

### What Shall it Be? This or That?



*In those days before becoming King, Yi Seong-gye made pilgrimages to all the great Sanshin (Mountain spirits) and requested their support. The White-Head mountain of the far north (Baekdu) offered support for the coming of Yi Seong-gye. So too did Namhae Yong-wang or the Dragon King of the South Sea. The Sanshin of Seoreoksan supported Yi Seong-gye, and so did the spirits of Namsan, Gwanaksan, and Bulguksan. All 12,000 peaks of Guemgansan celebrated Yi Seong-gye, for he carried the Mandate of Heaven. All the mountain spirits of Korea recognized and supported the coming King.*

*But not Jiri-san Sanshin (The Spirit-Queen of Mt. Jiri.) Mt Jiri was home of the earth mother of all creation, Mago Halmoni, who gave birth to all things. Also living at Mt. Jiri—or perhaps they were one—was the spirit of Queen Yuksuk, the mother of Taejo Wang Geon, founder of the Goryeo Dynasty. Alone among all the mountain spirits of Korea, Jirisan Sanshin would not bow down to the new king of Joseon. No matter how Yi Seong-gye entreated the mountain spirit, the mother of Goryeo would never take his side.*

*While all the other mountains celebrated Yi Seong-gye's Mandate of Heaven, the mother sanshin of Jirisan alone had a loyal spirit and remained forever banished from the new King's hall of heavenly supporters.<sup>1</sup>*



Responding to General Yi's mid-November resignation, Cho Chun and other supporters planned a big memorial in the spring of 1392 to honor the General and rally his popular support. Hearing of this effort, Jeong Mong-ju made plans of his own to get the General out of town and keep him on the

sidelines. It so happened that the Crown Prince, Wang Seok, was just then returning from an envoy visit to Ming and was nearing the northern border. In March of 1392, General Yi was ordered to leave Gaegyeong to travel north to meet the Crown Prince and escort him back to the capital. This trip would keep General Yi out of the capital city for a while, undermining the efforts of his allies to rally his support.

As Yi was travelling north, he spent some time hunting near the island of Byeonkran-do in Haeju, on the west coast. An accident occurred and the aged General fell off his horse, badly injuring himself. He ended up bedridden in a healing house on the island.

The *Koryosa* reports that when Jeong Mong-ju heard of the accident, he “showed signs of joy.”<sup>2</sup> Now was the moment! With Yi Seong-gye injured and out of action, Jeong Mong-ju issued an appeal in early April to torture and further punish Jeong Do-jeon and other supporters, in preparation for their inevitable denouement. Jeong Do-jeon was imprisoned in his place of exile.<sup>3</sup> While the great general lay bedridden, dozens of his supporters were put under military arrest or house detention. Supporters of these actions were many of those who had just returned from their own exile, following Jeong Mong-ju’s retrial of the sixty, including Jeong Do-jeon’s great enemy Wu Hyeon-bo. Though Yi Seong-gye issued a demand from his sickbed to release Jeong Do-jeon from jail, it was simply ignored.<sup>4</sup>

King Gongyang supported Jeong Mong-ju, and the shrewd scholar acted fast. Within a week of General Yi’s hunting accident, Cho Chun and Nam Eun were exiled and Jeong Do-jeon was recommended for execution. Before going further, a few weeks after Yi’s fall from the horse, Jeong Mong-ju decided to visit General Yi in Byeonkran-do and assess the real state of his health. It seems likely that worse may have been planned than a simple health check-up, for all of Yi Seong-gye’s top supporters were being arrested and slated for exile or execution, and now a capital detachment was rushing to the General’s sickbed. Yi Seong-gye was in a dangerous place.

At this time, Lady Kang visited with a shaman down in Gaegyeong and received a dire prophecy. It is as if your husband has “climbed to the top of a 100-foot-high pavilion

[and] suddenly lost his footing,” the shaman warned. “He is deadly danger.”<sup>5</sup> Lady Kang anxiously told Yi Bang-won (Yi Seong-gye’s ambitious son, from his first wife) of this prophecy and asked for help.

