

Feuding Factions of Late Goryeo



There once were two 1000-year-old foxes living on Mt. Baekdu. One fox began to run around the country and spread disease and doom. The other fox became a shaman, doing ceremonies for very rich people and taking all their money. Disease and doom were everywhere and the finances of the rich collapsed. A servant tracked the shaman fox to Mt. Baekdu, where it was piling up all the money. "Why are you taking all the money from the rich?" The servant asked. The fox answered: "Because the spirit of Mt. Baekdu told me to collect all the money until a new king emerges, so that he might be able to build a new palace and new kingdom."¹



These days were unsettled. Though Yi In-im's pro-Yuan faction had taken over Goryeo politics some years ago, the reality was that the Ming Dynasty in China was ascendant and Goryeo's court increasingly had to accommodate this fact. Though Goryeo had received many Yuan envoys in the first years after King Gongmin's assassination, by the 1380s there was no denying the victory of Ming forces in China. Ming had even taken control of all the Liaodong lands north of the Yalu River, including those where Yi Seong-gye had once recaptured an old Goguryeo fortress. Goryeo had retreated south of the Yalu after Yi Seong-gye's victory and Ming forces had filled the void.²

Now Ming began to demand robust tribute from Goryeo. In the spring of 1379, Ming envoys visited Goryeo and demanded regular tribute of 100 catties of gold, 10,000 taels of silver, 100 fine horses, and 10,000 roles of hemp—in addition to 1,000 fine horses as atonement for the earlier murder of Ming envoy Chae-Bin.³ Though fulfilling these demands was difficult for Goryeo after constant invasions by Japanese pirates and Red Turban forces, Goryeo prepared large volumes of tribute and sent them north.

A number of Goryeo envoys reached the border of Ming (i.e., the Liaodong lands north of the Yalu), but the suspicious Ming kept turning them back (even after demanding tribute be sent), remembering Goryeo's history of interest in conquering these territories.⁴ Several times, Zhu Yuanzhang charged that Goryeo's envoys were smuggling in Jurchen warriors "to see what's going on in my military camps." "Don't send people to come to trade and spy!" the Ming emperor ordered as he refused entry by Goryeo tribute missions.⁵ At the same time, Ming kept building up their own forces just north of the border. Goryeo became increasingly uneasy and kept sending hopeless envoys of peace and tribute.

Finally, at the end of 1383, Ming officials allowed a Goryeo envoy to cross the border. They informed this envoy that peaceful relations might be possible with Goryeo, but only for a hefty tribute. The Ming court demanded that Goryeo agree to back-payment of tribute for the previous five-year period that they had not been allowed to enter Ming—only then would Ming finally accept Goryeo sincerity. This level of tribute would have been immense, adding up to 5,000 strong horses, 50,000 rolls of hemp, and five years of gold and silver taels.* Goryeo couldn't hope to mobilize this much payment, so the court offered instead to provide Ming with 3,000 horses, and a promissory note for all the rest to follow in later envoys.⁶

It was a dicey situation, partly because Ming officials found many of the horses offered in tribute to be dwarfish, weak things ("like donkeys")—hardly the war horses they were expecting.⁷ A series of tense negotiations emerged about just how much tribute had to be offered, and of what quality.⁸ Hoping for a breakthrough, in July 1384 the Goryeo Court decided to send one of their top scholars and diplomats, the aristocratic Jeong Mong-ju, to the Ming court on the occasion of the Emperor's birthday.

Jeong Mong-ju was known for his elegant refinement and silver tongue, which would hopefully serve him well as an

* A "tael" is a weight measure used across East and Southeast Asia. Its weight varied over time and was probably about 37.5 grams in Yi Seong-gye's time. The tael weight was standardized in China during modern times at 50 grams.

envoy to Ming. Scholastic firebrand Jeong Do-jeon was chosen as Jeong Mong-ju's partner, and the two men pressed on day and night as they rushed to the Ming capital so they could arrive by the Emperor's birthday on September 18.⁹

The eloquent Jeong Mong-ju was a big hit at the Ming court. He and Jeong Do-jeon returned to Goryeo in April of 1385 with good news. The Ming court had agreed to accept Goryeo's smaller tribute and would also agree to let Goryeo send regular envoys to China several times a year. Most importantly, ten years after King Gongmin's death, the Ming finally agreed to recognize King U as the legitimate King of Goryeo and to bestow a posthumous title upon King Gongmin. Goryeo could at last enter into full diplomatic relations with Ming. A great celebratory party was arranged that April to celebrate the felicitous news. Many of the Goryeo's finest elites, military commanders, and scholars toasted a new day in Goryeo, but King U only became drunk and searched for women to take to bed.¹⁰

