

Standing Before the Phoenix Throne



“Thus it is that when Tian (Heaven) means to place a great burden of responsibility upon a man, it always first steeps the aspirations of his heart in bitterness and labors his muscle and bone. Starving his frame and flesh, depleting his person, obstructing his every plan: these are means to motivate his heart, strengthen his endurance, and expand what he is capable of doing. Only after persisting in error can a man correct himself; only after his mind is pressed and his thoughts thwarted can he create a new way; only when his face is flushed with expression and sound busts from his mouth is he understood. When within a state there are neither families that set standards nor gentleman who offer admonishments, and abroad there are no enemies and external threats, that state will generally perish. Knowing this one realizes that we thrive in adversity and perish from comfort and pleasure.”

— Mencius¹



When Jeong Mong-ju fell on Sojuk Bridge, Goryeo turned upside down. Anti-Yi conspirators were exiled, executed, or went underground, while the Yi Seong-gye faction rose to dominate government. Within a month of *Jeong Mong-ju's* death, on June 9th, Wu Hyeon-bo's entire family was purged. Wu Hyeon-bo, his five sons, seven relatives and thirteen supportive officials were all exiled. Yi Seong-gye accused them of working together to plot his demise, and he personally had them banished, without even talking to the King. These people “have committed many crimes and received excessively generous pardons,” in the past, General Yi complained, “Therefore, I dare to do things first and talk about them later.”² Even as the counter-revolutionary faction was banished, King Gong-

yang angrily summoned radicals like Jeong Do-jeon and Nam Eun to his chambers to explain Yi Seong-gye's impertinence.

Five days later, on June 15th, Yi Bang-won offered his own baleful counterreply to the King's anger. He gathered 52 government officials, military commanders, and Confucian scholars in the family gardens to discuss the future of Goryeo and the crown.³ Other supporters of the Yi Seong-gye faction offered formal appeals to the King, charging that he was too often ignoring justice to help his rich supporters, and complaining that "His Highness has disappointed the hearts of many people by bending the law."⁴ Jeong Do-jeon was giddy with such developments, praising how the rich and powerful Yi Seong-gye had given himself over to the cause of a better world. The elevation of Confucian *sadaebu*, land reform, punishment of corrupt officials, and all the other dreams of a new world suddenly seemed within reach. Jeong Do-jeon's long-awaited revolution seemed nigh at hand.

In late June, the beleaguered King Gongyang sent an envoy to Ming, desperately pleading for Ming support in finally investing him as legitimate King of Goryeo. The Ming court had delayed such a move for three years. Now it was too late: Gongyang's gambit would be the last envoy Goryeo ever sent to Ming.

Indeed, what was left for King Gongyang? State coffers were dry, all the best land was held by corrupt elites, the people were abandoning him, and his allies were executed, exiled, or in hiding. "There are three treasures of the King: land, people and politics" wrote Jeong Do-jeon. "But if the land and the people are gone, what will you do politics about?"⁵ On July 5th, long before the Ming envoy could complete its journey, the isolated King Gongyang tried to buy time. He summoned the Royal Secretariat (staffed by Yi Bang-won) and the court's Master Calligrapher (Jo Yong-gi). He ordered these officials to help him write up a proposed pact with Yi Seong-gye, stating that the two leaders would swear to fully support the other and that neither King nor general would ever rise in conspiracy against the other again. "How can I ever forget your virtues?" King Gongyang wrote in the proposed pact, which he had printed up and posted about the capital.⁶

But General Yi didn't think much of this pact and never did sign it. "What shall I say?" Yi disdainfully asked. "He had no choice but to offer this."⁷ The court historians of the *Taejo Sillok* shared this assessment: "The king failed to repay the chancellor [Taejo] for enthroning him as king; not only that, he even tried to harm the chancellor. He has lost the Mandate of Heaven and the hearts of the people. The pact he made, which sounds pathetic and lame, has become useless."⁸

An anxious King Gongyang then visited Yi Seong-gye in person on July 12, again begging for the mutual commitment pact. King Gongyang offered to voluntarily abdicate, as long as he could transfer the throne to another member of the Wang line and keep the Goryeo Dynasty alive. Yi Seong-gye refused this offer.

On that same day, several of Yi Seong-gye's strongest supporters met with the Queen Dowager (the executed King Gongmin's mother). They lay out their collapsing faith in the current King, Gongyang.