At the time, Yi Bang-won was isolated in a small hut, mourning the recent passing of his mother (Lady Han of Hamhung), but he sprang into action. Yi Bang-won rushed to his father’s side on the island, arriving shortly before Jeong Mong-ju had planned his own suspicious journey. Bang-won told his father of the desperate events in Gaegyeong and warned him of his life.<sup>6</sup>

For the longest time, the General just lay weary and quiet, but then he finally agreed to leave the island. In mid-April, General Yi Seong-gye was snuck off Byeonkran-do (perhaps hidden in a woman’s palanquin) and spirited secretly into his Gaegyeong house. The next day, the Ministry of Justice confirmed the coming execution of Jeong Do-jeon, Cho Chun and Yoon So-jong—the most important officials of Yi Seong-gye’s faction. But then like a lightning bolt came the shocking news that Yi Seong-gye was somehow back in the capital! Everyone froze. No executions moved forward. A fretting King Gongyang immediately sent a get-well gift to General Yi’s house. Jeong Mong-ju couldn’t eat for three days due to his immense anxiety.<sup>7</sup>

Yi Bang-won took the initiative and called a family meeting to decide what to do about Jeong Mong-ju’s conspiracy. “The people of the country know [my father] is loyal to the royal family, but now he is criticized by Jeong Mong-ju.” Bang-won complained. No matter how friendly Yi Seong-gye had been with Po Eun (Jeong Mong-ju) in the past, those days were over. The scholar should be arrested and punished, Yi Bang-won argued. “The situation is very dangerous!” Bang-won exclaimed to his father. “What are you going to do in the future?”

But Yi Seong-gye was equanimous. “There are thousands of people who live and die daily,” he reflected. “Since life and death depend on the will of Heaven, I have no choice but to accept what is given to me.”<sup>8</sup> Yi Seong-gye refused to consider any kind of attack on the great scholar, and instead berated Bang-won for leaving the house of mourning for his deceased

mother. Immensely frustrated, Yi Bang-won grew desperate, felt cornered. His family name and the fate of his father was on the brink of collapse, but no one would act to stop it. A dark will gathered in his mind.

But still he wavered. Perhaps if Poeun really understood how dangerous his own situation had become, perhaps then the scholar would finally agree to join the cause of Yi Seong-gye. The familiar legends about these days say that Yi Bang-won arranged to meet with Poeun over a meal and share a drink together. Before their meal, he offered Poeun a poem he had written, and wondered how the scholar would reply.\*

So the General's son and the loyal scholar met for drinks. There was much to toast for Poeun's long life of achievement. In 1360, he had passed the qualifying exams in literary and classical studies three times in a row. In 1362, he became the Minister of Censorship. In 1363, he fought beside Yi Seong-gye in the northern campaign. In 1366, he was a lecturer in the Confucian Academy (Sungkyunkwan). In 1372, he was a successful envoy to Ming and survived thirteen days of drifting in the ocean after a shipwreck. In 1376 he helped direct Sungkyunkwan. In 1377 he fought against the corrupt Prime Minister Yi In-im and ended up exiled. In 1380, he had fought with Yi Seong-gye against the pirates at Hwangsansan. Through the 1380s he taught and directed at Sungkyunkwan, and from

---

\* This dinner and poetic exchange between Yi Bang-won and Jeong Mong-ju is well-known and young Korean students to this day often are asked to read and memorize the poems. But there is a good chance the story of the poetic dinner is apocryphal. The historical record is mixed on that point and mention of the dinner and poetic exchange only appears in records quite some time after the event. For one argument that the poetic exchange and other circumstances of Jeong Mong-ju's death have not been remembered accurately, see Kim, I., ["A Study about the Truth and Myth of Jeong Mong-ju's Death"]. Other scholarship argues that events occurred much along the lines shared in this book. One scholar argues that the original poem was recited orally, so it is not surprising that the written version only shows up in later records. See, for example, Hong, S., "*Poeun Ueongmongjuui Yeongu*" ["A Study of Poeun Jeong Mong-ju's 'Danshimga'"].

