

The Return from Wihwado



There was once a time when Yi Seong-gye was young that he studied at the same school as Ju Won-jang (c. Zhu Yuanzhang). Both young students were strong, bold and ambitious. Over time, Ju Won-jang noticed that Yi Seong-gye was growing a fine, fierce beard, with three impressive strands (samwasu). Ju thought that Yi would become a powerful leader if he kept that beard, so he plotted to get rid of it. One night he waited until Yi Seong-gye became drunk and lost consciousness. Then he cut off Yi's beard and burned it in a fire. After that time, Yi Seong-gye's courage began to wither.

There was a time after that incident that the teacher of Yi Seong-gye and Ju Won-jang decided to test the courage of both young men. He took them into the mountains to an empty old house for the shamans and spirits. He asked Yi Seong-gye to put his hand through a dark window. Yi put his hand through the window, but something grabbed him, and Yi pulled his hand out fast, crying out in fear: "There's a ghost in there!" Then Ju Won-jang put his hand through the window, and felt his wrist grabbed as well. Ju Won-jang did not pull out his hand, but fiercely shouted out "Let it go!" His hand was let go and then another student from their school came out of the dark space, laughing. He had been grabbing his friends' hands in the dark.

The teacher asked Ju: "How did you know it was a person grabbing your hand?" Ju answered: "Because the hand grabbing me was warm." The teacher praised Ju Won-jang and said he was bold and would achieve a great thing.

After a time, both Ju Won-jang and Yi Seong-gye were travelling to China, though not together. Ju stopped by a tavern on the road and ordered a drink. The innkeeper told Ju that the drink was expensive and cost 1000 nyang. Ju didn't have any money at all, but he didn't care and drank up three whole bowls. When the side dishes were brought to him, Ju noticed that they were full of blood and severed fingers. He ate it all up. He said to the

innkeeper "Don't worry! I'll be back to pay for all this after I achieve a great thing."

Some time later, Yi Seong-gye showed up at the same tavern and ordered the same drink. The innkeeper said the drink would cost 1000 nyang. Yi Seong-gye grew worried and said: "I only have 500 nyang, so I guess I can only have half a drink." When the side dishes of bloody severed fingers arrived, Yi Seong-gye would not eat them.

As Yi Seong-gye was leaving on the road, an old man came up to him and said, "those drinks were sent by Heaven. Ju Won-jang drank three bowls without worry and ate everything, but you wouldn't even drink one bowl. You should not even dream about doing a big thing." When Yi Seong-gye turned around to look at the tavern, both the inn and the innkeeper had disappeared.

It also came to pass on their journeys that both Yi Seong-gye and Ju Won-jang came across a pond in the woods. An old man was nearby, and he said that whoever entered the pond would become a great leader. Yi Seong-gye approached, but there were blue and gold dragons playing in the pond. Yi grew scared and would not enter. Ju Won-jang was not scared, however. He entered the pond and played with the two dragons.

In later days, these two men became competitors who struggled to found their countries. But while the bold Ju Won-jang became the founder of the great country of Ming China (being called Zhu Yuanzhang there), the cautious Yi Seong-gye only achieved the much smaller country of Joseon.¹



Now came the momentous days of spring 1388 that changed the course of Korean history. From the accession of King U after King Gongmin's assassination to the events of 1388, Goryeo and Ming were in constant tension. The Ming court withheld recognition of King U as a legitimate monarch for ten years. They demanded execution of those who killed their envoy back in the days after King Gongmin's assassination. To

make up for such insults, Ming demanded huge amounts of tribute, far more than the famine-challenged and tax-bankrupt Goryeo could mobilize. Five thousand horses were demanded on one occasion, together with 40,000 bolts of cotton and 10,000 rolls of silk. When Goryeo did give some tribute, their horses were called weak and dwarfish. Their envoys were critiqued as being impolite, not well versed in Chinese, and more interested in self-enriching trading opportunities than in serious diplomatic discussions.²

Even as Ming finally announced they would recognize King U, after Jeong Mong-ju and Jeong Do-jeon's successful trip in 1384, Ming forces on the border swelled. In 1387, Ming had conquered Liaodong with 200,000 troops and proceeded to reinforce fortifications north of the Yalu.³ Ming also demanded that its traders be allowed full access to Tamna Island (Jeju) to purchase horses at will.⁴ Threats of border conflict and all-out war with Ming simmered and Goryeo's King U became ever more anxious. What if Ming troops invaded as Red Turban rebels had done before? What if he were killed by forces of international intrigue, like King Gongmin had been? "My father was harmed while sleeping at night, so I have to be firmly vigilant," King U resolved.

