives, refused to help their neighbors, collected unreasonably high interest on old loans, and recklessly seized merchandise in the market against the will of the merchants. Sometimes when one fell ill or died, no one provided either help or burial. As a result, humaneness and good customs deteriorated.[10]

As for King U, he was incapable and disinterested in doing anything about the situation. When Yi In-im rose to power together with U's accession, he quickly exiled, tortured, or killed his opponents, including those who might have been independent allies of King U.[11] This included even King U's wet nurse, who was killed in an upheaval that threw the young king into a crying fit. After his wet nurse was killed (and her relatives tortured), U realized the extent of his helplessness and lost interest in state affairs. At one banquet, "the intoxicated king likened himself to a puppet and lamented the powerlessness of his situation. He spent most of his time hunting, horse riding, and drinking."[12]

If the records of the *Koryosa* are to be believed,* King U's hopelessness and debauched behavior only worsened with time. He would go out "hunting" in the capital city's streets, firing arrows at people's chickens and dogs.[13] He would catch sparrows and roast them for fun.[14] He climbed to the top of the palace and threw rocks and roof tiles down to hit people below. He once dragged a villager around behind his horse until "his blood gushed and covered his whole body."[15] He would sometimes beat his court associates furiously if they didn't join him in festivities.[16] He stole other people's horses at will, and if his horse became unruly, he would flog and exile his horse trainers.[17]

He constantly tried to get drunk with pretty women, including even noble women about to get married. He would kidnap women and lock them away in the palace, destroying

* The *Koryosa* presents a constant stream of daily diary entries about King U's licentious and debauched behavior. It is important to keep in mind that these records were produced by supporters of the subsequent dynasty (Yi Seong-gye's Joseon dynasty), which threw down the Goryeo dynasty, so they would have motivation to besmirch King U, so as to legitimate Yi Seong-gye's political revolution. In the end, it's hard to tell how much of the critique of King U was accurate and how much was propaganda. The sheer number of daily entries summarizing questionable behavior by the King, together with the text of multiple entreaties and supplications by his advisors to change his ways, suggests that there likely was some truth, at least, to the unflattering historical record.

marriages.[18] He frequently arranged large, costly parties with kisaengs and clowns, draining the state treasury to pay for it all.[19] He required one official to give up his daughter for the night to his pleasure, though the daughter had just been engaged to a pirate-fighting warrior. He erected special houses outside of the palace for his liaisons.

King U especially loved to spend time at the house of Prime Minister Yi In-im and became infatuated with a beautiful servant girl (Bongai Fei) who lived there. The King took to calling Yi In-im and his wife (Park) his "father and mother," and spent nights cavorting with Bongai Fei at their house. Yi-In-im would simply spend those nights elsewhere.[20]

The Queen Dowager (among others) urged the debauched king to "refrain from acting as you please"[21] and to reduce his drinking and hunting and pay attention to state affairs, but he heard none of it. He continued hunting chickens, beating dogs, kidnapping women off the streets, drinking all day, and cavorting with concubines all night.[22] During his hunting trips, he would have servants following him, "singing barbarian songs, blowing barbarian flutes, and playing drums and harps."[23] One diarist lamented how every day "the king hunts, comes back, dances and plays. The world of this man is like dew on grass…the sense of futility in his life to attributed to Yi In-im, who is King and does politics at will."[24]

General Choe Yeong witnessed the declining situation of Goryeo and despaired. Choe was a general who valued duty and nation above power and wealth—he was said to value gold itself as just a stone[25]—and he lamented the growing decadence of Goryeo's leaders. King U's frivolous life "is like dew on the grass," Choe once reflected.[26] When the King became drunk and fell off his horse while riding around in public it would make Choe weep, thinking of the resentment of the common people at such decadence.[27] "Right now famine is repeating and the people cannot live," Choe complained to the King. "So you should refrain from going out and playing." King U only replied that "My ancestor, King Chungsuk, also liked to play."

Other court officials offered up petitions and supplications to the King to change his ways. "Sickness and famine are raging all over the place," the scholar Gwon Geun observed.

