

The General's Bow and the Scholar's Brush



There was once a fox who came upon a powerful tiger. The fox asked the tiger if he knew that the fox was stronger than all the other animals. The fierce tiger retorted that this claim was outrageous. So the fox said to the tiger: "Follow me, and you will find out." The tiger followed the fox, and everywhere they went all the animals in the forest ran away. The tiger came to believe that the fox was indeed very strong and bowed to the fox's strength.¹



When Jeong Do-jeon headed north to meet the great general, it was a historic inflection point. It can be described as a "Machiavellian moment," when the current conditions descend into chaos, but the new order has not yet emerged.² Social chaos is the mother of political thought and the times called for grand ideas and bold leaders. Jeong Do-jeon had those ideas, and his calligrapher's brush was active, but he had need now of a sword, not an ink well.

Heading north with his portfolio of ideas, Sambong was a dangerous character: "an unemployed man with political knowledge and ability."³ This dangerous character well knew the growing reputation of Yi Seong-gye and wondered if some sort of alliance might be possible. Yi Seong-gye was a national hero, so famous after defeating Ajibaldo's pirates that people would sing lullabies to their babies, promising that Yi Seong-gye would protect the wee ones.⁴

And yet General Yi remained humble and lived with spartan dignity, which only increased his popularity. After battle victories, the General would turn down excessive rewards. When ministers recited poems or songs of praise, Yi Seong-gye was often embarrassed, asking them to quit and humbly denying the greatness of his achievements.⁵ Though he was intimidating in battle and could be stern and authoritative in meetings, "when he met with the people, he

looked kind and benevolent, mixing with them easily. For that reason, people were eager to follow him.”⁶

While on the march, Yi Seong-gye wouldn't let his soldiers take the bamboo or supplies of the villagers, and he fiercely punished soldiers if they raided people's food or damaged their fields.⁷ He treated his soldiers well and boasted a well-trained and exceptionally loyal fighting force. Most other generals “mistreated their officers and men when they were not satisfied with their performance. They not only cursed them but also whipped them, and sometimes even tortured them to death.”⁸ In distinction, the *Taejo Sillok* reports that “[Yi Seong-gye] was the only commanding general who treated his soldiers with respect and dignity. So the officers and soldiers led by other generals wanted to serve under his command.”⁹ Unlike so many other officials, Yi Seong-gye had little record of abusing authority, or corruptly amalgamating court power, and was a clearly a refreshing personality.

Even better for the dreams of Jeong Do-jeon, Yi Seong-gye respected the Confucian scholars. At Gaegyong, Yi patronized and visited the scholars of Sungkyunkwan, and he was beloved of Yi Saek. He enjoyed late night discussions of the classics and studied Confucian texts in his barracks (most notably, the *Daxue yangi*, a text describing the moral virtues of kings).¹⁰ Yi Seong-gye was exceptionally proud of his son's Confucian studies as well. At every feast, when the poetry contest broke out, Seong-gye excitedly called on Yi Bang-won to take charge of the event and to recite his own verse.¹¹

Yi Seong-gye seemed a man who appreciated the deep thinkers and belles-lettres of his day, while maintaining the humble virtues of a natural leader. So in 1383, Jeong Do-jeon travelled to Yi Seong-gye's field barracks in Hamyong province to see the great man for himself. Upon arriving, he introduced himself as a friend of Jeong Mong-ju, an influential *sadaebu* who Yi Seong-gye greatly admired and who had fought beside General Yi in battles against the Jurchen (1364) and at Hwangsan versus Ajibaldo, the “brave baby”. Yi Seong-gye laid out a table of welcome.

Jeong Do-jeon arrived in Hamhung as a scholar alienated from power and unable to rise in the world. Yi Seong-gye was a man isolated from the top social circles and still mostly seen as

a rugged man of the north. It was a marriage born in heaven. Over the next several days of his visit, Jeong Do-jeon must have passionately discussed his many ideas for reform and how to stabilize the people's lives. He always did this wherever he went, and besides, Yi Seong-gye enjoyed such talks.

Towards the end of his visit, Jeong Do-jeon viewed Yi's private troops practicing their drills. These warriors were great horsemen, training their cavalry on horse obstacle-courses and famous for deadly archery at a full gallop. Yi Seong-gye himself was one of best archers in the land and constantly trained with the troops. His army was not the ill fed and glum conscripted forces so common down south, but an elite force of well-trained loyalists, with high morale. The Jurchen warrior Yi Chiran was also here, with his clan's powerful cavalry. Jeong Do-jeon watched these elite soldiers and stars grew in his eyes.

"What couldn't I do with such an army?!" he said to Yi Seong-gye, beside him.

"What do you mean?" asked a startled Yi.