After the Jo Ban incident upended things, it didn't help that Choe Yeong and Yi Seong-gye rose to undisputed power, while King U's adopted "father," Yi In-im, was exiled. King U didn't know where to turn. During some anxious times in later months, he would stay up all night on a boat in the river, with a sword by his side.⁵ He grew easily angered at any supposed slight to his authority, and had some attendants beheaded when they didn't show up to one of his parties. To anchor the General's loyalty, he pushed Choe Yeong to marry his daughter into the royal family, but a cautious Choe demurred and said that his girl was too low born for such honor.⁶

At this time, in the midst of the Jo Ban upheaval, the Ming Emperor made a move. Having handily defeated the Yuan in China, the Ming court now proclaimed that it would retain ownership of all Liaodong lands North of the Yalu River, though Goryeo also considered many of these lands rightfully theirs. Now the Ming Emperor was firmly declaring ownership of these lands and demanded hefty Goryeo tribute as a sign of

loyal acceptance. The *Dodang* councilors sat stunned as the Ming message was read out: The Ming demanded 1000 virgins, 1000 young boys, and 1000 eunuchs as immediate proof of Goryeo's sincere loyalty. A court messenger dashed from the *Dodang* hall to the quarters of King U, where he had locked himself away in anxiety. "The emperor is demanding tribute of 1000 women and men each!" the anxious messenger blurted out. Cornered, King U turned to his top general Choe Yeong and asked what to do. True to character, Choe quickly refused to even consider such a huge tribute. "We cannot use up our national power!" he cried.⁷

In response to Goryeo's resistance, in February of 1388, The Hongwu Emperor proclaimed his intention to establish a command post at Cheollyeong pass, far south of the Yalu River and deep in Korean territory, just 50 li from Gaegyeong.⁸ Hongwu threatened to swallow up all the old Yuan lands north of Ssangseong (including Yi Seong-gye's old hometown territories in Hamyeong-do)—a direct attack on Goryeo's territorial integrity and independence.*

Such a move was likely to provoke a Goryeo response, but Ming leaders had good reasons for their gamble—especially at this time of Goryeo's internal chaos over the Jo Ban Affair. Constant Yalu River border disputes made them ever suspicious of Goryeo's intentions in that region.⁹ Just as Ming dreamed of taking over all that was once Yuan in Goryeo, so did Goryeo dream of rekindling Goguryeo claims over lands north of the Yalu. Expanding Ming control of the border area would restrain any dreams of Goguryeo redux. In addition, there were many Han Chinese living in these areas, including in Goryeo territories south of the Yalu, so the Ming had an ethnic draw to this strategic transit corridor running down the northern Korean peninsula. Goryeo sovereignty was weak in

* For detailed historical records on Ming's claim on Goryeo's lands north of Cheollyeong Pass, including Goryeo's military response (e.g., calling up soldiers, repairing northern fortresses, and ordering Yi Seong-gye to march north into war), see *Koryosa*, v. 33, 2.1388-4.1388 These entries can be accessed at the website below, and in subsequent entries over the next few months of *Koryosa* records.
http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_033r_0010_0010_0020_0050.

the relatively lawless areas near the Yalu and there were constant conflicts between Mongolian, Jurchen, Han, Japanese and Goryeo forces. At heart, Ming's threat to expand their military presence both north and south of the Yalu was an effort to stabilize this unresolved and fluid area and make a loyal people out of a wild territory.

For Goryeo, the Ming plan was an existential threat. Historically, whenever China had become a strong and unified country, it had invaded Korea, as in the Han, Sui, Liao, and Yuan dynasties in the past. It seemed that once again a Chinese dynasty was claiming loyalties of northern border peoples (the Jurchen) en route to a future occupation of Goryeo itself. Upon receiving the Ming's threat, Choe Yeong called an emergency meeting of *Dodang*. All the officials agreed: "We cannot concede these territories to the Ming."¹⁰

Subsequently, Choe Yeong met privately with King U and the unthinkable was discussed: war with Ming China. Choe proposed sending the Goryeo army north to cross the Yalu and pre-emptively invade Liaodong territories now occupied by Ming forces, and he wasn't in the mood to back down. When Yi Chasong, the Grand Lord of Kongsan, met with General Choe afterwards to advise against an invasion of Ming, Choe grew furious. He had the Lord beaten with a heavy stick and then killed. Others with similar opinion were sent into exile.¹¹ There was no one left to resist talk of war. Most of Choe Yeong's opponents had already been killed, jailed, or exiled during the Jo Ban incident. Terrorizing his opponents, Choe even had the small child of one critic thrown into the river to drown.