1388 to 1391 he had helped advance the cause of Yi Seong-gye after the *Wihwado Hoegun*.

But now, the famous scholar had become dangerously divided from the great general and the cliff edge loomed. This warning is the message Yi Bang-won shared when he offered his bit of poetry to the top scholar of Goryeo. Yi Bang-won had often been called on by his father to lead poetry sessions at dinner parties like this, and so he offered his old friend Poen a poem for thought, now famously known as the *Hayeoga*.

*What difference does it make, this way or that?  
The tangled vines of Mansusan\* in profusion grow  
entwined  
We too could be like that, and live together a hundred  
years.<sup>9</sup>*

Yi Bang-won was urging Jeong Mong-ju to realize that even though the walls of his beloved dynasty might crumble and lay amid twisted vines on Mansusan (a mountain just beyond Gaegyeong's walls), there remained the ability to still live well by intertwining with the new world that was emerging. He was imploring Poen to abandon his loyalty to Goryeo once and for all, and wind together with the Yi family like twisted vines, so that they all could live in peace and prosperity going forward. Either that or face the consequences. In fact, the opening lines of his poem can be translated alternatively as the blunt question: "*What shall it be: this or that?*"

Poen then offered a poetic reply of his own—the famous "*Danshimga*" of an eternally loyal servant to the realm.

*Though I were to die and die again, still die a  
hundred times,  
And my bones all turn to dust, my soul remains  
or not,  
My single-minded heart toward my love shall  
never perish.<sup>10</sup>*

---

\* Mansusan is a mountain outside the west gate of Gaegyeong (Goryeo's capital), so Yi Bang-won is speaking of the twisting vines consuming the crumbling Goryeo dynasty.

Yi Bang-won had his answer. Jeong Mong-ju would never agree to work against the Goryeo dynasty, no matter if he died a hundred times. Moreover, the influential scholar was systematically eliminating all Yi Seong-gye's strongest allies. The Yi family was in a corner. But with General Yi back in the capital, Poeun must have felt a bit in a corner himself. As Jeong Do-jeon and other allies of Yi Seong-gye remained on death row, and Yi Bang-won was darkly threatening Jeong Mong-ju, the scholar decided to pay a visit to the General's house to assess exactly where he stood.

Meanwhile, Yi Bang-won had decided on his own that the time had come to act: Poeun had left him no choice. Before Poeun showed up at his father's house, Yi Bang-won reached out to close associates and explained the dire situation. Yi Seong-gye is a loyal servant to the royal family, Bang-won said. "All the people of the country know that he has merit, but he can't continue to be an innocent child. If he is slaughtered with his hands tied, they will surely turn his story upside down and give him a bad reputation."<sup>11</sup>

Bang-won turned to Yi Chiran, Seong-gye's adopted brother, and asked for help in assassinating Jeong Mong-ju. "How can I do something [your father] does not know about?" Yi Chiran asked, challenging Bang-won to remain loyal to his father's wishes to protect Poeun. Bang-won angrily recoiled, arguing that punishment of Jeong Mong-ju was the *real* loyalty to his father. "Mongju and his clique tried to destroy our family. How can we just sit and wait for disaster? I believed I could be more filial to you by [killing him]."<sup>12</sup> Yi Bang-won left Yi Chiran to his loyalty, gathered others to his side, and planned the deed. "I will do it myself," the son of Yi Seong-gye resolved.

When Poeun arrived at Yi Seong-gye's house one April evening in 1392, the General received him as always: "with dignity and virtue."<sup>13</sup> Everything was as it always had been, and Poeun must have been reassured with the General's warm welcome. Outside the house, however, Yi Bang-won's assassins gathered.

