

Base Blood and Counter-Revolution



Hong Gildong had many skills and a refined character. But he was base-born of a lowly servant, so he could never rise in society or government. Hong despaired and wished that he were born of “a true man” in this world. “Then I would go forth to become a general and rise up as a high minister. I would wear a moon-sized insignia of a commander on my waist and sit upon a high seat from which I would order a thousand men and ten thousand horses to conquer the east and subdue the west. In such a way I would do great service to the country and achieve glory. I would then be elevated to become the loftiest of men below the king. And as a high minister I would work for the country with utmost loyalty so that my name would become renowned for generations and my portrait memorialized in Girin House.”

But ministers are born only from a special blood, as Hong well knew. “I have been born into a situation in which I am barred from following my ambitions, and I cannot even address my father as Father and my older brother as Brother.” He wept like rain and fell into lonely grief.

— *The Story of Hong Gildong*¹



About the same time that Yi Seong-gye was at the Geumgangsan temple, dreaming of a new world, King Gongyang was spending his days in retreat at Hanyang, dreading his return to the turbulent capital. After a month in Hanyang to kick off 1391, the King headed back to Gaegyeong. He must have felt like he was heading back into the tiger’s cave, and he took a slow eight-day journey for the short trip. On his way, he attended a Buddhist temple (Haemsa), staying

up all night in incense-filled prayers with the Queen and crown prince. He was preparing to formally name the crown prince upon his return to Gaegyeong, solidifying his own power as the legitimate king of Goryeo.

Fearful that such developments signaled a shift in power away from Yi Seong-gye and towards the Goryeo throne, Jeong Do-jeon spoke up as soon as King Gongyang returned to Gaegyeong. He criticized the expense of Gongyang's journey to Hanyang and called once again for serious punishment of men like Yi Saek and Wu Hyeon-bo, who had conspired against Yi Seong-gye. In the spring and early summer of 1391, Jeong renewed complaints against many of the Goryeo loyalists and anti-Yi conspirators of the Yoon I/Yi Cho affair who had "escaped the jaws of death" and were now returning to government influence.² He specifically targeted Wu Hyeon-bo, arguing that he was involved in both the Kim Jeo and the Yi I/Yi Cho incidents and must be punished. Yi Seong-gye weighed in, supporting Jeong Do-jeon's charges. Under growing pressure, by the end of June, Wu Hyeon-bo was exiled to Cheorwan as punishment for a crime that had previously been forgiven after the Chongju flood. "I had better go back to a place where I can live comfortably," said Wu as he left.³

Jeong Do-jeon's *sadaebu* colleague, Jeong Mong-ju (pen name: Poeun) was exceedingly upset to have these old issues being brought up again—after all, Poeun was the one who led the way to release and forgive most of the conspirators of the Yoon I/Yi Cho incident the previous year. Poeun was a moderate, always looking to find a middle way to hold the elites of old Goryeo together with the reformers of Yi Seong-gye, but Jeong Do-jeon was the radical who had completely given up on Goryeo after his ten-year exile. While Poeun kept looking for ways to save Goryeo with moderate reforms, Jeong Do-jeon (pen name: Sambong) argued that such efforts were useless, akin to "pouring wild ginseng and deer blood into a person's mouth at the end of his life."⁴ Now, as Poeun continued to support even those who conspired against Yi Seong-gye, while Sambong petitioned for renewed rounds of punishments, the thirty-year friendship between the two scholars was fracturing. A great expanse was opening between

the scholarly titans of Goryeo; trying somehow to stand on a bridge in the middle became deadly dangerous.⁵