Only Yi Seong-gye had both a cooler head and the possible ability to resist General Choe's call for war. Yi sought ways to avoid a disastrous war with Ming, while still resisting their encroachment into Goryeo. During the build-up to possible war, Yi sent Park Ui-jung (a security council official) to the northern border in February of 1388, in an effort to convince Ming leaders to back off their plan to build a fortress at Goryeo's Cheollyeong pass. This messenger explained to Ming representatives that these lands south of the river were historically part of Goryeo and were simply too close to the Goryeo capital to allow them to be taken without conflict. Yi promised that Goryeo would respect the Yalu as the northern

border and urged Ming to reverse their Cheollyeong decree. The messenger Park Uijung soon returned with a reply from the Ming, who seemed pleased at Goryeo's offer to essentially renounce claim on all lands north of the Yalu. We can't reverse the decree already ordered, the Ming reply said, but we will be careful not to upset Goryeo. The Ming reply noted that the position of Goryeo was reasonable. They explained that for now Ming troops would only build a fortress north of the Yalu and would delay the Cheollyeong fortress project.

It was a good start to a possible diplomatic resolution to the situation, but General Choe Yeong would have none of it. When a Ming envoy came down from the Liaodong commandery to discuss the issue of a Ming fortress north of the river, Choe tried to have him killed.¹² For Choe, Goryeo had been too sorely insulted and wartime response was the only path. Moreover, if Goryeo succeeded in war, the lands of Liaodong itself might be claimed, as in Goguryeo of old. Goryeo, not Ming, would be the great power in the Northeast region—a goal long sought by General Choe Yeong.

Finally, there was also the issue of Yi Seong-gye's stubborn resistance to Choe Yeong's recent leadership, and the fact of General Yi's dangerously powerful northeastern army. Here was Choe Yeong's chance to order Yi Seong-gye's great army into a climactic battle. Either the undefeated Yi Seong-gye would win again and new lands would be opened to Goryeo's claim, thus winning Choe Yeong great acclaim for his gamble—or Yi Seong-gye would lose, and his army and popularity would be destroyed, leaving Choe Yeong the sole serious powerholder in Goryeo.¹³ Now was Choe Yeong's chance to either win sweeping territory long desired by Goryeo, or perhaps put a damper on any dangerous aspirations by Yi Seong-gye.

So in March 1388, King U and Choe Yeong decided on a military attack on Ming forces north of the Yalu river, hoping to drive Ming out of the Liaodong peninsula altogether and reclaim traditional lands. It could be the second coming of Goguryeo, that ancient Korean kingdom that once governed much of (later named) Manchuria as well.

But there were many in Goryeo who were strongly against provoking a war with their powerful neighbor. If

Goryeo lost, it could be return to occupation and submission as in the days of vassalage to Yuan. Wouldn't it be better to develop pragmatic relations with the new power in Nanjing, perhaps even to enter into a tributary relationship with the rising Ming dynasty? Scared of announcing their bold and dangerous invasion publicly in the face of such certain resistance, King U first travelled to Haeju (a bit northwest of the capital) to meet Yi Seong-gye (now the vice-Chancellor of Goryeo), hoping to win him over to the idea.¹⁴

But General Yi was in favor of agreeing to the Ming's territorial demands north of the Yalu, in exchange for Ming not establishing a command post south of the river. This pragmatic policy would avoid devastating war and would stabilize Korean sovereignty over lands south of the Yalu, which were more easily defensible by Korean forces than Liaodong lands north of the river.¹⁵ More than just a geopolitical debate about the balance of military power in the region, the debate concerned the overall direction of Goryeo society and court. General Yi was dismayed by what he saw as continued corrupt and indefensible behavior by many Goryeo elites, even after the purges of the Jo-Ban incident. He wasn't excited about fighting a war so that Goryeo's high government officials could keep selling government positions for personal gain, seizing land and property from commoners, and enslaving and trafficking Goryeo peasants.¹⁶

Beyond all these issues, Yi was concerned that invasion of Ming would be a military disaster, for his troops and his country. In their private meeting on May 31, 1388, Yi vigorously advised King U against the attack, "There are four problems in raising an army at the present time," Yi argued. "First, it is not advisable for a small country to challenge a large country. Second, it is also not a good idea to mobilize an army during the [hot, wet] summer. Third, the Japanese will try to take advantage of the situation during our military campaign as we send our army to a far-off land. Fourth, since it is the rainy season now, the glue put on the bows will be loosened, and the soldiers will be exposed to epidemic disease."¹⁷

At the end of the conversation, King U seemed well-nigh persuaded by Yi's reasoning. Yi Seong-gye then met with

