

Radicals on Fire



There was once a man who had a dream in which a Yellow Dragon living in the village pond appeared and told him that an enemy Blue Dragon from the West Sea was trying to take away the village pond where it had lived for hundreds of years. The Yellow Dragon asked the man to help him fight the dangerous Blue Dragon. When this man woke and later went to the village pond, he found the two dragons entangled in a fight, so he shot and killed the enemy Blue Dragon.

That night, the Yellow Dragon appeared in the man's dream and said that as a reward, the dragon would let the village use his pond water to turn nearby waste lands into fertile fields. In the days to come a large rainstorm made the pond overflow, and water from the dragon pond poured out, turning dry lands into green, fertile fields of rice, feeding all the people.¹



While government elites fought hand-to-hand combat over personnel and power, the broader struggles over policy and ideology were always there. Amid all the jockeying for political position and proper punishments, the Confucian *sadaebu* were not about to allow their dreams of a new world simply to evaporate in the murky retrenchment of the pre-revolution crowd. While old Goryeo elites conspired to cut the legs out from under Yi Seong-gye, some of the radicals stepped up with a drama show of their own. In September of 1390, amid the cacophony of constant factional struggle, the scholars took to the public square one night, built a mound of all the land records of Goryeo's wealthiest families, and set the whole

thing ablaze.² They were laying down a fiery marker demanding their radical land reform project.

At the heart of the scholars' radical reform project was Cho Chun's aforementioned land reform proposal—the test case for opening a new era with the rise of Yi Seong-gye. While Goryeo's farmers starved or were enslaved, Goryeo's land distribution had become exceptionally imbalanced and the ideologues of the Yi Seong-gye faction sought to rectify it. As Cho Chun said when posting his first appeal, immediately after the *Wihwado Hoegun*.

The success of our nation depends on addressing the agony and joy of the people...Poor people, who have no place to appeal, are scattered everywhere and dying in streams and pits. When people pay their grain for taxes, they borrow it from someone else, and the debt is not repayable even if they sell their wives or sell their children, and their cries are heard in Heaven.³

Cho Chun's land reform proposal promised to do away with all that by repossessing many land titles from the richest families, redistributing them more equitably, and substantially reducing the private taxation practices of the powerful *gwonmun sejok*. Cho Chun was a member of a splendid old family himself—the Pyongchang Cho, a clan of powerhouse aristocrats—but his Confucian studies had led him to seek a balanced path of equitable social relations rather than simply holding on to his old family wealth.⁴

To launch this grand reform project, a nation-wide land survey was launched in 1388, soon after Yi Seong-gye deposed King U. As the land survey was completed throughout 1389, about 500,000 arable plots of land were identified. Although the most radical reformers, like Jeong Do-jeon, wanted to distribute this land to the common people in small, equal plots, more realistic plans were pursued. So that the social foundations of Goryeo wouldn't be destroyed altogether, it was determined that most of the arable plots had to be

redistributed to existing local officials, military officers, and meritorious retainers to support their work and achievements. There were also about 170,000 plots reclaimed from *gwonmun sejok* families by the state, so that the state could collect taxes to pay public servants and soldiers, conduct public works and war repairs, finance ship and fortress projects, and distribute public welfare.⁵ A lesser amount of land was distributed to grieving widows, corvée laborers and small farmers.

Though this distribution wouldn't result in Jeong Do-jeon's perfect egalitarianism, even the most radical found it a huge improvement on the current situation. Jeong Do-jeon later described the goals of this land reform project, supported strongly by Yi Seong-gye.

[We] established court land, military provision land for state use, and office land for civil and military officials. Also, off-duty military men residing in the capital as guards for the royal court, widows remaining faithful to their deceased husbands, government workers in the local magistracies, postal station workers, and river ferry workers, as well as commoners and artisans performing public duties, have all been granted land. Although the distribution of land to the people may not have reached the standard set by the ancient sages, the new land law has restored equity and balance. Compared to the evil system of the former dynasty, the new land reform has brought infinite improvement.⁶

Of course, all of this was vehemently opposed by the powerful families who stood to lose substantial land rights with even these limited land reforms. The national land survey threatened to expose their corrupt wealth and outright criminality, and the economic foundations of their immense power seemed to be crumbling. The *gwonmun sejok* pushed back throughout the spring of 1389, arguing that the socio-economic foundations of Goryeo should not be discarded so easily. These were

influential, well respected old families, and their long court experience gave a persuasive sophistry to their claims.

In April of 1389, the wealthy Yi Saek (who had recently escaped responsibility for the Yoon I/Yi Cho Ming envoy affair) stood up against the changing times, dazzling people with an argument about how “the old law cannot be changed too rapidly.”⁷ The opponents proposed that instead of eliminating land titles, Goryeo should simply reduce taxation. Goryeo could eliminate multiple tax claims on a single plot of land, with a policy of “one rice paddy, one owner,” and most existing land titles could be preserved.

On *Dodang*'s council of mostly wealthy landowners, all the red-robed elites bobbed their heads in support of Yi Saek's idea. Only eight or nine of the 53 officials who discussed the matter ended up supporting Cho Chun's radical land redistribution plan—everyone else lined up to support the protection of existing land rights.⁸ Moreover, to protect their economic interests, the old elites pushed a plan to only allow the government to take half of their lands' tax revenues for the next three years, rather than all revenues.⁹ The King was disposed to agree with this overwhelming sentiment of his Privy Council. As King Gongyang backed away from Cho Chun's social revolution in the first half of 1389, the *gwonmun sejok* must have breathed a sigh of relief. Their land rights seemed well-nigh protected.