"I only mean this army could repel the pirates in the southeast," stammered Jeong Do-jeon—but surely other thoughts must have danced about the edges.¹²

In March of 1384, Jeong Do-jeon left General Yi's camp in high spirits.* Before departing, he stopped by a tall and ancient pine tree, rising near the gates of Yi Seong-gye's barracks—reminiscent of Yi Seong-gye's own pen name of Song Heon ("Pine Tree"). There he carved a poem of praise to the General on the pine tree's bark.

*I see a [tall] pine tree that has endured myriad years,
That was born and grew in ten thousand folds
of green mountains.
I wonder if we can see each other in years ahead?¹³*

* Jeong Do-jeon visited Yi Seong-gye's Hamhung military camp again in the summer of 1384, spending about 6 months in total discussing ideas with the general. See *Sambongjip*, Vol. I, p. 200.

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Hiking off, Jeong Do-jeon pondered what a deeper relationship with Yi Seong-gye might mean. He had talked for hours with the General about various reforms to stabilize and improve the country, and Yi Seong-gye had seemed interested. Finally, might someone with real power listen to the dreams of the scholars? Jeong reflected morosely on his long years of futility up to this point.

I studied very hard until my hair became very white, from a very young age, so as to find a way to find the truth and straighten the king. But the crazy world of officials is worthless, and I was kicked out to the south and said farewell to my friends. There was no way to straighten the king or give benefits to the people. I went to [the south] and read books.

For the past ten years there were lots of wars and students studying Confucianism fell down and dispersed like the clouds. I studied famous Chinese philosophers. Time passed by and I didn't accomplish anything. There were only books unfinished sitting on the dusty desk. I couldn't even sword fight. I went back to the fields and farmed. There were horrible conditions and high land taxes on us.

How can this situation be?!¹⁴

It had been a sad and unproductive life for Jeong Do-jeon to date, but perhaps a new wind was blowing. In fact, good signs came quickly after the meeting, when General Yi submitted a proposal to the court in Gaegyeong, clearly influenced by Jeong Do-jeon's thinking. This report was a detailed analysis of "Measures to make the Border Safe," while simultaneously improving the lives of the people.

"The enemy strongholds are extremely close to the borders of our Northwest Region. Nevertheless, we pay little attention to our borders," complained General Yi. "Since I was

appointed to take charge of this region, I cannot just sit idly by and watch what is happening. So I made plans to reinforce our security and I submit them to Your Majesty.”¹⁵

Yi's proposal noted that the northern border was dangerous, and that enemies north of the river were always trying to lure or steal Goryeo's residents away to join their forces. Therefore, he proposed extensive new military training with a clear chain of command. He advocated for better supply storage facilities and for something like a prepared national guard all along the border.

He noted that opportunistic elites and treacherous Buddhist monks in the area would often charge usurious interest rates (up to ten times the principal) on emergency loans of food after floods and droughts, which reduced people to utter poverty. “The people who fail to pay their debts are harassed and persecuted until they are starved and ragged,” Yi noted. “Much worse, groups of people dispatched from various government agencies and local army units force the people to entertain them with food and wine, plunging the already-poor people into further desperation. Consequently, eight or nine out of ten people abandon their homes and wander around the country.” Yi urged that these practices be prohibited.

Taxes are inequitable, Yi noted, as they are based on the size of one's household rather than on the productivity of a family's oft-barren land. Moreover, many local officials pay no taxes at all, as the government granted them exemptions. These practices should change so that all the lands and all the people are taxed fairly. Helping reduce the unfair burdens on people will enhance their loyalty, and they will be less vulnerable to enemies north of the border who constantly try to turn them against Goryeo.

As a final set of recommendations, Yi noted that state welfare distributions should be expanded, and only meritorious officials and generals should be promoted. In the end, whether the people are good or bad depends on the quality of their leaders, Yi argued, but the people in charge now only care about their own power and wealth.

Those who now serve as local magistrates
gained their positions through their alliance

with the powerful families. Hence, they are negligent in their duty. The soldiers are ill provided with what they need, and the people experience hardship in maintaining their livelihoods. The number of households decreases, and the state warehouses are empty. Therefore, I sincerely request that Your Majesty send men of integrity and diligence as local magistrates and let them govern the people with benevolence. Let them take care of widows, widowers, and others left alone.¹⁶

The imprint of Jeong Do-jeon was all over these recommendations. Correspondingly, at about the same time as Yi delivered this impressive bit of military and social analysis to the court, he also recommended that Jeong Do-jeon be brought back into government and granted a ministerial post again. "The study of Jeong Do-jeon has delved into the deep problems of Confucian scripture and history," said Yi Seong-gye. "His knowledge is well-versed regarding ancient times...He has good insights and writing skills. In addition, he has a gentle scholar's spirit."¹⁷