General Choe Yeong and urged him to repeat this same reasoning to the King when they met privately. Choe promised Yi that he would do that. However, Choe visited the king alone that very night and once again urged only war. "I beg you not to listen to anyone [with a different point of view]," he implored the king.¹⁸

In their next meeting, General Yi Seong-gye was directed by King U to march his army north, cross the Yalu River, and lead the attack on Ming-held territory. Yi Seong-gye begged that at least the invasion should be delayed until the fall, so that there was time for the harvest to come in, and soldiers would be well supplied with food in the field. Moreover, the Yalu River froze over in the fall and winter, so it would be easier for troops to cross. But King U wouldn't listen to any of this reasoning. "I can't stop now because I've already called up soldiers," the King said.¹⁹

Then the King offered a warning to General Yi. "Didn't you see what happened to Yi Chasong?" King U asked, referring to the high official who Choe Yeong had beaten and killed for resisting the war.

"He left an honorable name behind," Yi coldly replied.

That afternoon, Yi returned to his soldiers in tears. As they gathered to hear their fate, his words were dark. "The catastrophe for the people has now begun."²⁰

In April of 1388, King U and General Choe moved their base to Seogyang (Pyongyang), 340 li north of the capital city of Gaegyeong, so that they could oversee war preparations and the military departure. The Queen and crown prince (Chang) had already been moved into the Hanyang fortress south of the capital (today's Seoul).²¹ Soldiers were conscripted across the peninsula. Even Buddhist monks were drafted into the growing invasion force. Half of the state's already overstretched coffers and the confiscated property of some of the disgraced and executed elites of the Jo Ban incident were used to pay soldiers and acquire military supplies.²²

As the army formed, Yi Seong-gye was ordered to direct the right army while commander Jo Min-soo was given the left army. Yi couldn't have been too excited at his fellow commander, who didn't have a distinguished record. Back in one 1375 campaign against Japanese pirates around the Daegu

area, Jo Min-soo had lost all his battles. Because Jo Min-soo had the support of Yi In-im, King U had wanted to award him with clothes and fine liquor for these lost battles, but Kim Ja-su of the Office of Remonstrances pushed back. "How?" He asked. "Jo Min-soo doesn't have much merit due to his many defeats." For his honest assessment, the Remonstrator was sent to prison.²³ Moreover, while Yi Seong-gye's forces included his elite, private troops—well trained and loyal—Jo Min-soo's private forces were much less intimidating.

General Choe Yeong thought at one point to join these armies, commanding a center army of his own, but King U cried in desperation and fell to his knees. He grabbed Choe's ankles, calling him "Father," and begged him not to join the invasion. "If you go, whom should I discuss the affairs of state with?" the King lamented.²⁴ King U also feared that he might be attacked by court enemies without Choe Yeong around. So Choe agreed to stay beside the king in Seogyang while Yi Seong-gye prepared to go off to war.

It was certainly true that King U needed a stable force beside him, for he continued his erratic and emotional behaviors in the buildup to war. The King ordered the suspension of all Chinese music across the land and took to wearing only Mongol clothes. He suspended any use of the term "Hongwu," which was the title Zhu Yuanzhang had taken upon accession as the first Ming emperor. All this was reasonable, but he also played the Mongol flute at long drinking parties deep into the night and began to neglect other affairs of state. He was easily angered, once killing a person washing horses for no reason at all and cutting down a baby in the street who noisily surprised him. Both the *Koryosa* and the *Taejo Sillok* (both admittedly compiled by diarists of the anti-King U faction) note disparagingly that King U increasingly filled his days with "debauchery, playing the pipe, drinking, and womanizing. Even worse, he killed people recklessly." In the final days before the departure, U spent all his time boating, playing games on the river, and constantly playing whistles and flutes. He ordered piles of erotic pictures delivered to the palace.²⁵

With an unstable and debauched royal commander, and fears of his impossible task, Yi Seong-gye must have had an

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uneasy sleep the night before setting out for war with Ming. Perhaps he even thought of a children's song that was said to circulate during those days, offering a plea that General Yi could somehow save them from the coming war with China.

*Outside the Western Capital there is a fire.
Outside Anju Fortress there is smoke and light.
Between the two places, General Yi travels
back and forth.
One wishes he could save the people.²⁶*

General Yi knew a catastrophe was coming, and it must have weighed heavy that he was the person ordered to set it in motion, even as the wreckage of Goryeo mounted everywhere. Suffering and poverty of common people had deepened in the years after the Red Turban invasions amid the deep corruption of the aristocrats. There were increasing numbers of wandering people, as more and more common lands were claimed by private elites. Families were known to sell off their children, and illegal slaughtering of the livestock of others was growing.²⁷ There was plenty of talk about how the corruption of the aristocrats was causing disharmony between Goryeo and Heaven—leading to punishments of drought, disease, famine, and now possible war.²⁸ General Yi saw all this, he had carefully listened to the scholars critique the moral and political decay of Goryeo, and now he was ordered by the King to heap yet one more disaster upon the backs of the Goryeo people.