The news was good, but receiving the Ming envoys later that year to deliver the Emperor's blessing to King U came with complications. For one thing, thawing relations with Ming meant accepting their growing troops on the border of the Yalu River, and completely turning away from Goryeo's old Yuan allies. Accordingly, when Yuan sent an envoy to Goryeo in October of 1384, it was turned away at the border. The envoy lingered at the border for six months, hoping to enter Goryeo, but in the end the hapless diplomat died without ever crossing the border.

Even as relations thawed, tensions remained high as the Ming envoy arrived to recognize the legitimacy of King U. When the Ming envoy arrived at the northern border in late summer of 1384, representatives inquired about the health of Goryeo's great generals, Choe Yeong and Yi Seong-gye. The Ming envoy's interest in meeting the two generals directly perhaps made the Goryeo court officials nervous, for they sent both generals away from the capital before the envoys arrived. King U's political position was weak; perhaps there was concern of military strongmen undermining the Goryeo crown, especially if they became close to Ming operatives. So both

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Generals were sent away from the capital city in the fall of 1384 and were unable to meet the Ming envoy.¹¹

Choe Yeong camped in the suburbs outside Gaegyeong, but the Goryeo court sent Yi Seong-gye all the way back to Hamhung. It just so happened that there was a growing military crisis in the northeast at that very moment, so there was reason to send him. One hundred and fifty Japanese pirate ships had just landed near the Hamhung coast and marauders were plundering the region. Local Goryeo forces resisted the pirates, but had “suffered an overwhelming defeat, and the enemy’s morale rose sharply.”¹² Volunteering to help his hometown, General Yi left Gaegyeong to its Ming reception and marched once again to war on the pirates.

General Yi arrived in the demoralized camp of Goryeo soldiers, Yi Chiran at his side. His first order of business was to raise the soldier’s morale. He pointed out pinecones on the high limbs of a tall pine tree, 70 paces away. He called out each small pinecone target in turn and hit it true, seven in a row. As the local soldiers cheered and stomped their feet, Yi Seong-gye blew his conch horn and headed out to fight the pirates.¹³

General Yi knew how to destabilize his opponents. Blowing his loud conch horn as he approached the Japanese forces, he marched slowly into the area, passing right in front of the Japanese pirates with his cavalry force of 100 men. The pirates were so nervous they couldn’t attack but simply took defensive positions. General Yi then sat down upon a chair right in the middle of the field. He told his troops to let their horses graze and to remove their saddles. While the horses were resting right in front of them, General Yi’s nonchalance must have unnerved the Japanese. Yi took out his bow and began to shoot at a dry tree stump, 100 paces away, hitting it three times in a row.

Then Yi told the pirates that he was a general of thousands of men. “You had better surrender yourselves quickly. Otherwise, it will be too late for regrets.” The enemy commander couldn’t decide what to do, so Yi coldly declared that the moment of surrender had passed: “it is the right time to attack.” In the subsequent battle, General Yi himself personally killed over twenty of the enemy, with his large arrows passing through even heavy armor. All the pirates were

either killed or captured. Once again, Yi was given reward: “50 taels of silver, a roll of fabric that was long enough to make five dresses, and a horse with saddle, as well as an honorable title that read ‘Merit Subject Who Subjugated Distant Regions.’”¹⁴

From one point of view, things were looking better in Goryeo. Japanese pirate attacks were declining, Yi Seong-gye’s army seemed unbeatable, and the Ming dynasty was reaching out to stabilize relations. But not everyone was happy with these developments. For one thing, some were upset at Ming’s constantly growing forces north of the Yalu. And for another, many old elites were unnerved by the way Yi Seong-gye was starting to shake things up politically.

In terms of the border situation, Ming troops had taken the initiative in absorbing all the Liaodong lands north of the Yalu by the late 1380s. Many of these lands were long ago part of Korea’s ancient Goguryeo kingdom, there were many ethnic Koreans living there, and Yi Seong-gye himself had recently won important battles north of the Yalu River. So some Goryeo officials chafed as thawing relations with the Ming led to a growing and uncontested Ming presence in these lands. General Choe Yeong, who always dreamed of making Goryeo a strong and respected nation, was among those who didn’t appreciate the Ming’s blustering claims to all of Liaodong.

