

Of Politicide



One day, while napping on the mountain, Yi Seong-gye was visited by a mountain spirit. The mountain spirit told Yi that he was surrounded by bad energy and in danger. A red dragon is coming to fight you, and the only way to defeat it is to shoot right between certain scales.

Yi Seong-gye listened carefully to the Sanshin. When the red dragon came to destroy him, he shot a poison arrow between its scales, and it died and disappeared altogether. The dragon left its blood behind in a red pool.¹



Following the violent destruction of Goryeo's 500-year dynasty, Taejo's legitimation challenges were serious. Supporters spoke of the Mandate of Heaven, but in the cold eyes of many, Yi Seong-gye wore the mantle of a violent traitor. Though the new King had been a popular general, saved the country from war, and rose to power amid a widely felt social crisis, he had also killed several of Goryeo's most beloved leaders and deposed the kings of a deeply rooted dynasty.

General Choe Yeong—"the shield of Goryeo"—had been executed. The scholar Jeong Mong-ju—"The Last Man of Goryeo"—had been savagely beaten to death on a Gaegyeong bridge, leaving behind a poem of his blood-red loyalty. Many lesser officials had been tortured, exiled, and executed. Though King Taejo had ordered most of his opponents simply flogged upon his accession, at least eight were beaten so badly that they died.²

Then there was the sad case of Dumon-dong, an obscure mountain village of loyal Goryeo *sadaebu* (scholar-officials) that King Taejo could not abide. With the fall of Goryeo's kings, about one hundred loyal Goryeo *sadaebu* had retreated deep

into the mountains near Gaegyeong and formed a closed collective village. These loyalist Goryeo scholars locked themselves away from the affairs of the world and spent their days studying the Confucian classics and remembering the old days.

When King Taejo heard of it, he grew angry, claiming these students were turning their backs on his new order and were a dangerous example to others. Taejo offered these scholars good government posts in his new order. “Think of the future to come, not just the past,” he implored. But the loyal scholars refused and would not leave their village. One of the sages of Dumon-dong was actually an old childhood friend of Yi Seong-gye’s—Do Eung. King Taejo offered his friend a government post on five separate occasions but Do Eung would not bend and remained inside the mountain village.³

Taejo’s son, Yi Bang-won, urged that all the scholars should be dragged out and killed. King Taejo agreed that allowing the disrespectful scholars to stay would do serious damage to the new dynasty. So Taejo sent Yi Chiran and a platoon of soldiers to Dumon-dong. “If you don’t leave the mountain, we will set your village on fire,” the scholars were warned. But they wouldn’t leave and would not bow to the new King. So Taejo’s soldiers surrounded the village and set the whole place on fire. Dumon-dong was swallowed up and all the scholars were incinerated.⁴

The wave of exiles and executions, the high-profile deaths of Choe Yeong and *Jeong Mong-ju*, the incineration of the scholars of Dumon-dong: these were dramatic signs of the violent foundations of the King Taejo era. They presented a serious legitimation challenge. Feeling the cold eyes of the people fall on him after the fires of Dumon-dong, King Taejo saw the hard truth. “Now I see it is more difficult to win the hearts of the people than to win the Dragon Throne.”⁵

Some of the most dramatic violence was the murder of two previous kings of Goryeo, to make way for the Yi Seong-gye endorsed enthronement of King Gongyang (the final king of Goryeo). King U and King Chang (father and son) had been killed, and the murder of the very young King Chang was especially likely to have prompted bad will across Goryeo. The issue of the murdered Kings was so sensitive to King Taejo that

as his court scribes prepared the official records, he once demanded to review those sections.

It was a grave violation of protocol for a king to review the court records while they were being finalized. In order that history could be recorded “with a straight brush”⁶ (i.e., accurately, without fear or favor of royal pressure), these records were kept locked away from a sitting king. The court diarists advised King Taejo that their records needed to be kept secure from royal intervention, so as to ensure honest history.⁷ But still Taejo demanded to see what the diarists had written about the touchy issue of the preceding royal executions.

Shocked, the historians wondered why in the world the King would want to do that. Was he trying to change the record? If the king can review things, “how can a historiographer dare to grab a brush and write history as he witnesses it?” one scribe asked. The historian prostrated himself before the King. He implored Taejo to please not review the draft records. But King Taejo’s will would not be turned. He insisted he wouldn’t demand inappropriate changes and demanded to see the drafts. He explained that he simply wanted to be sure that some obscure early events from the start of his dynasty were correctly recorded (including such matters as who ordered the Goryeo Kings killed). So the drafts were turned over to the king for review.⁸

Upon his review, King Taejo did discover some allegedly incorrect records. One court historian had written that Taejo was responsible for the death of King U and King Change, when actually King Gongyang had ordered their death (though Gongyang was clearly under pressure by Yi Seong-gye to give the orders). Because of this alleged “error” in the record, King Taejo had the historian (Yi Haeng) flogged with 100 strokes, confiscated all his properties, stripped his office, and sent him into exile.⁹