As the Goryeo troops gathered on the morning of April 18, 1388, to begin their march north, King U was not even there to see them off. The King had gone on a boat ride and become exceedingly drunk the night before, and even at noon was sleeping it off. "So the commanders were unable to take leave of the King," the *Taejo Sillok* reports.²⁹ Just after noon, Yi's gloomy troops left the city and marched north without even a royal farewell. That same day, in Jinpo harbor (Jeolla province), about 80 Japanese pirating ships dropped anchor and began plundering the region far south of the capital.³⁰

Yi Seong-gye and Jo Min-soo commanded armies of about 50,000 persons and 22,000 horses.³¹ The march north must

have been a dramatic scene. Though weather was dour and anxiety high, Yi Seong-gye's personal troops rallied to his side, and thousands of elite warriors mobilized under the General's flag. The Joseon hagiography, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, tells it this way:

*While the submerged dragon had
not yet taken wing,
The people of the north submitted to him.
Carrying bows and swords
They served him on the right and on the left.*³²

As for the villagers, *Songs of the Dragons* tells us that "Heaven sent a genius to save the people." Many people sang of General Yi's virtues as his troops passed by, hoping somehow the general might still save them all from war. They didn't know what was coming, "but Heaven told them in their dreams."³³

Though Heaven may have whispered about a submerged dragon, the moment remained dire. For Yi's troops, it was a difficult journey north, through constant rain and mud. By the time Yi reached the Yalu River frontier on May 7th (three slogging weeks after leaving Seogyang), the rains continued, and the river was flooding. Disease was spreading through his weary troops, and many were deserting.³⁴ Back in Gaegyeong, Choe Yeong proposed leading a disciplinary team to hunt down deserters and kill them, but King U refused. Remember how King Gongmin was assassinated when you once left to discipline people on Tamna, U reminded the general.

Amid deserting and diseased troops, at the flood-raging river, Yi's men built rafts as best they could and began to ferry over. The Yalu was fierce and swollen and hundreds drowned, unable even to reach Wihwa island, a long flat bar in the middle of the river channel. For those that did reach the island, the rains continued. The troops gathered in the drench on the thin island sandbar, watched the river waters swell with bloated bodies of the drowned, and contemplated additional flooded river crossings to come.

Dispirited, General Yi sent a letter to his King on May 13th. "Let us quit this campaign," he begged. Our soldiers are drowning, and our bows are falling apart in the sticky summer

weather.³⁵ We will lose to the superior Ming forces and Goryeo will be worse off. But King U was preparing for a relaxing sojourn in the Seongju hot springs, so he hurriedly sent his cold reply—carry on.³⁶ Yi sent a second request for withdrawal, while his troops huddled on the thin sandbar, surrounding by ever rising waters. This request was received by Choe Yeong who sent back his own stony reply on May 22nd—carry on.

Yi was losing faith in these rulers. Looking at the hopeless situation and considering the faith that his troops put in him, General Yi could continue no longer. He considered resigning his post altogether and just returning home with the “troops of his standard”³⁷ to Hamhung, but that option wasn’t very promising. He would still be blamed for defying the King’s command and would hardly be safe simply by sitting still in the north.

Events were rushing forward, and Yi must have known all his options were troubled with unpredictable results: war on Ming, return as a traitor to Gaegyeong, or retreat to the northeast and await the royal rebuke. All paths out of the chaos were dark. We can call such occasions a “Machiavellian moment”—the past order has already collapsed, but a new order has not yet arisen.³⁸ Such historical convergences are leadership moments, times when people are face-to-face with profound instability and the choices of the leader can create or destroy great value.³⁹ The banks of the Yalu River in May of 1388 were just such a time and place. A choice had to be made.

On May 22, General Yi gathered 1,000 of his private troops and prepared for a possible withdrawal. Immediately, his fellow commander Jo Min-soo panicked. It appeared Yi Seong-gye might be resigning from his Goryeo post altogether and marching back home to Hamhung. General Min-soo came to Yi Seong-gye in tears.

“If you leave, what should we do?” he wondered, begging Yi to stay with the armies.