Another source of unease for some in the Goryeo court was the rise of Yi Seong-gye, with his melioristic talk of such things as land reform and a merit-based personnel system. In 1384, Yi had submitted his radical set of Jeong Do-jeon-influenced proposals to stabilize the border, which included proposals to increase taxes on the wealthy, redistribute *gwonmun sejok* lands to poor farmers, promote only meritorious officials, and reduce expectations that villagers provide food and wine to travelling elites. Some of the established powers of Goryeo didn’t think much of these proposals, but as Yi Seong-gye’s stature grew, these reformist ideas gathered steam. Some of the worst of the *gwonmun sejok* families fiercely defended all their traditional prerogatives even as progressive fervor swelled the halls of Sungkyunkwan. Something had to give.

Then came the “Jo Ban Incident,” which clarified things in a hurry.¹⁵ Jo Ban was a retired official of Goryeo, a respected

two-time envoy to Ming, who had helped to win Ming's approval of King U's accession to the throne, after many years of resistance. He was now retired and living on his rich agricultural lands in Baekche, far south of the capital. In the late fall of 1387, it seems a high official on the Goryeo court (Yeom Hueng-bang, Left Director of the State Finance Commission, and close Yi In-im ally) decided that he wanted to claim these rich lands for himself. He sent one of his servants with a group of toughs to drive the elderly Jo Ban off his land. Yeom Hueng-bang was counting on his connection to Prime Minister Yi In-im to let him get away with anything, even roughing up an old Goryeo notable. The servant who showed up on Jo Ban's lands in Baekche was described as a simple "ruffian of the streets."¹⁶ He berated and abused Jo Ban as he tried to drive him off the land, secure in his own connection to an elite minister back in Gaegyeong.

The Confucian *sadaebu* in Gaegyeong howled about the injustice, and word of the incident reached the crown. Jo Ban was a respectable former minister of *Dodang*—how could he now be violently driven off his land by Yi In-im's foul allies? Even though King U was closely allied to Yi In-im, pressure mounted to do something about the injustice to Jo Ban and others. So in December of 1387 King U issued an order to provincial officials to compile the names of all those who were plundering the nation's storehouses, and illicitly reducing commoners to slaves on their ill-gotten lands.¹⁷ It seems that some of the reformers' ideas had gotten to the king.

This royal order set loose a chain of events that would ultimately drive Yi Seong-gye marching to war on Ming China, less than a year later, which sealed the fate of the doomed Goryeo dynasty. It began when local officials refused to cooperate with the King's appeal for the names of malefactors stealing land and grain from the state, which makes sense because these same officials were some of the main culprits. Instead of cooperating with the King's reformist crusade, the same official who attacked Jo Ban earlier (Yeom Hueng-bang) sent his ruffians *yet again* to beat up Jo Ban and demand his lands.¹⁸

Jo Ban couldn't take it anymore. He retaliated by organizing a surprise attack on the local ruffian (Yi Gwang), burning

down his house and killing him in the process. Jo Ban felt he could rely on King U's land reform order, and his own former official status, to protect him from killing this low-level servant, but he was wrong. Back in Gaegyeong, Yeom Hueng-bang was furious and accused Jo Ban of treason against the state. Yeom called on his personal connection to high level Goryeo officials (for example, he was the son-in-law of Yi In-im's right-hand man, Im Gyeon-mi) and poor Jo Ban didn't have a chance. On January 1st of 1388, Yeom had Jo Ban imprisoned and accused of treason.

Jo Ban defended himself, denouncing the corruption of Goryeo elites. "They are great bandits because six or seven greedy tycoons release their slaves everywhere to take people's lands. These slaves harm and abuse people. How can it be considered rebellion against the nation when I killed one of these slaves?"¹⁹ But it was no use: Yeom had Jo Ban arrested, together with his nephew, mother, and wife. Yeom ordered Jo Ban forcefully interrogated until he confessed his treason and gave up the names of other people who spoke poorly of Gaegyeong's officials.²⁰

Gaegyeong's official interrogators prepared for torture. *Juri* was the most common form of torture, whereby the accused was strapped into a wooden chair and had two long poles inserted between his legs, crossed diagonally. Then, two strong men pulled or pressed down upon the poles in opposite directions, forcefully spreading the legs apart and often breaking or dislocating the leg bones. The *Koryosa* describes other torture techniques: "The thumbs of both hands were tied to a beam, the big toes were tied together, and a heavy stone was tied to it, and a charcoal fire was lit under it. Two people were ordered to take turns whipping the waist and back."²¹ Other common torture included beating a person's lower legs until they fractured. The soles of feet were cut open. Thighs and knees were pressed between thick boards. Nose-cutting, foot-splitting, and ash-water waterboarding were common.²²