Japanese pirates are constantly plundering the land, and people grow more and more poor.

> Now is the time to be truly troubled day and night, and diligently rectify your mind and engage in politics. [However] Your Majesty does not pay attention to this, and plays at night and gets up late, lusts for pleasure inside, runs horses outside, enjoys small entertainment and forgets worries about the future.[28]

Another petitioner observed the same troubles of famine and unrest, together with strange portents like "abnormalities of animals and fish."

> Because of this, there is not one among the people of the country who is not worried and not afraid….I hope you will stop drinking and flirting, singing and dancing, stop hunting with falcons and dogs, do not underestimate the words of the sages, do not offend the faithful, do not shun the virtuous paths, and do not shun the virtuous children.[29]

But nothing was to change for the licentious King U, and beyond the palace walls, Goryeo's declining situation fostered a spiritual and political crisis—Gwon Geun described it as "a time of perilous and dizzying difficulties."[30] Songs of despair and crude language began to spread. "In broad daylight, strange men and women committed lewd acts."[31] Street performers, underground slave movements, and shamans alike all began to foresee a coming transformation. Strange prophets predicted end times and people "were completely taken away by the words that dazzled them."[32] In the midst of spreading famine, one influential Buddhist monk began to spread the gospel of Maitreya, a millennial philosophy that a savior Buddha would soon return to cleanse things and start

the world anew.* "Anyone who eats and does not share his wealth with others will surely die," the monk prophesized. Crowds of people began following him around, and even some noble households invited the prophet inside their doors. In such an uneasy social environment, this millennial Buddhist and other followers of Maitreya were exiled and executed.[33]

Though currents of ideological and social transformation swirled also in the halls of the Confucian Sungkyunkwan academy, Yi In-im's government heard none of it. Goryeo's corrupt *gwonmun sejok* just filled their larders and exiled the critics. Following decades of famine, invasion, and corrupt oppression, Goryeo's heroic past receded into mist and its current world was collapsing, but the future was not yet born.

At that historic juncture, Goryeo's exiled scholar Jeong Do-jeon would come to play an oversized role. Jeong was that principled Confucian crusader who had loudly denounced the rise of Yi In-im's pro-Yuan faction in the days after King Gongmin's assassination, only to be exiled to the distant south. Sometimes Goryeo unfortunates were exiled to remote islands where they lived in a quarantined house, cut off from everyone behind tall thorny walls. Jeong Do-jeon didn't face this level of isolation, but was sent to the small town of Naju in 1374, far from the capital. Naju was in Jeolla province, a rich farming region and the birthplace of Korea's large round pears. It was isolated from the circuits of Goryeo political power, filled with tiny houses and no libraries at all. Living there was a serious fall from favor for a leading scholar-official of the Confucian Academy. Jeong Do-jeon described the experience as being "cast out into the southern wilds, [where] I suffered from the heat and miasma and hovered close to death."[34] Jeong was frustrated because "the house is low, tilted, narrow and dirty," Jeong Do-jeon complained.[35]

Here in the village, Jeong Do-jeon could work, eat, and talk with "sweaty and mud-covered"[36] farmers all he wished, but

* This millenarian philosophy of impending salvation by a world-cleansing Buddhist deity was similar to what many of China's Red Turban rebels had predicted in their own "sorcerous" uprising against the Yuan. See Robinson, D., *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire*, p. 112.

he missed his vibrant discussions with the scholars and ministers of the capital. "While living in the countryside, all [friendship] is broken; I can't see any visitors. Wilted leaves falling before the frost comes; Chrysanthemum blossoms after rain. With books left in the room I treat myself to a drink I've found. Not only to try to forget the world...."[37] Jo Do-jeon nostalgically called himself a "man without a post., a 'leftover man' in a splendorous age."[38]

