

The Crown Prince of Joseon



Back when tigers used to smoke, the god-man Dangun came down to earth beneath a birch tree, and he became crowned king. Dangun set up his capital at Pyongyang and named his land Joseon—the first kingdom of Korea. He ruled Joseon for 1,500 years, before returning to Mt. Baekdu where he became a Mountain God. Many Korean kingdoms rose and fell since those days: Goguryeo, Silla, Baekche, Balhae, Goryeo. Dangun's kingdom of Joseon became ancient and was called Gojoseon, meaning "Old Joseon."¹



With a new king at least standing by the Phoenix throne, the poets and prophets spread the word. At least that's how the myth-makers of the *Taejo Sillok* record it. On the day King Taejo ascended to the throne, an old man was said to have arrived with an ancient scroll, once hidden on Mt. Jirisan. "The shepherd will come down on a pig and correct the Samhan River,"* the prophecy read.² Hidden books were brought out of the Astronomical and Meteorological Observatory and shown to the world. One ancient text predicted that in these days a new start, or "morning freshness," would come to Korea. A more recent book predicted that "the Wang clan is finished, while the Yi clan rises."³ Jeong Do-jeon authored many poems and songs around this time. One was called "Dreaming of a Golden Ruler," which told the tale of how Yi Seong-gye had once in a dream received a golden ruler from a divine being.

* As a once-obscure man from the north, Yi Seong-gye was sometimes thought of as a humble shepherd rising to a high place; 1392 was the Chinese Year of the Pig. The "Samhan River" refers to the ancient Three Kingdoms Period of Korea, which culminated in the development of the Goguryeo, Silla, and Baekche kingdoms ruling the peninsula.

One was called “Receiving the Precious Secret Scrolls,” and another was titled “Song of Driving out Nahachu.” One poem simply praised the new King’s wisdom, being titled “Opening Channels of Communication for Good Advice.”⁴ You are like the rising sun, said the scholar Jeong Do-jeon to the new King Taejo. “Your brilliance shines broadly and dispels the darkness, and the myriad things are illuminated. Such is the purity and brilliance when a sovereign begins his rule. The multitude of evildoers were foiled, and the myriad laws are all renewed.”⁵

Censorate officials noted how Yi Seong-gye had been humble and never sought the crown, but that “the thousand people” had gathered under his banner nonetheless and so the crown was won due to the Mandate of Heaven. “How many times did you ask for permission to resign as chancellor and retire to your home for rest after redistributing all your houses and lands to your sons and sons-in-law?” the Censors asked.⁶ They commended how when Yi Seong-gye finally did agree to take the throne, “the markets were not closed, and soldiers did not have their weapons stained with blood, and instead the court was bright, cleared of all its anomalies, and the people were delighted.”⁷

Some of the old bluebloods didn’t quite agree with such praise and were heard complaining to their wives and concubines about Yi Seong-gye’s lowborn, northern background. The new King simply laughed, saying that one’s *ability*, not background, determined the Mandate of Heaven. “The current Emperor of the Ming used to be an ordinary person but has gained the empire. Why should I bother myself by the remarks of such people concerning my background?”⁸ A notice of Taejo’s ascent was quickly sent to Ming, criticizing King Gongyang’s hapless rule. The notice also characterizing Gongyang’s son (the Crown Prince Wang Seok) as “so foolish and ignorant that he led a dissolute life by drinking and womanizing. Furthermore, he tried to harm honest people by gathering petty people all about him.”⁹

The new officials of King Taejo’s Censorate advised that many allies of the former King Gongyang needed to be denounced, tortured, exiled, or perhaps even executed. By the end of Taejo’s first weeks on the throne, 56 supporters of

Gongyang or Taejo critics had been arrested and punished for conspiracy. Most were ordered to endure 100 floggings and then go into exile, but the floggings were so severe that eight people died while being beaten.¹⁰