*The present king is benighted. He has lost the way of a monarch, and the hearts and minds of the people have already left him. He is unable either to preside over the Altars of Earth and Grain or to rule living souls. Hence, we request that he be deposed.*⁹

Seeing the writing on the wall, the Queen Dowager could do nothing but agree. The gathering storm of officials then paid their visit to King Gongyang. Upon seeing that tides had turned in favor of his deposition, the King wept and prostrated himself, complaining that he never wanted to be king in the first place. Bemoaning his inadequacies, Gongyang abdicated his crown and departed for Wonju—about 280 li (140 kilometers) east of Seoul. He was soon followed by the Queen and crown prince. That very day, two of Gongyang's sons-in-law were beheaded outside the city gates, while his father-in-law was exiled.¹⁰ Goryeo's 34th and final king was now banished from the palace. Thereupon, the gathered officials slowly carried the abandoned royal seal to the door of the Queen Dowager, where they delivered it unto her.

THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

The final days of Goryeo were at hand. A few days after the abdicated King retreated to Wonju, on the 16th day of the seventh lunar month, a grand procession of ranking officials and scholars gathered to solemnly convey the royal seal to Yi Seong-gye's private house. Villagers filled the roads to the watch the seal pass by and wonder on what was to come. At his house, General Yi was sitting down to a simple dinner of rice and water, with his Consort Kang and many wives of his kinsmen. These women became alarmed at the coming of the procession and scattered through the house.

Yi Seong-gye closed the gate against the procession and would not allow them to enter. The procession remained at the gate all day, imploring the General to open the doors, but to no avail. The *Taejo Sillok* records what happened next.

Toward evening, Pae Keungnyeom and others pushed open the gate and entered the inner yard. As they placed a royal seal on the floor of the large hall, Taejo became alarmed and immediately lost his composure. He held onto Yi Cheonu and barely managed to walk out the door of his sleeping chamber. The hundred officials assembled in rows and bowed to him. They beat drums and shouted, "Long live the king!"¹¹

Yi Seong-gye was agitated and denied that he could accept such a thing. The officials disagreed and vigorously denounced the corruption and decay that the Goryeo dynasty had fallen into. They recalled the vicious tyranny of King U and how he had killed so many innocent people. They praised Yi for avoiding war with the Ming dynasty when he turned his troops around on Wihwa island. "This is how we call you to be king. Military matters are extremely complicated and important, so we can't wait another day. Take the throne and live up to the expectations of God and men!"

"But the king must do a thousand things," Yi Seong-gye exclaimed. "How dare I do this when I am a man of little virtue?"¹²

When he tried to leave the assembled crowd, the ministers surrounded Yi and again implored him to march to the royal hall and ascend the throne. "The august son demurred three times," proclaims *Songs of the Dragons*,¹³ but finally, the weary General acceded. "How could I have imagined that I would see the events of this day?" Yi wondered. "Should I have been in good health, I could have run away on horseback. However, just now, I suffer from ailing hands and feet to such a degree that I am unable to move my body freely. I want you to assist me, all working together to help me overcome my deficiencies in virtue and ability."¹⁴

It was three months after the murder of Jeong Mong-ju. On July 17, 1392, Yi Seong-gye proceeded to the royal throne hall, where all the high officials stood costumed in their ranks to greet him at the palace gate. Yi Seong-gye dismounted his horse, walked into Gaegyeong's Sachangung palace, and prepared to take the throne. However, instead of rising to sit upon the throne on high, as expected of any new King, an uneasy Yi "received the felicitations of his ministers while standing in front of the pillars." Though now king, Yi Seong-gye was not yet ready to sit on the throne.* King Yi mentioned his recent injuries from falling from the horse and begged all the ministers to help him in governing.¹⁵

The 474-year-old Goryeo dynasty had come an end. Reflecting on the final King's abdication, The *Koryosa* records the melancholic mood of the times.

When political affairs became disorderly, the hearts of the people naturally abandoned [the Goryeo dynasty], and the mandate of heaven naturally disappeared, causing the 500-year-old royal shrine and shrine of the gods to suddenly perish without receiving the ancestral rites. It is sad.¹⁶

* King Taejo would not actually climb to sit upon the throne for three weeks after becoming the king. He finally sat upon the throne on August 11th, after a great deal of bowing and prostrating supplications by his ministers. *Taejo Sillok*, 1:1 (1392.8.11).

THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

Melancholic or not, Goryeo had passed, and a new King was now at least *standing* before the throne. King Yi—who would later be named King Taejo, the Grand Progenitor of a new dynasty*—ordered his ministers to carry out what tasks they had and returned to his own home for the evening. In a thousand years of Korean history, from 918 to 1910, a change in dynastic lines only happened a single time—that moment when General Yi Seong-gye stood before the Phoenix throne, ended the Goryeo royal line, and became King Taejo of the Joseon dynasty to come.

The next day, after a long and debilitating drought, the rains came.¹⁷

* The title “Taejo” (“Grand Progenitor”) was bestowed upon Yi Seong-gye posthumously. We will refer to Yi Seong-gye as King Taejo henceforth in this book.