In this lonely solitude, Jeong Do-jeon had plenty of time to ponder the ills of Goryeo. While the virtuous scholars were tortured and exiled, the corrupt elite of Goryeo grew fat on the backs of peasants. Those that spoke out were ruthlessly beaten, exiled, or killed. As the *Koryosa* reported, "The prosperous families occupied endless farmland, but the little people had no land for crops, so both their parents and their wives starved, and families separated. God and the Heavens became deeply sad."[39] Thinking about it all drove Jeong Do-jeon mad with frustration. "Why is the good man cursed and why is the evil man blessed? Why is my province so desolate? What can I do but drink?"[40]

But there was something good about this time of exile as well. Free from the stuffy and corrupt air of Goryeo, Jeong Do-jeon came to appreciate the simple and generous virtues of the Naju farmers who treated him so well.[41] Although Sambong complained that "the place where I live is humble and crude, and I was depressed and listless,"[42] he soon came to enjoy the friendliness and folk wisdom of the farmers around him. Farmers shared what little food and drink they had. They showed him the ways of their town and were happy to host "Sambong" (Jeong Do-jeon's casual penname) for dinner. They enjoyed hiking about the hills and listening to Sambong's poetry. Sambong's writings describe how he came to enjoy eating the local foods, drinking with the residents, and forgetting life in the corrupt capital. "I slept early and got up late…and ate whatever food I wanted." He wandered the mountains and streams with the locals, and simple farmers felt like old friends.[43] As one scholar imagines, "[Sambong] went up and down the valley along a stream. When he was tired, he rested. He walked when he was energetic and when he met a

place with a beautiful view, he whistled and delayed going back to the city."[44]

Once, Sambong offered to teach a friendly old farmer to read and write, but the farmer was pleased just to keep tilling his land honestly. "I have been a farmer my whole life," the rustic said. "I till the fields to pay taxes to the state. With the remainder, I support my wife and son. I don't understand anything beyond that. Don't cause me any problems." Sambong came away inspired and compared the farmer to famous rustic sages and "hermit princes" of old.[45]

This bucolic life among virtuous people saved the increasingly gloomy soul of Jeong Do-jeon. Though his scholarly old friends had "scattered like clouds" when he went into the exile, the common people embraced him.[46] Generous and hard-working farmers taught him that the common people were the foundation of Goryeo, not the capital elites, and not even the scholars. The people were suffering immensely, and their struggles were far more important than airy debates and honorary merit titles back in the capital. "I was kicked out [of Gaegyeong] for saying the right thing, but I saved my life by coming back to my country," Jeong Do-jeon concluded.

> The people of Dong-ri were naïve, and hardworking, especially Hwang-yeong (an old farmer). His house was well made and Hwang-yeong liked to drink. But when the alcohol was ripe, he always invited me first and I drank with him. He always served wine when guests came and the more days went by, the more polite he was...
>
> I have been abandoned by the world and have been exiled, but my fellow villagers treat me so warmly, because they feel sorry for my plight. I now know that I was a sinner because I [was] far away from the people and did not hear their words.[47]

But alas, these virtuous people faced constant struggles. Not only were they overtaxed and harassed by Goryeo officials, but

they were constantly attacked in Japanese piracy raids. On several occasions, Jeong Do-jeon and the villagers had to flee for the hills when marauders arrived, abandoning their homes to the foxes and rabbits, while the *gwonmun sejok* hid in protected villas guarded by private militias.[48] Jeong Do-jeon's wife wrote him in despair, describing how his own family was also collapsing

> Children fill the house, whimpering with cold and crying out in hunger…Your reputation was besmirched, your accomplishments erased. You were exiled alone to sweltering lands where you breathe miasmic toxins. Your brothers have fallen. The gates of our house have been torn down and we are ridiculed by the world.[49]

In his increasingly frustrated musings, Jeong began to imagine a new world. "One day, we have to overturn this rotten country." Jeong Do-jeon fumed in a letter to his wife still in Gaegyeong. "That way the people and the country may live."[50] He wrote about a vast reform project that would take lands from the *gwonmun sejok* and redistribute them to hard working farmers. He wrote of earlier days of Korea where "all the people under Heaven received land…because the land belonged to the state and was distributed to the people and there was no one who did not cultivate land."[51] The rich/poor gap was narrow in this system, he said, and everyone paid fair taxes to the state. In such an equitable system, famine would disappear, and the virtues of the people could flourish. "If the people are engaged in work for their livelihood, if men have enough to eat and women have enough clothes to wear, and if there is no shortage in serving one's parents and raising their children, the people will know good manners and the customs will be honorable."[52]