Several old opponents who had escaped punishment for the Yoon Yi/I Cho incident (i.e., lobbying Ming to invade Goryeo so as to throw down Yi Seong-gye) were hunted down for retribution. For example, a minister named Sungjin had been appointed Commissioner of the Security Council in 1392, but after King Taejo's accession he was exiled to Naju and then beaten with a heavy paddle until he died. Similarly, Yi Saek's son (Chongbak) had been imprisoned for the Yoon Yi/I Cho incident but was later released after the flood in Chongju. He was now rearrested, sent into exile by King Taejo, and then hunted down and strangled to death.¹¹

As for his supporters, King Taejo now elevated many of them to "Meritorious Retainer" status and awarded them with land, title, treasure, and enslaved servants.¹² On September 16, 1392, 52 founding contributors to the new regime were recognized. Jeong Do-jeon was the very first name on the list, a first-rank Meritorious Retainer.¹³ Being on the Meritorious Retainer list came with substantial reward, as King Taejo sought to build his political base with dependable supporters. Some retainers were granted fiefs of hundreds of households, or "tax villages" from which the retainer could keep all the tax revenues. Hundreds of *kyols* of land and dozens of enslaved servants were granted to first-class retainers like Jeong Do-jeon or Cho Chun.¹⁴ Enfeoffment titles were granted to all retainers, as was immunity to certain prosecutions. All these benefits were shared with close family members (parents, spouses, and children) and could be passed down for generations.¹⁵

These merit subjects were an important part of King Taejo's political base and represented newly dominant forces in Korean politics. The anti-Ming faction that had once been so closely aligned with the Yuan was now displaced in favor of those wishing to find friendship and accommodation with the Ming dynasty. Confucian scholars and ambitious social reformers were becoming an important force, while old *gwonmun sejok* families were on their heels. King Taejo's

fellow military commanders and other warriors from the northeast were now important government officials and dominant military leaders, balancing out the long dominance of southern Korean elites.¹⁶

Many of these new “meritorious retainers” were previously without great wealth or notoriety, and several had been on the margins of Goryeo’s political life. Twenty-three didn’t have a clear birth year (a sign of lower-status birth), twenty could not account for a meritorious ancestor, seventeen had Chinese surnames, some were common farmers, and three were recently naturalized immigrants.¹⁷ All of them were now the foundations of a new nation. At a special banquet held in their honor in the Royal Council Hall, King Taejo conferred on these merit subjects a permanent state stipend. He also gave them belts decorated with gold and silver, together with fabric for making the required robes of court officials. For his two new chancellors, the King offered court hats with strings of jade beads.¹⁸ It was a happy time, and some of the retainers became a bit giddy and indiscrete during the feast, which featured plentiful wine and dancing *kisaeng* (courtesans). One official caught sight of Seol-mae, one of the deposed King Gongyang’s favorite *kisaeng*, and dangerously remarked that “Seol-mae is going to have breakfast in the same house, but with a new man.”¹⁹

Ten days after being so honored, on September 28, 1392, the 52 meritorious retainers gathered for another grand banquet. Their children, brothers, and sons-in-law all joined as well. At this banquet, the retainers created a “mutual assistance association for loyalty and filial piety,” and swore a sacred oath to each other and to the new King.

[We] dare to make an announcement manifestly to Heaven and Earth and all the spirits...We respectfully believe that Our Majesty responded to the will of Heaven and followed the hearts of the people until he received the Mandate of Heaven, and we subjects cooperated in solidarity and finally achieved a great goal together...

However, men of antiquity warned that there are many who start well but few who finish well. All of us who have worked together must serve the king with sincerity and associate with one another with trust.

We should neither harm one another for wealth and honor, nor avoid one another for self-interests, nor act upon listening to slander, nor become suspicious because of trivial mistakes in words and facial expressions, nor pretend to be pleased while hating behind the back, nor feign to be in harmony while secretly alienating the other. When one of us makes a mistake, we should correct it. When we have doubts, we should ask. If we are sick, we should help each other. If we have a problem, we should save each other. We will keep this pledge for generations, down to our descendants. If it happens that we break this pledge, the gods will punish us.²⁰