“What makes you think I would leave?” Yi Seong-gye replied. “Stop saying that.”⁴⁰

Instead of leaving, Yi Seong-gye ordered all the officers of Goryeo’s invasion force to gather close. There in the rain on

Wihwa island, with flood waters rising all about, General Seong-gye spoke to the men in earnest.

If we invade the borders of China and incur the wrath of the Son of Heaven [the Chinese emperor], we will immediately bring about catastrophe to our country as well as our people. Based on reason and common sense, I tried to persuade the government to withdraw from this military campaign before it was too late, but the King does not realize the magnitude of what he is doing, and Choe Yeong, old and senile, pays no attention to my plea. Would you join me in seeing and persuading the King, personally explaining the potential problems with our military action, and finally removing the wicked people surrounding the King and bringing peace to people's lives?⁴¹

The General was inviting his troops to refuse the royal command, turn around, follow him to Gaegyeong, and demand personal audience with the King. They would “see and persuade the King” and remove the “wicked people” who surrounded him. To a man, Yi’s gathered officers replied with their support. “The security of our nation and people solely depends on you. How can we dare not follow your orders?”⁴²

Yi Seong-gye then rebuked the King’s order and turned his army around. As the troops ferried back across the river to Goryeo lands, General Yi watched from atop a hill, astride his fine white horse, holding his bright red bow with white feather arrows. According to the *Taejo Sillok*, thankful soldiers looked up at the general and said to one another: “There has been no man like him, and there will be no man like him hereafter.” As the army regrouped under General Yi’s banner on Goryeo lands once again, amid the relentless rain, the river flood waters behind them rose even higher and wholly submerged the island on which they had just stood.⁴³

The seismic news radiated south as he marched: General Yi had turned his army around and was headed to see and

persuade the King! With him was General Jo Min-soo who joined for the return to Gaegyeong. The sons and husbands of Goryeo were returning from the brink of disastrous war, and the people gathered all along the road to cheer and sing. They offered wine and drink, and their lines were endless.⁴⁴ Yi ordered his troops to treat all the people well and to protect their crops. "If you touch any property belonging to people, even a cucumber in their fields, I will punish you according to law," he warned.⁴⁵

Yi's army moved at full speed, returning to Gaegyeong four times faster than his long march north, moving at the breakneck army speed of 40 kilometers a day.⁴⁶ Royal panic unfurled. Gaegyeong was exceptionally vulnerable, partly because on May 22nd (the same day Yi Seong-gye had turned his troops around), most of the capital city's own army had been sent south to battle a Japanese pirate invasion. Ironically, these pirates had first landed in Jinpo on the very day General Yi began his march north, back on April 18th. Now in late May, an angry King U had just sent many of his capital commanders south to battle the pirates. He was upset at them for feigning illness and not joining Yi Seong-gye's Ming invasion force, so he sent them after the pirates instead.⁴⁷ Yi Seong-gye might well have been told this fact by the messenger who had arrived with Choe Yeong's denial of withdrawal on May 22nd. Whether Yi knew of Gaegyeong's unique vulnerability at this moment or not, the General sped south immediately upon hearing Choe's refusal.

As Yi Seong-gye charged south towards the undefended capital, General Choe rushed to the Seonju hot springs to inform the king of impending disaster. King U and General Choe quickly gathered all their treasure and what few soldiers they had and raced back to the capital. As they moved south to Gaegyeong, King U ordered the royal treasure rooms and storehouses opened so they could lure and pay soldiers. Choe issued a proclamation offering gold, silk, and high title to anyone who would join in defense of the King. Messages were sent to the provinces, ordering soldiers to rush to Gaegyeong.⁴⁸ But there were precious few to answer the call. Most soldiers had already been sent north with Yi Syeong-gye and Jo Min-

soo, or south to fight Japanese pirates. Moreover, there was little will to fight the undefeated and popular Yi Seong-gye.

Only a few hundred people responded to Choe Yeong's call to action, mostly enslaved servants and municipal officers.⁴⁹ All that remained to mobilize were the old and weak, the enslaved and untrained. When the sad King marched into his capital city on May 29th, he had only fifty cavalymen at his side.⁵⁰ The army of Yi Seong-gye was only three days away, singing as they came.