While Sambong and Poeun faced off, so did King Gongyang and Yi Seong-gye. Gongyang wanted to keep Yi Seong-gye in Gaegyeong but was worried over his loyalty. Yi Seong-gye dreamed sometimes of a better world to come, but he thought just as often of retirement to Hamhung.⁶ The summer of 1391 thus featured many private meetings between King Gongyang and Yi Seong-gye, with each reassuring the other of their intentions, often over long drinking sessions.⁷ In July of 1391, at one of their good-will drinking parties, King Gongyang once again begged General Yi to remain at his post and bestowed the General with a new horse and saddle, a ceremonial robe, a new hat, and the finest quality hat string featuring the jeweled beads so popular among Goryeo elite. General Yi was happy with the gifts and tried on the robe right then and there, pleasing the King.⁸

While the suspicious King and weary General slowly circled each other in palace drinking parties, the tigers outside bristled and grew ready to pounce. In the summer of 1391, Jeong Mong-ju felt that the Goryeo court was growing weary of Jeong Do-jeon's constant attacks on Goryeo elites and saw an opening for a counterattack. On the heels of Wu Hyeon-bo's exile, Jeong Mong-ju raised an appeal with the *Dodang*, in July of 1391. We can't keep revisiting these old cases and exposing people to new terror and punishment based on the mood of the day, Poeun argued. Instead, the King should preside over one *final* discussion of five sensitive incidents involving Yi Seong-gye. Sixty people commonly accused as being involved in these issues should be investigated and determined guilty or not-guilty, *once and for all*, and they should never be brought up for investigation again.⁹ Some of these sixty people had already been executed or had died in prison, but a final investigation would at least settle their record for posterity and would be helpful for their families. The five investigations were to determine, once and for all:

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- Those who had blocked accession of Gongyang as “the true” king of Goryeo;
- Those who joined in the Kim Jeo incident;
- Those who tried to overthrow Goryeo’s Wang dynasty altogether;
- Those who were involved in the conspiratorial envoy to Ming (the Yoon I/Yi Cho affair);
- Those who were involved in Buddhist conspiracies against the crown (e.g., Yi Seong-gye’s Maitreya ceremonies?).

The *Dodang* council supported this idea, and it was determined that the King would investigate and issue a final ruling on all these cases. This development was a direct response to Jeong Do-jeon’s constant rallying and renewed assaults against Goryeo’s old loyalists and revealed the deep and growing divide between the Poemun and Sambong factions, even among the Confucian *sadaebu*.¹⁰

During the investigations of these sixty people, it quickly became clear that most would be acquitted. Old conspiracies against Yi Seong-gye would be buried for good, and many of the Goryeo loyalist would return to government service. The genie of dynastic revolution would be back in the bottle, old opponents of Yi Seong-gye would be politically protected henceforth, and the dreams of the radical *sadaebu* would be nicely domesticated.

But Jeong Do-jeon loathed to let go of the genie. “Corrupt officials are the great vermin of the people’s heart,” he once wrote. “Rip up their roots and do not let them spread.”¹¹ Instead of accepting the final retrial of the sixty, therefore, Sambong continued to constantly denounce some of the most influential “fierce tigers”¹² of old Goryeo, including even his old mentor, Yi Saek of the Confucian Academy. Several times in the spring and summer of 1391, he sent requests to *Dodang* and the King, recounting lengthy allegations of treason by various notables and requesting the execution of both Wu Hyeon-bo and Yi Saek (former director of the Sungkyunkwan Confucian

Academy).¹³ Late in the summer of 1391, he raised yet another appeal charging that several court officials as being “the most flagrant of traitorous ministers,” and calling for exiles and executions.*¹⁴

It was all too much for the ministers of *Dodang*, many of whom were exactly the old, wealthy elite so often targeted by Sambong. Some of the ministers charged that General Yi Seong-gye was pushing Jeong Do-jeon to make all these charges and offered harsh words about the general’s questionable loyalty to the King. The general grew depressed and considered just returning home to the northeast, as harsh critiques against Jeong Do-jeon grew.¹⁵ One conservative minister (Kim Jin-yang) warned Jeong Mong-ju that “if you don’t pull out the roots of the grasses and eliminate Jeong Do-jeon’s words, the evil will grow again...the root of the evil will be eradicated only when Jeong Do-jeon and his associates are executed.”¹⁶

Accordingly, in September of 1391, just as Jeong Mong-ju was settling almost all of the sixty cases brought up for re-hearing (almost all of the accused were found not guilty and set free), he also brought up one more interesting case for consideration: the case of his old friend, Sambong.