It was an auspicious start to the new regime, but there was something odd. Among all the meritorious retainers swearing mutual loyalty there were none of the grown sons of King Taejo. The morally scrupulous new King had refused to name any of his own sons as meritorious subjects with special rights, even excluding the three sons who had stood closest to him during his rise and fought beside him in many life-and-death battles (Yi Bang-gwa, Yi Bang-gan, and Yi Bang-won). Some of Taejo's top advisors worried that this was not an equitable arrangement and didn't align with the new royal status of these sons who had fought hard to achieve the new world. "We urge you to bestow more lands upon them," they said to the King.²¹

But Taejo didn't want to give more rewards to his children. He remembered his own hard days up north, where he grew up out of public view, and thought his sons could do the same. "They will not suffer hunger and cold" because they

already hold title to some lands, King Taejo said. “If I give them extra lands, people will certainly say that I give my sons preferential treatment.” Furthermore, state lands were limited and Taejo didn’t want to give them out recklessly. When advisors kept pressing to give the princes more lands, the king grew nostalgic about his own harsh youth. He quietly remembered how “In olden days when I was a subject, I was also bestowed with lands. The lands were mostly barren and useless, but I did not mind.” Taejo was upset that now his sons expected more and better rewards than he once had, but in the end the King gave in and awarded greater land titles to his now royal children.²²

There was one other troubling family matter. In August of 1392, at the same time that King Taejo left his grown sons of Lady Han off the Meritorious Retainer list, he named the new crown prince. The decision was a shock to everyone.

Lady Kang became General Yi’s second wife in 1376. The General was 41 years old and his new wife just 20. They would have three children together—two sons and a daughter. Though General Yi was deeply devoted to his second wife, tradition dictated that the children of his first wife (Lady Han, who he had married twenty years ago) would always have priority over his three later children. Moreover, Yi met and married his second wife many years after the first.²³ This meant that all the sons of his first wife were much older than those of Lady Kang, and as such were the expected heirs to the Phoenix throne of Joseon. Moreover, the two sons of Lady Kang were just 10 and 11 years old when Yi Seong-gye took the throne of Joseon, while the older sons of Yi Seong-gye had fought beside him during all his struggles against the failing Goryeo dynasty. Surely it would be one of the older Yi boys who would inherit the regal mantle once their father moved on.

Immediately upon ascending to the throne, Yi Seong-gye turned to the issue of naming a crown prince.²⁴ He did not want to die unexpectedly without leaving a clear heir to the throne and sought to end speculation and politics around this sensitive issue. Choosing the oldest son as crown prince would adhere to custom in the Goryeo dynasty—as well as match Confucian expectations that first sons had special obligations

to carry on their ancestral line. But this general custom was not a hard rule and had been violated many times by previous monarchs of Goryeo and by the Yuan dynasty in China as well. Moreover, these were not normal times but were turbulent moments of a new dynasty, so rules were fluid.

When the King called in advisors to help him on this issue, they all agreed that although the usual rule was to appoint the oldest son as royal successor, the natural challenges associated with dynastic change meant that the king should select his most meritorious son as successor, rather than just look at age. "When the world is at peace, the first born should be chosen. When the world is violent and confused, the man with the most merit should be chosen. So think carefully three times."²⁵

The King thought carefully. Three of the six sons of his first wife, Lady Han, were not serious considerations as crown prince. The eldest, Bang-woo, remained loyal to Goryeo and had become a dissolute alcoholic. As his father-in-law was King Taejo's old enemy Yi In-im, Yi Bang-woo fell into despair as Yi Seong-gye grew ever more disloyal to Goryeo. "I knew my place early and hid my life. I wanted to bury my traces," Yi Bang-woo wrote. He surrounded himself with bowls of liquor. "He drank a lot every day...He worked hard, drank soju, and fell asleep."²⁶ The simple-minded third son (Yi Bang-ui) mostly enjoyed light-hearted conversation over good food and drinks and didn't like talking about current affairs and politics at all.²⁷ The sixth son died young. That left three princes of Lady Han: Yi's second, fourth, and fifth sons (Bang-gwa, Bang-gan, and Bang-won). All three princes were deeply involved in their father's rise to power, with service in military roles and involvement in many court plots and imbrolios.²⁸

The most ambitious of all was Yi's fifth son by Lady Han—Yi Bang-won. He was a skilled warrior and a talented scholar, having passed rigorous civil service exams in 1382 and 1383.²⁹ "It is you who will accomplish my will!" His father once exclaimed long ago in Hamhung, when Yi Bang-won received news of high marks on the Civil Service Exam and promotion into government service. Bang-won had deep political experience and resembled his father in courage and ambition, having raised his own private army and he earned praise for

leading soldiers in battles at his father's side. He would be a natural choice to be named crown prince.