Yi's army grew stronger as it moved south. Within a few days of his turning around, 1,000 more elite troops raced across the northern provinces and joined Yi's troops. It seems likely that Yi had sent word of his possible return to the capital and had asked his northern allies to stand ready. So when the general turned his horse's head, they were there. His army included strong Jurchen captains like Yi Chiran and Cheo Myeong, who had sworn fealty to Yi Seong-gye since the days of the Liaodong campaign. It included Mongolian leaders like Jomu who had come over to Yi Seong-gye's faction. Common farmers with unique fighting skills like Kim In-chan and Unchang had flocked to the banner of Yi Seong-gye when witnessing his martial success. They helped lead divisions by General Yi's side.⁵¹ The legends would later grow that giving such a strong army to Yi Seong-gye was dangerous from the beginning—it was like watering a dragon.⁵²

Yi's other family members also moved quickly. King U had tried to keep Yi Seong-gye's children and wives under close watch, as a check on any rebellious ideas, but it didn't work. As soon as Yi Seong-gye turned his troops around, his two older sons (Yi Bang-woo and Yi Bang-gwa), as well as the son of Yi Chiran, fled the vicinity of King U and made for the troops of Yi Seong-gye. King U had kept these Yi family members close to him in the hot springs, but just before the King heard news of General Yi's rebellion, these family members had managed to waylay some local magistrates on the road, steal their horses and ride off towards Yi Seong-gye's army.⁵³

Another of the General's sons, Yi Bang-won, raced to Pocheon (about 100 li east of Gaegyeong) where his mother (Lady Han) and stepmother (Lady Kang) maintained separate estates and where Lady Kang was raising her two young boys.

King U's forces were also rushing to Pocheon to take the Yi family hostage against the coming troubles. Yi Bang-won arrived first and gathered his family. He placed young Bang-beon and Bang-seok (his stepbrothers) on a horseback and held the reins tight as the family fled for safehouses further north and east, towards Hamyong province.⁵⁴

Choe Yeong sent soldiers to track them down, but it was hopeless. Too many people in these northern lands supported the family Yi and helped them as they fled, day and night. They kept off the main roads and travelled hidden trails. They slept in the fields, for fear of capture.⁵⁵ After several days of flight, the family arrived at the house of Hanchung, a supporter in the northeastern town of Icheon, where they would be safe for the remainder of the coming events.⁵⁶

On June 1st, Yi Seong-gye arrived at the gates of Gaegyeong. He camped his troops about 10 li from the city and sent a note to King U, demanding that Choe Yeong be sent out to face the music.

King Gongmin served our great nation with intelligence and did not intend to sacrifice his soldiers. But now Choe Yeong does not intend to serve our great nation. In the hot summer, when the soldiers were requisitioned, [Korea] lost its farming spirit, and the Japanese invaded and killed the Korean people and burned our warehouses. If Choe Yeong is not removed now, the Shrine of the Ancestors will be in jeopardy.⁵⁷

A desperate King U refused, crying, and holding onto General Choe inside the palace, begging him from protection against Yi Seong-gye. An assault on the city seemed inevitable. The families of Gaegyeong doused their lanterns that night, and children were told to keep quiet.

On June 3rd, the forces of Yi Seong-gye and Jo Min-soo surrounded the city. There were a few hundred guards on the walls, but they had to be nervous, facing the undefeated Yi Seong-gye. The defenders had built barricades of carts, rocks, and furniture as best they could, but that didn't promise much

protection against the coming assault.⁵⁸ On the morning of June 3rd, Yi had his troops call out with one voice, demanding the King to offer up Choe Yeong. General Choe did not come.

“Blow the conch to vibrate heaven and earth,” General Yi commanded. The horns were brought to the east gate and blown until the stone walls vibrated and the soldiers inside fell into panic. Soldiers on the wall began to abandon their posts, while others opened the Gates to Yi Seong-gye. Yi Seong-gye later described how the common people of Goryeo pulled carts aside to make a path as he entered the city. His soldiers were given alcohol and food by the gathered people, “and the elderly and weak climbed onto the castle walls and cheered.”⁵⁹

In subsequent skirmishes, Yi’s troops easily advanced. One after another, the high places of the capital city were captured, and Yi’s bright yellow dragon banners were unfurled on all the hilltops. Atop a final hill, Yi had his army sound the conch horns—a sign that General Yi had won in battle once again: “the dust overflowed the sky, and the earth shook.”⁶⁰

General Yi then began his walk through the captured Gaegyeong, heading to the palace where the King, Queen, and General Choe had fled to the royal garden. The Joseon historians tell us that the common people were ecstatic at these developments. They were happy to have avoided war, and Yi Seong-gye was beloved. A popular song was said to have broken out in the streets: “The shepherd wins the country,” the children sang.⁶¹ People gathered in the streets, cheering. “With baskets of food and jugs of broth, they lined the road to gaze up at him.”⁶²

The Confucian thinkers had a way of describing this moment. When the people suddenly move from one leader to another, it is a sign that the “Mandate of Heaven” has shifted, and a regime change is in the stars. Surely, Jeong Do-jeon and the scholars of Sungkyunkwan must have been pondering this possibility as the people welcomed Yi Seong-gye to Gaegyeong.