It is interesting that Jeong Do-jeon keeps attacking the Wu Hyeon-bo family, Jeong Mong-ju observed. When we dig into the records, don’t we find that this was the very family who had long ago pointed out the low-born origins of Jeong Do-jeon? Is this why Jeong Do-jeon keeps attacking these loyal servants of Goryeo so unfairly and relentlessly? He has been

* Jeong Do-jeon’s castigations of “corrupt officials” could be quite severe. A typical critique, written in later years, was as follows. “They are grasping and collude together; they are jealous and dangerous. The poison of their avarice and brutality swells the winds of denunciation. They use litigation as the gate to wealth and jail as the bureau for riches. They are happy in the use of extraordinary punishments and seize beyond regular taxes. They consider compassion and approachability as appeasement and oppressive extraction and viciousness as putting things in order.” See Jeong Do-Jeong, “A Literary Mirror to Order the World (1395),” in Robinson, D., *Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age.*, p. 177.

“harboring a wicked heart on the inside while pretending loyalty on the outside,”¹⁷ the critics charged. This improper and vindictive behavior is to be expected, said *Jeong Mong-ju*. For Jeong Do-jeon is indeed descended of base blood. His maternal grandmother was an enslaved person, and he has tried to hide this fact from everyone. “His lineage is not clear,” concluded the posted accusations.¹⁸ “Jeong Do-jeon raised himself from humble status and took a high position, so he tried to remove the record and hide his humble roots, but he could not do it alone, so he made many people guilty of the crime by joining his deception.”¹⁹

The charges of low birth were dramatic and upended everything. Base blood was in the water, and censors and ministers alike circled to argue that Jeong Do-jeon’s constant accusations against Goryeo elites must have been driven by his low-born, jealous heart. He was hopelessly tainted to the core, born of a slave.²⁰ Jeong Do-jeon was imprisoned and ten days of accusations and impeachment by the sharks of *Dodang* went on. He should be executed for his deception, argued some. In the end, Jeong Do-jeon was once again simply exiled from Gaegyeong. In October, the radical scholar was once again fired from his government post, stripped of his rights as a meritorious retainer, and exiled far south to Naju. Sambong had been exiled there before. His two sons also lost their government posts.²¹

In the fall of 1391, Jeong Do-jeon was hauled out of Gaegyeong in the wooden cage of exiled criminals, even as the moderates and Goryeo loyalists slowly filtered back in. Almost all sixty of those retried for anti-Yi conspiracies were found not guilty; many returned to their government posts.²² Jeong Mong-ju was putting the final touches on proposed changes to the criminal code that would limit the ability of the Yi Seong-gye faction (or anyone) from bringing people up on old charges or accusing them multiple times.²³ A number of other radicals began losing their posts with the exile of Jeong Do-jeon, and a growing number of Goryeo loyalists began to return to government life.

It was a bitter time for Jeong Do-jeon. The world was in upheaval, his cause seemed to be slipping away, and he was once again banished from it all. “Everything is changing,” he

wrote in a personal reflection. "World history is changing, and the people keep moving. If anyone you meet asks about me, tell them I am too sick to recite poetry." He wrote several other sad poems of exile.

*When I look to the north, it gets further away.
When I look to the south, my steps get slower.
Already I have been alone.
How can I say farewell again?*

*The pear flower shines brightly.
The bird is playing in the sunshine.
I am sitting without thought as a recluse,
Looking at a single blade of grass,
Emerging alone in the garden.²⁴*

General Yi had dreamed of Maitreya in the promising spring of 1391, but with summer's end those dreams went into exile with Jeong Do-jeon. In mid-November 1391, a frustrated General Yi resigned from government once again. The counter-revolution was gaining steam.