There was also the option of Yi Bang-gwa, King Taejo's elder son of Lady Han, and also distinguished in military service. Choosing the oldest as crown prince had the additional benefit of adhering to established custom. The middle son was the least interested in politics and showed no special ambition for the throne, so he seemed out of the running. But surely it would be either Yi Bang-gwa, the elder, or Yi Bang-won, the most achieved and ambitious.

While discussing these crown prince candidates with his advisors, there Taejong Sillok reports an occasion where King Taejo's second wife, Lady Kang, burst into tears. She had been eavesdropping in the room next door. In tears, Kang cried out and begged her husband to appoint one of her own young boys as Crown Prince.³⁰ King Taejo adored Lady Kang, all the more since his first wife had died a few years earlier, and he ultimately agreed to her wishes, which had the additional benefit of naming a crown prince who was not tainted by involvement in the violence of Yi Seong-gye's coup d'état, as his older sons were.

He ordered Cho Chun to write down the name of Yi Bang-beon, his oldest son by Lady Kang to be named crown prince. But Bang-beon was known to be emotional and had a fierce temper. Moreover, Bang-beon had recently married the deposed King Gongyang's niece, so he had family ties to the old dynasty. Cho Chun could not imagine such a crown prince and he refused to write down this name. He just bowed before the King, prostrated upon the floor, and would not touch his calligrapher's brush. Thinking it over, King Taejo agreed, and decided instead to name ten-year old Bang-seok as Crown Prince, the second son of Lady King. Cho Chun picked up his brush.³¹

Just one month after taking over the throne, King Taejo announced his shocking decision. His youngest son of all—the ten-year-old Prince Bang-seok—would be crown prince. The shock in the court was palpable, and the three stunned sons of Lady Han were immediately sent on dispersed missions far away from the capital so they might blow off steam.³² In

Gaegyeong, all the high court ladies organized a great feast for Lady Kang in celebration.³³

It was a completely unexpected development, and scholars continue to debate what could have motivated such a surprising decision. Perhaps the King simply loved his second wife so deeply that he felt moved to appoint one of her children as the crown prince. There was also the fact that King Taejo was highly suspicious of the headstrong ambition of Yi Bang-won and had been somewhat alienated from this son since Bang-won orchestrated the murder of scholar *Jeong Mong-ju*. There was also the influence of Jeong Do-jeon, who was close to King Taejo and who became a personal tutor to the newly named young crown prince. Perhaps Jeong Do-jeon believed this young prince was the most removed from the tainting political struggles of Taejo's coup d'état and would have the most public legitimacy in the end. Moreover, the prince's youth meant he might be most malleable and best able to be properly educated by sage Confucian scholars.

Whatever the reason, animosity now simmered between the sons of Lady Han and the sons of Lady Kang (which now included the young crown prince). But there was little that the elder princes could do while their father remained healthy and Lady Kang served as queen. Their own mother, Lady Han, had died years previously. The Han princes waited and stewed.³⁴

In other matters, the year ended beautifully for the family Yi. On November 22, 1392, a message arrived from the Ming Emperor observing that the rise of King Taejo seemed to be the Mandate of Heaven. "The situation is not different from Wang's when he took over [Goryeo] a long time ago," the Emperor wrote. "It is impossible unless the Lord on High willed it that way. The officials and the people of Korea have already begun to follow Yi and are doing fine without having the disasters of war and this is the will of the Emperor Above." In the palace hall, all the officials in their silk robes bowed down and congratulated King Taejo on this fine missive from Ming.³⁵