In the subsequently “corrected” records, King Taejo is presented as resisting many calls to execute the doomed Kings of Goryeo, but only going along in the end due to ministerial pressure. For example, here’s how *The Taejo Sillok* presents Taejo’s final communication with the doomed King Gongyang. “You may have been unaware of what happened,” wrote Taejo

in a final missive to Gongyang, “but the censors and other officials in charge of the law submitted no fewer than twelve joint memorials insisting that you and your family be brought to justice. Now all the officials, both high and low, have joined them in submitting memorials. So I have no choice but to grant their request, I want you to know this fully.” King Taejo’s supposed reluctance was likely cold comfort to the former King Gongyang, who Taejo then had strangled to death, along with his two sons.¹⁰

It wasn’t just these four Goryeo kings that faced their demise—doom came to the whole Wang royal family, as to some other influential clans. Several leading Goryeo families—entire descent lines—were removed from political power altogether. Four leading ministerial families that had risen to prominence in the late Goryeo era were completely eliminated from political positions. Among these notable families was the Haengju Ki clan, family of Empress Ki of the Yuan. This clan does not show a single family member in government power for centuries after the rise of King Taejo.¹¹

But could King Taejo really destroy the taproots of old Goryeo? Did he have it in him to wage stone-cold politicide—seeking out and eliminating the royal blood line that had ruled his country for nearly 500 years?¹² At the start, he wavered. King Taejo moved to control—but not eliminate—the members of the Goryeo royal line. Three days after his ascension, on August 8, 1392, Taejo ordered most members of the royal Wang family living in Gaegyeong to be relocated to Ganghwa island, site of the old government in exile during the days of Mongol invasions. Other elite Wang family members were moved to Koje island, at the southern tip of Korea.¹³ Regarding Wang descendants not closely tied to the preceding Goryeo royals, Taejo proclaimed amnesty: “allow the remaining descendants to go wherever in the provinces they will, and allow their wives and male servants to live together as before.”¹⁴

The Wang royal family had lost their power, and now many were exiled to islands, but storm crowds were gathering and worse was yet to come. Many advisors to King Taejo urged him to end the Wang line once and for all. Advisors shared incidents of exiled royal family members sending enslaved

servants back and forth across the land, sharing messages, and perhaps fomenting rebellion. The *Taejo Sillok* reports the whispers to the King. “You must insist on eliminating them all,” was one early advisement.¹⁵ “Drive all of them to a dangerous and barren island, regardless of their status, for the purpose of killing them, their wives, and their children.”¹⁶ King Taejo—for decades a loyal warrior of this very same Goryeo line—delayed. “The removal of all the Wang line is something I cannot bear to do,” he bemoaned.¹⁷

Then, in February of 1394, the Joseon court received news of an alleged conspiracy against their new dynasty, including hopes to restore the Goryeo clan to power. One high official (Park Wi, Assistant Grand Councilor of the Chancellery) had gone with some other magistrates to see a blind fortune teller, seeking advice on whether King Taejo or the Wang family would prove to have the better fortune in the end. It seems some Wang family members were involved in this dangerous divination, which suggested thoughts of a royal restoration in some quarters.¹⁸ Such rumination could not be allowed. Members of the former royal family most suspected of these dangerous inclinations were tortured through the months of March and April, until confessions of conspiracy against King Taejo had been secured.¹⁹ The abdicated King Gongyang and his sons were banished to the remote area of Samcheok on the east coast, while additional royal Wangs were gathered and interned on Koje island. “Have them permanently eliminated,” King Taejo was again advised.²⁰

The King finally agreed, and began the executions on April 13, ordering five members of the Wang royal family beheaded.²¹ After a few weeks of debate over what to do with the rest of the family, Taejo approved mass executions on May 14.²² Ministers of Punishment were dispatched to the three Wang internment locations. There, they gathered up the doomed prisoners. On May 15th, all the Wangs on Ganghwa island were thrown into the sea and drowned. Two days later, King Gongyang and his two sons were strangled at Samcheok, as were several members of his household.²³ On May 20, the Minister of Punishments gathered all the Wangs on the island of Koje (about 111 of them) and ordered them onto boats.²⁴ The Wangs were told they were being transported to different

islands where they would be provided with land and allowed to live as commoners. During their voyage, divers swam underneath the waves and drilled holes into the boats. Watching the boats sink into the sea, a Buddhist monk on the shore called out in alarm to the Wangs. One of the doomed souls on the boat shouted back: *“the lamenting sound of oars, out in the blue ocean, even if a monk is present, what good is it?”* The monk wailed and turned away as all the ships sank, and all the royal Wangs drowned.²⁵

About 135 males of the royal Wang line had been killed (females were mostly spared throughout the terror). On the mainland, the King commanded his officials to search out and behead all the male Wang clan members tied to the royals who remained alive.²⁶ Government officials hunted down Wang royals in a campaign lasting two decades. Dozens more were executed. The Wang surname was banned. Those who carried it were ordered to switch to their maternal surnames. Others simply added a small new stroke to the Chinese calligraphy of the Wang name, changing it to Ok.²⁷

There would be no return to Goryeo.