On the streets, the tigers lurked as Jeong Mong-ju made his way home on horseback. On the Sonjuk bridge, four assassins emerged from the shadows, gathered around the

scholar, and took out their weapons. Jeong Mong-ju rebuked them and flogged his horse to flee. But one of the assassins hit the horse's head and brought it to the ground. As the horse fell, Poeun jumped up, but it was hopeless. He was surrounded and savagely beaten to death with clubs and an iron ball on a chain.\*<sup>14</sup> Poeun's head was cut off and displayed in the street, together with a sign reading "*Made Empty Talk, Led Astray, Plotted Against the Government Ministers, and Caused Disorder to the State.*"<sup>15</sup>

There were four assassins of Jeong Mong-ju: Cho Yeong-kyu, Cho Yeong-moo, Ko Yeo-yeo, and Lee Bu-yi. Yi Bang-won had directed the whole affair. He was just 26 years old when cutting down Goryeo's 56-year-old philosopher of state.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Jeong Mong-ju's family was enslaved and all their property was confiscated by the state.<sup>17</sup>

General Yi Seong-gye was greatly dismayed upon learning of Jeong Mong-ju's assassination. "Everyone knew that our household's root was filial piety," Yi berated his son. "But you killed a minister at your own discretion, as you wished. People will think that I failed to recognize this act. Now that you have conducted such an undutiful act like this, I feel like drinking poison and dying."<sup>18</sup>

But Bang-won replied pragmatically. "With Jeong Mong-ju and his followers plotting against us, was I supposed to just sit and wait for disaster to befall us? My action was motivated by my filial concern. We must, in any event, call our loyal troops and have them make ready for any possible disturbance." Ever careful, Seong-gye agreed to contact his troops now that the deed was done. He also had his allied commander Hwang Hui-seok go to the king to impeach Jeong Mong-ju as a plotter and to demand the release of Cho Chun, Nam Eun and Jeong Do-jeon.<sup>19</sup>

Though Yi Bang-won's actions may have preserved Yi Seong-gye in power and saved the General's supporters, his father would never fully forgive the brutal act. He only saw that a much-beloved Goryeo scholar had been murdered, thus

---

\* The popular scholar's red heart bled so much on Sonjuk Bridge that to this day when it rains, legends say the bridge becomes dark red with stains where his blood fell.

tarnishing the reputation of the family Yi. Simmering anger and regret over the incident likely played a role in General Yi requesting resignation from government several times in the coming weeks, though King Gongyang turned him down.<sup>20</sup> The whole assassination affair was a serious episode, deeply alienating Yi Seong-gye from his fiery son.

Angry as General Yi was, there was no denying the effectiveness of Bang-won's actions. The half-century-old Goryeo Dynasty symbolically ended with Jeong Mong-ju's death on the bridge, for the moderate faction of Goryeo supporters never recovered. Jeong Mong-ju's two sons were killed, his family was thrown down, and all their wealth confiscated. About thirty allies of the Jeong Mong-ju faction were exiled. Goryeo moderates were in panicked disarray and could do nothing as Yi Seong-gye's allies began taking over core government positions in the weeks after this assassination. Yi Chiran was given a high military position. By the end of April, Yi Seong-gye was back at the forefront of Goryeo government and had taken a position as Chief Chancellor of *Dodang*. The radicals were brought back from exile. Rescued from the edge of the executioner's blade, Jeong Do-jeon entered Gaegyeong again on June 10<sup>th</sup>.

Though the radical Jeong Do-jeon had won his battle with the moderate Jeong Mong-ju, the people always remembered the blood-red heart and loyalty of Poeun: "The Last Man of Goryeo." Even the Yi family Hagiography (*Songs of the Dragons*) admitted how "they saw his red heart from the beginning, and in the end his was still a red heart; so who would not remember that?"<sup>21</sup> But Sambong, not Poeun, was the scholar who would build the new world in the end—the undeviating gardener who cleared away the deadwood of history. "If you want to plant a new tree, you have to cut away all the thorns," Sambong wrote. "When you eliminate the thorns, that's when the beautiful orchard flowers can bloom."<sup>22</sup>