At the palace, Choe Yeong and King U had retreated to the octagonal pavilion in the back flower garden. But the garden walls were assaulted. King U took General Choe’s hands, weeping hopelessly. Choe bowed twice to his king and went out to meet Yi Seong-gye.⁶³ It was a bittersweet meeting between the two old generals who had so often been allies.

Choe Yeong was a titanic force in Goryeo's political world. He had fought in 27 different battles of note, including assaults on enemy fortresses and defense of his own fortresses against brutal enemy sieges.⁶⁴ He had fought off the Japanese pirates for decades, standing firm even when shot in the face with arrows.⁶⁵ He had drove the Red Turban rebels out of Gaegyeong and fought off endless waves of Jurchen raiders. Choe Yeong came from old money, but he avoided most of the corruptions of the *gwonmun sejok* and was known for his personal honesty and frugality. As his father taught, Choe looked upon gold as if were stone. He accepted no bribes and had few extravagances. His house was small, and he wore simple clothes. He was thought incorruptible, was called the "Shield of Goryeo," and was much beloved of the people.⁶⁶

But at the end of things, Yi Seong-gye had no choice but to exile the beloved general who had ordered Goryeo's troops to their doom and who protected a debauched king. General Seong-gye spoke sadly to the defeated General Choe, who he had once fought beside in many Goryeo campaigns. "It was not my intention to bring about this disturbance. It was inevitable because you not only acted against a great cause but also threw the country and the people into crises and troubles until their complaints and resentment reached Heaven. Farewell, farewell." Standing face-to-face, both great generals wept and Yi Seong-gye then banished Choe south, to the Goyang area.⁶⁷

Immediately after the capture of Choe Yeong, the scholar Yi Saek (director of the Confucian Academy) arranged to meet with Yi Seong-gye. At Saek's request, General Yi agreed to remove his troops from the city, restoring some decorum and dignity to the capital. His troops would camp outside the city for a time, under strict orders to respect nearby property, while General Yi resolved the question of what to do about King U, hiding in his palace.

In one final effort to preserve his throne, King U sent eighty armed eunuchs that very night to kill Yi Seong-gye in his Gaegyeong house as he slept. But the eunuchs found only an empty house, for the General slept with his army in the field.⁶⁸ This kind of incident fueled the fire of those like Nam Eun and Jo In-ok, radical *sadaebu* who urged Yi Seong-gye to immediately kill King U and take the throne for himself. But

this was not the path Yi Seong-gye walked. Instead, General Yi claimed his rebellion was simply to rectify the corruption and errors of the current king, and avoid war with Ming, not to overthrow the 500-year Goryeo dynasty.

So it developed that Yi Seong-gye won the city, but not the crown. Instead, he deposed the 23-year-old King U, and banished him to Ganghwa island, where the Goryeo court had once governed in exile during decades of Mongolian assaults. In King U's place, General Yi recognized U's 7-year-old son, Chang, as the new Goryeo king. Chang was a descendant of King U, and thus his accession secured the dynastic Goryeo line. But since the new king was but a boy, the conquering generals had essentially put themselves in the position of regents—with a close watch on Goryeo's politics.

Admittedly, the boy-king was not Yi Seong-gye's first choice, as Yi wished a more complete break with the era of U. He supported a different royal Wang relative to take the throne, one not descended from King U nor close to those old politics. But the allies of Jo Min-soo (the other general of the Wihwado excursion) supported King Chang's accession. This faction of Jo Min-soo was more closely connected to the old Gaegyeong elites (featuring those such as Yi Saek), who supported Chang as someone unlikely to cause trouble to their power since he was closely connected to many in the old Yi In-im faction of the *gwonmun sejok*. General Min-soo was in a strong position with these powerful capital allies and Yi Seong-gye saw little option but to agree to elevating Chang as the new king of Goryeo.⁶⁹ It would stabilize the moment.

In any case, Yi Seong-gye retained his hands on power. Soon after his accession, in late summer of 1388, the 7-year-old King Chang named General Yi Director of the Office of Personnel Appointments and Royal Seals, as well as supreme commander of the armies in multiple provinces.⁷⁰ Yi Seong-gye had triumphantly returned to Gaegyeong with his instantly legendary *Wihwado Hoegun* ("Return from Wihwado"). He had overthrown the notoriously erratic and licentious King U and had ushered a new King onto the throne of Goryeo. As for General Yi himself, his own stature and power continued to swell magnificently in the capital city. Grandfather Yi Chun's white dragon dream prophecy was proving true after all.