But the radicals had risked it all to support Yi Seong-gye's march back from Wihwado and weren't about to stop now. Dismayed at the course of *Dodang* politics, and surely upset at the constant anti-Yi conspiracies driving their hero to despair, several *sadaebu* broke into the hall of records in September of 1390. The radical Jeong Do-jeon was foremost among them. He gathered all the land records he could find, denouncing them as corrupt papers granting the *gwonmun sejok* families title to vast lands across Goryeo. He piled them into a huge mound in the public courtyard, and then set the whole thing ablaze.¹⁰ Constantly feeding more land records into the flames, the fire was said to burn for days in the Gaegyeong square. As *gwonmun sejok* families gathered and wept at the fire, Jeon Do-jeon shouted out that land reform was coming to Goryeo, like it

or not: the new day dawning with the *Wihwado Hoegun* could not be stopped!¹¹

As fire lit the sky, the old elites must have feared what was to come. Three preceding Goryeo kings had been murdered. The once-obscure soldier from the north had taken over the heights of military power from the wealthy old aristocrat Choe Yeong. The radical Jeong Do-jeon, with just middling family background, was challenging the aristocratic scion Jeong Mong-ju as voice of the *sadaebu*.¹² And now land records were burning in the public square. As Kang Jae-eun observed, this episode dealt “a crushing blow to the economic foundation of the pro-Yuan faction that had become great landowners through joint possession of land and slaves, and shook the very foundation of the Goryeo dynasty which relied on the economic support of the great landowners.”¹³

The flames certainly frightened King Gongyang. With the three previous kings having each been executed, the anxious monarch fretted about what was to come. Tensions and conspiracies racked the court. The end of days seemed upon Gaegyeong. Seeking any avenue of escape, King Gongyang even toyed with the idea of closing down Gaegyeong altogether and moving the entire capital south, to Hanyang (today’s Seoul).¹⁴ The good energy of Gaegyeong’s bygone days seemed to be entirely drained, so perhaps a new location with a new community of supporters would have better *ki** and could restore the magic of the Wang dynasty. As the land records burned in Gaegyeong, King Gongyang wept over his fate. On September 21, he packed up his things and moved the whole court to Hanyang for a trial run.

Yi Seong-gye was asked to follow, but he would not. Instead, he said that he would head to some hot springs for a time, as he was again feeling ill. Dismayed with the King’s odd retreat to Hanyang, Yi Seong-gye then proffered his complete retirement once again on November 1st, claiming he had lost all energy and was weary of all the slander and intrigue.¹⁵

* “*Ki*” means the “life energy” that adheres to auspicious places and runs through certain routes within the earth. It is a critical aspect of long-existing Korean philosophy and practice of geomantic *pungsu* (in Chinese, *feng shui*)

General Yi repeated what he had said so many times before: "Being sick and lying in bed, it is difficult for me to see you...I feel extremely sorry."¹⁶

Yi Seong-gye also told some of his closest and most radical supporters, like Jeong Do-jeon and Nam Eun, that it was time for him to step down. "With your support I have done my best to help the royal house, yet the slander against me never ceases. I am afraid that we may not be able to endure this. So I have decided to return to the [Northeast Region] to avoid potential disasters." General Yi ordered the members of his household to get ready to move.¹⁷

Jeong Do-jeon was aghast. He argued passionately that the General had to stay in Gaegyeong. The *Wihwado Hoegun* could not be taken back and Yi Seong-gye had to see the grand dream through.

The future of the country and people depends on you alone. How can you then make a decision so easily? I believe your decision to leave is no better than to stay in the royal court. If you select men of benevolence and establish rules and discipline by removing wicked people, the slander against you will automatically disappear. If you withdraw yourself to a remote corner of the country, on the other hand, the slander against you will spin out of control and bring calamity upon you.¹⁸

No matter how he wished to leave, Yi Seong-gye could not forsake the constant appeals of the scholars for his return to politics. The king also called General Yi back to court, reminding him that he was Supreme Chancellor and general of all the armies of Goryeo. So Yi Seong-gye remained in the capital after all. Perhaps King Gongyang hoped to keep General Yi close, as a bulwark against raging winds, but there was no denying the world was changing. All the property records of Gaegyeong had went up in flames and the radical *sadaebu*

preached of social reforms to come.* The King had fled to Hanyang for several months and even threatened to decamp there permanently. Yi Seong-gye's old Hamhung home was a retreating memory as his Gaegyeong position ossified. In a sad development, Yi Seong-gye's first wife, Lady Han from Hamhung, passed away during these days.

The world was changing, and on the sacred mountainsides, thousands of people began having strange dreams of where it all might end.

* Following the burning of the land records in the fall of 1390, a land reform act (the Gwajeon Act) passed in 1391. It took taxation rights away from many *gwonmun sejok* families and distributed them to up-and-coming officials of the new reformist faction. These new taxation rights were allocated as income support, based on whether one was a current public servant or not, rather than being held and passed down by old *gwonmun sejok* families, even many years after their retirement from public service. With taxation rights shifting from landed aristocrats to up-and-coming bureaucrats and scholars, the foundations of Goryeo's financial and economic system were being rebuilt. See So, S., "*Yeomalseoncho Jeonjegaehyukui Yeoksaseok Seonggyeoke Daehan Jaegeomto*" ["A Review of the Historical Characteristics of Land Reform in Late Goryeo and Early Joseon"].