With the General's support, Jeong Do-jeon was finally brought back from exile in July of 1384. It had been a long ten years, and the scholar stood alone for a time in the rain and wind, "hesitant outside the door,"¹⁸ before walking once again through the doors of the Sungkyunkwan Confucian Academy. Jeong was reinstated as a fourth-class officer, responsible for writing up ceremonial occasions. The very next year, also on the recommendation of Yi Seong-gye (who had met with Sambong several other times by now), he was promoted to Grand Minister of the Confucian Academy.¹⁹

A new alliance was emerging in Goryeo. While the old order was based on the power of *gwonmun sejok* landed elites, with special connections to the royal family, this new force featured an alliance between idealistic scholars from across the peninsula, civil service bureaucrats, and the northeastern military force of Yi Seong-gye.²⁰ Many of these Confucian scholars or mid-level bureaucrats were small- to medium-

sized landowners of moderate wealth themselves, but they were alienated from what they saw as the thoroughly corrupted and inaccessible high summits of Goryeo power.

These *sadaebu* had been nurtured inside the cocoon of Sungkyunkwan academy, where they grew as an intellectual and political force. Now approached their eclosion. The northern general had found his philosophers of state, and the scholars had found their man.²¹ In later years, whenever he grew boisterously drunk, Jeong Do-jeon liked to laugh about how “Liu-bang, the founder of Han China, did not take advantage of Zhang Liang [his philosopher-advisor]; rather, Zhang Liang took advantage of the founder of Han China.”²²

Following his dramatic reform appeal to the court, Yi Seong-gye returned to his place on the *Dodang* council and to his Gaegyeong family. The conquering general was a great hit back in Goryeo's capital. He went on lots of hunting trips with local dandies and his own soldiers. On one occasion, General Choe Yeong held a grand banquet and asked Yi Seong-gye for help. “I will prepare the noodle dishes and you prepare the meat dishes,” Choe said to Yi. “No problem,” said General Yi and he set off with his crew, hunting for fresh meat.

It came to pass on this hunt that a roe deer had run down a hill so steep that the hunters couldn't chase it, and they had to go down and around by a longer route. Yi Seong-gye stayed on top of the ravine. As his hunting partners came around the bottom of the steep hill, suddenly they heard Yi Seong-gye's famous arrow whistle over their heads. The general then came plunging straight down the steep gorge on horseback, shooting at the deer as he rode by “like lightning” and dropping it dead. Yi then pulled up to his partners, laughing at his own exploits. The local notable who was with them was amazed and “kept praising Yi Seong-gye for a long time.”²³

On another occasion, Yi joined King U for a hunt. This time, Yi said to his attendants that he would only shoot at an animal's spine when he came upon it—no other location. That day, the mythologizing *Taejo Sillok* reports that Yi Seong-gye shot down dozens of deer, and all of them were hit square in the back, just as he said. “Those who watched his marvelous archery skills could not help admiring him.”²⁴

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King U loved festive occasions and during this time in 1384 the King once set up an archery contest. One of the contestants was known as the best archer in Goryeo, an established court personality. Yi Seong-gye stepped up to challenge the champion. The target was “a bowl-sized yellow paper with a silver mark only a couple of inches in diameter placed in the middle. It was set up fifty paces away.” The contest became a grand court event, going deep into the evening. In the end, the King’s champion archer hit the target fifty times before missing. But Yi Seong-gye hit the silver mark every time he shot and far outdueled his opponent. He had earned the nickname some called him: “Shin-gung,” the “God-like archer.” For his marksmanship, King U awarded Yi with three fine horses.²⁵

There were many more stunning displays of Yi’s martial prowess, according to the legendry of the *Taejo Sillok*. For example, one day while out hunting with royal family members, Yi shot a pheasant out of the sky. “Witnessing his feat, the two men dismounted their horses and congratulated Taejo, bowing their heads.” One royal relative asked for the arrow that Yi Seong-gye had used, so the General gave it to him with a smile. “There is nothing special about the arrow. It all depends on the one who uses it,” laughed General Yi.

Yi Chiran watched Seong-gye’s feats of archery amid the cliquish capital elites. He thought he saw signs of concern and envy among the bluebloods and became a bit worried. “It is not advisable to show such marvelous talent to the people too much,” he warned his General.²⁶

Yi Chiran was right to be nervous, for as Yi Seong-gye’s power and popularity grew—together with his suspicious connection to the scholastic agitator Jeong Do-jeon—there were those in court who grew suspicious, jealous, and always wanted to bring the General down. On one occasion, some court ministers slandered Yi in King U’s presence, accusing him of being power-hungry and untrustworthy. But General Choe Yeong leapt up to put down these accusations forcefully, saying “Lord Yi is a cornerstone of our state. If the state is in danger, whom can you ask to deal with it?”²⁷ Still, there were those who grumbled about the powerhouse from the north and worried about the radical *sadaebu* at his side.