On public display, Jo Ban endured whatever torture the magistrate doled out all day long, while he continued to curse corrupt elites and officials. "Why do you call yourself committed to the nation when you only love each other?!" he cried. But Yeom and the other ministers of Yi In-im's faction

were unrelenting. The public torture sessions went on and grew more painful, day after day. Public sentiments began to run high against the corrupt officials of Goryeo, openly meting out this brutality on a retired public servant.²³

Jo Ban endured five days of torture, until finally Generals Choe Yeong and Yi Seong-gye had enough. They went together to King U to appeal for the torture to end. They both made the case for some necessary social reforms and pointed out the obvious corruption and horrible brutality of his top officials. Confronted by two immensely popular and angry generals, the uneasy King was persuaded.

On January 5th, he ordered the torture to stop. It was a surprise to Yeom Heung-bang, who had showed up that day, eager to oversee another long torture session.

Suddenly, the tables turned. On January 7th, after the torture had been stopped, King U gave medicine to Jo-Ban's imprisoned nephew and ordered his mother and wife released. He issued a royal edict that poor farmers had to be better protected by local magistrates. Taxes on their harvest were reduced and officials were required to ensure the people were always left with enough to feed their families. To cap the day's activities, King U also ordered a shocked Yeom Heung-bang—Jo Ban's relentless persecutor—to be arrested.

On January 8th, Yi Seong-gye and Cheo Yeong mobilized their troops in case the family of Yeom Heung-bang or any private forces of the Yi In-im faction tried to rebel. Then Yi and Choe set out together to eliminate "the whole gang of evildoers," capturing top ministers like Im Gyeon-mi, Yeom Heung-bang and Do Gil-bu, together with several of their associates and relatives. On January 11th, these three high officials were all executed. In the next week about fifty others were killed for state corruption or illegal seizure of local lands. Their assets were seized, and King U sent inspectors across the country to determine what lands might have been illegally stolen from people and to punish the malefactors. As reported in the *Taejo Sillok*, "The people across the country were overjoyed to hear the news, and they danced and sang in the streets."²⁴

King U issued a proclamation naming meritorious retainers of Goryeo who helped in the purge of the

malefactors. Prominently featured were Generals Choe Yeong and Yi Seong-gye, who became joint directors of future personnel appointments.²⁵ Over the next two months, the King's land inspectors would conduct a nation-wide investigation of illegal seizures of land and goods, which would result in about 1000 executions. Finally, the Yi In-im faction had been dislodged in a bloody, nationwide purge. Ever the wily fox, Yi In-im himself escaped execution and simply retired from politics altogether, accepting exile with his brother. General Choe "has privately spared the old thief," some people complained. "The great thief...has escaped the net."²⁶

The world of Goryeo politics had changed dramatically, but the break was never complete. Yi In-im, the corruption at the heart of *gwonmun sejok* politics for years, had survived. Though many corrupt local elites (*hyangni*) had been killed in the provinces, other questionable aristocrats in the capital survived—especially those known to Choe Yeong, who was himself a rich Goryeo patrician in the end. Many traditional capital patricians showed up on King U's new list of meritorious retainers, although they certainly had participated in the corrupt land schemes and sale of government positions. Bureaucratic positions were filled by some of these old offenders. Moreover, although many of the most corrupt local officials had been executed, the grand project of systematic land reform hardly moved forward at all.

Simply put, though progress was made, it wasn't a clean break with the past, and much of the old system survived. Perhaps more importantly, considering the likelihood of Yi Seong-gye's own growing ambitions, General Choe Yeong remained closely connected with many remaining elites in Goryeo court society, and had a more clear path to power and royal influence than did Yi himself. When Yi Seong-gye complained about the continued influence of corrupt old families like Yi In-im in Goryeo, the Koryosa simply says that "Choe Yeong didn't listen,"²⁷ In the aftermath, Yi Seong-gye would grow increasingly disenchanted with General Choe Yeong's more easy acceptance of Goryeo's surviving malefactors, and with Choe's tight connections to the crown. Distance began to grow between the two lions of late Goryeo.