The final entry in the *Taejo Sillok* for the year 1392 tells of a grand year-end celebration. All the Dynasty-founding Merit Subjects gathered and held a banquet. "One after another, they wished the King a long life, raising their drinking cups. They

enjoyed themselves to their hearts' content and went home." That same day, the Japanese kingdom of Ryuku sent a congratulatory letter to King Taejo, offered tributary gifts, and returned several Korean captives to their homes.³⁶

The very next day, the first day of 1393, opened the same way. King Taejo stood facing the direction of the Chinese Emperor and led all the officials in a New Year's congratulatory ceremony. For the first time in the new era, everyone dressed in beautiful robes made in China. Gifts were presented to King Taejo. The *Dodang* council gave a nice memorial to the king's virtues. All the provincial officers presented letters of felicitation and gifted local products. One provincial officer gave a painting depicting various kings throughout history as they studied government affairs. The Governor of Gyoju-Gangneung Province gave a painting of a Chinese General admonishing his King for not studying Confucian texts enough. One officer presented a live tiger.

Then everyone sat down to a fine banquet. Left Chancellor Cho Chun raised his chalice and offered a toast to the king: "On the morning of New Year's Day, with a heart filled with joy, we wish Your Majesty to live a Thousand Years!"

"*Cheonse!*"* All the officials called out. "Long Live the King!"

Everyone drank their wine, prostrated themselves before the king, and sat down to eat. It was a fine banquet, followed by a late-night display of fireworks. The King then pardoned thirty people who had resisted his rise to power, including Wu Hyeon-bo and Yi Saek, allowing them to live wherever they chose.³⁷

There was other good news early in 1393. In February, an envoy arrived from Ming agreeing with King Taejo's proposal to abandon the title of "Goryeo" and to rename the Korean nation. Two weeks after King Gongyang was dethroned, Yi

* "*Cheonse*" means "one thousand years" in Korean, and is a phrase used to wish someone a long and successful life. Throughout the Joseon dynasty founded by King Taejo, this phrase was often used to wish Kings a long life, rather than the similar "*manse*" ("ten thousand years!") cheer, out of deference to the Ming Emperor who had special entitlement to the *manse* cheer.

Seong-gye had said the Goryeo name would be preserved, but he quickly changed his mind on that point. In late 1392, he sent an envoy to Ming led by the Jeong Do-jeon, who Taejo had named the Supervisor of Personnel Appointments and Royal Seals and also elevated to a member of *Dodang*.³⁸ Jeong Do-jeon's envoy offered 60 horses in tribute and requested Ming advice about a proposed name change for Goryeo.³⁹

Taejo proposed two names to the Hongwu Emperor: Hwaryeong or Joseon. "Hwaryeong" referred to the hometown area of Yi Seong-gye, while "Joseon" harkened back to the ancient Korean kingdom also named "Joseon" (now called Gojoseon, or "Old Joseon"), once centered in (later named) Manchuria and the far northern areas of the peninsula. It was welcome news that Ming agreed with the dynastic name change, finding "Joseon" an especially appropriate name. "The name Joseon is beautiful and its history is old," said the Ming's letter of approval. "The nation will prosper in generations to come if this name is taken as the foundation and a model"⁴⁰

For his part, Jeong Do-jeon agreed. This name hearkened back to the old Korean kingdom of Gojoseon ("Old Joseon"), which ruled during days of Confucian dominance of China during the Zhou dynasty. Jeong believed those days could come again. "Politics and enlightenment flourished and manners became proper," due to Confucian influence back then, Jeong argued. Because we are now turning again towards Confucianism, "the name of Joseon will become known throughout the world in the future."⁴¹ The Ming Emperor had earlier sent an envoy accepting King Taejo's accession. Now came word that renaming the country would also be acceptable to Korea's powerful neighbor. The peninsula had a new nation—Joseon—and a new dawn.

With softening heart, King Taejo issued yet another general amnesty. "Since it is necessary to show benevolence at a time when we make a fresh start in administration, all crimes (except capital punishment, by either beheading or hanging) committed before the early morning of [February 15, 1393] will be forgiven, regardless of whether the guilty were sentenced."⁴²

But in the King's own family, other hearts were hardening.