Reaching for this warm vision, Jeong Do-jeon developed a plan. The Goryeo government should confiscate all the land in the country, count the people in an area, and then redistribute the land based on how many people have to be supported in any given area. Inheritance should be strictly limited, and most

lands should return to state ownership when one dies. The pattern of multiple "owners," each with the ability to tax a parcel of land, should be ended, so that farmers only have to pay taxes to a single owner. People should only be able to "own" land (e.g., privately tax the land) if they have a current government duty requiring a salary. Tax rates should be reduced on almost all lands. Large landowners should also have to pay their share of taxes to the state and tax exemption for various elites and merit subjects should be ended.

These were all grand ideas, floating on air. The reality was that Jeong Do-jeon was spending year-after-year exiled in what he called "cold, drizzly mountains…detached from the troublesome world,"[53] while his old reformist friends at Sungkyunkwan had scattered like frightened birds upon the rise of that malefactor, Yi In-im. No matter how beautiful the rural mountains and streams are, "the exiled servants think it is a prison," Jeong wrote. Isolated in the South, "I sing a poem of resentment to the distant sky alone."[54] Without a source of real power, there was little hope of realizing any of these hopes for a new world. Here in the provinces, "my mind is as dead as an old tree."[55] Even when Jeong Do-jeon's exile was loosened after three years (allowing him to move about the country outside of Naju, but not enter the capital), things didn't improve. Jeong moved to his old hometown (near the Sambong peaks at Samgaksan mountain) and started teaching Confucian classes to circles of disciples by candlelight, wearing only a "shabby, hemp suit."[56] But even this small effort was thrown down. A local official called his class a "disturbing thought group" and demolished Sambong's house, kicking all the students out of the area. Sambong moved to a nearby town and tried again, but his new house was also torn down by a suspicious magistrate and he was forced to move yet again.[57]

His belongings destroyed and forced to wander without purpose, the scholar became despondent. "The old tree is lonely," he wrote, despairing that time seemed to have stopped for him.[58] "My old friends even cut off their letters, leaving me as the wind blows."[59] It was an impossible situation, Sambong concluded. The common people are increasingly desperate, with their food and land being taken at will by powerful families, while Goryeo's leaders are simply "obscene,

extravagant and reckless." They were nothing but "Big Cheaters" and "Big Devils." "I can't bear to turn a blind eye to the destruction of my country,"[60] Jeong wrote, but only the most dramatic of solutions could overcome "the Big Wicked."[61]

Sambong could take heart in the fact that more and more local communities featured small circles of Confucian scholars giving public lectures, while books of Confucian thought seemed to be showing up even in the most rustic of houses[62]—but this scholastic flowering was not yet bearing much fruit. Things would never change until philosophers became the kings, Jeong Do-jeon finally concluded: "morals and politics are inseparable,"[63] and "only a true scholar should be in charge of politics."[64]

When he thought carefully, Sambong realized the scholars would probably never be kings themselves, but he began to hope that perhaps the philosophers could hold hands with a virtuous king—one who was free of the "Big Wicked" and who respected the ideas of the Confucian scholars. In thinking about how this virtuous future king could possibly be, Jeong Do-jeon could only think of one man. Living up in Hamhung, General Yi Seong-gye had recently defeated the pirates of Ajibaldo and had driven out Hobaldo's "barbarians." This virtuous warrior had humbly denied great rewards. Moreover, the northern general always liked to visit and talk with the Confucian scholars when he was in Gaegyeong.

Jeong Do-jeon looked to the north and wondered what it might mean. Watching Goryeo's ruling class running towards destruction, he packed his bags and left for the north one day, crossing country roads "thick with fog and smoke."[65] It was the fall of 1383.