

**“His Thunderous and Earth-Shaking Reputation
Spread All Over the World”**



*A blue dragon and a white tiger on his left and right,
Like a mountain tiger crouched on a stone,
He came from a family of wealth and high position.
Generation after generation of great commanding generals.
His thunderous and earth-shaking reputation
spread all over the world,
The four oceans could not hold back his unifying measures.
With the head of his three-foot sword, he pacified the state.
With the end of his whip, he settled Heaven and Earth.*

— *Poem on Back of Enshrined Portrait of King Taejo*¹



When the boy Yi Seong-gye was born in 1335, Yuan forces occupied the northern Korean peninsula and Goryeo was a subjugated vassal state. As General Yi become a military general his feeble country suffered persistent invasions from Jurchen raiders, Red Turban rebels, and hundreds of Japanese pirate raids. But as Taejo rose to become King, Joseon took its place as an independent nation of consequence in East Asia, with stable borders and able to conduct diplomacy on its own terms. Not a single Ming or Yuan soldier occupied Joseon territory in Taejo’s reign, and Japanese pirating attacks came to a near cease. “If the monarch reads this, he will think of a god who protects the border,” commended King Sejo (Joseon’s seventh king and the great grandson of King Taejo) when he read about Taejo’s achievement of a stable peace in *Songs of the Dragons*.²

These were no easy achievements, for during his reign, King Taejo would have to resolve several uneasy border situations with the Ming dynasty, would have to win the loyalties of long rebellious northern peoples, and would face

several invasions from Japanese pirates. In its time, each challenge was met.

Managing the Ming Border

The complicated issue of border relations with the Ming Dynasty had catapulted Yi Seong-gye to power and that issue did not go away with his accession. In fact, although Yi Seong-gye had turned back from crossing the Yalu in 1388, Ming authorities were well-aware of Yi's popularity and power in these northern lands and remained deeply suspicious of Joseon's intentions. Ming leaders had their own eyes set on claims to the vast lands north of the Korean peninsula, and they couldn't have liked it that so many tribal peoples there seemed enthralled with the magic of King Taejo.

As *Songs of the Dragons* records, Taejo was a homegrown hero of the north who had protected many of its people from Japanese and Yuan invasions. During the days of his military campaigns, many Jurchen captains of northern territories had served with Yi and become close allies.³ Though the General had now become king in the southwestern capital, "the people of the East longed for him when he came to the West."⁴ Also, as the *Songs of the Dragons* describe, when Yi Seong-gye returned from Wihwado, a thousand Jurchen warriors had quickly mobilized to join his march on the Goryeo capital. That fact was surely not lost on the Ming rulers.

*He sang of righteousness and led the troops,
And the people gathered from far away;
Sacred virtue ran deep.
And even the Northern outlanders did not
waver.⁵*

These northern "outlanders" were an important part of King Taejo's power base.⁶ To solidify their loyalty, Taejo gave many of these peoples title and power in his new order. The *Taejo Sillok* lists forty Jurchen who served under Yi Seong-gye and describes how several reached chiliarch (*cheonho*) and myriarch (*manho*) posts in his army.⁷ Some Jurchen leaders were granted court titles⁸ and there were several Yuan-origin

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individuals or ethnic Uighurs who served in Taejo’s government as well, becoming interpreters, envoys, educators, doctors, military officers, and even merit subjects.⁹

This all meant that King Taejo had a good foundation to grow Joseon’s influence in the fluid territories along the Yalu River. Vast, loosely governed lands there would be useful in addressing Joseon’s land distribution problems. Mining and lumber resources were rich in these areas. The area was also an important transit corridor. Joseon histories sometimes refer to the northern borderlands as the “East Eight Posts” region due to its eight abandoned courier relay stations, originally constructed by Mongol forces. Even with Mongol retreat, the “East Eight Posts” remained the most dependable land route between east Joseon and central China.¹⁰

But such regional assets also meant tense border threats, as Ming China had all the same reasons for wishing to control these attractive lands wherein clear borders between dynasties had never solidified. It made for an ungoverned contact zone, characterized by dangerously delicate Ming-Joseon relations. Whereas Ming leaders openly sought to absorb the land and peoples in areas south of the Yalu all the way to the border of South Hamyeong province, Joseon leaders frequently implied that lands north of the Yalu, extending all the way to Yodong and Liaoyang actually belonged to Joseon.¹¹ Instability was fueled by the mutual collapse of the Goryeo and Yuan dynasties, which unsettled all existing patterns and fostered fierce competition for the loyalties of Jurchen, Mongol, Han, Korean and Japanese peoples living across the northern areas.¹²

The unpredictability made for challenging times for local residents. Jurchen tribes feared that Korean authorities would raid their villages and take their wives and children if they submitted to Ming and crossed the Yalu. Similarly, enslaved persons and women living in Liaodong often fled south to Joseon to avoid being taken as tribute to Ming. Villages on both sides of the river were often raided by competing powers. Seeking some kind of stability, many Jurchen peoples embraced the new Joseon regime, intermarrying into ethnic Korean clans, serving in the Joseon army, and paying tax to Joseon officials. At the same time, others were lured across the

Yalu by Ming representatives, crossing into the Ming sphere to join trading posts and military garrisons there. It led to an unsteady situation of constant threats of military action by Ming versus Joseon, to which Taejo had to respond.

Ming forces had built several strong fortresses and garrisons along the East Eight Route north of the Yalu. But King Taejo had some strategies of his own. He prepared militarily. He expanded granaries all along the northern border to store supplies for soldiers. Much of the harvest of several provinces was dedicated to this task.¹³ He awarded Jurchen chieftains with military titles and trained them with his army, and awarded them plots of land, clothes, and other treasures from the capital. He spoke of lands south of the Yalu and Tumen rivers—which notably included his own hometown area in the northeast—as being within the “fence” of Joseon, promising to defend the peoples there. He sent representatives of the crown to the northern region to help organize villages into self-defense networks while also steadily expanding the number of central army soldiers responsible for defending the area.

Where once Goryeo had relied mostly on local strongmen (*Hyangni*) to defend their own patch of land, Taejo advanced a principle of centrally managed national defense and built an ever-expanding national defense network.* But this claim also meant people of the northern region were increasingly subject to Joseon law, including expectations of military service if needed. Taejo also sent royal envoys to the northeast to monitor iron and weapon production, and to encourage more of both. Finally, he supported the internal migration of Koreans to the north, where they were offered lower taxes and plots of land to farm.¹⁴

Other strategies included convincing the Jurchen to replace raids on neighboring villages with more stable trade, and he opened trading posts to that end. Jurchen villages that

* By King Sejong's reign (1418–450) (King Taejo's grandson), 22,000 central soldiers and 60,000 sailors were regularly deployed to the northern border areas. Kim, B. *Wangjeongui Jogeon: Damronuiro Ikneun Joseonsidaesa [The Conditions of Monarchy: Reading Joseon History Through Discourse]*, p. 170

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agreed to voluntarily submit to Joseon rule were offered new farming tools, land titles, lower taxation rates, and even wives, sent from the southern peninsula.¹⁵ It was all a strategy to weave the northern Jurchen into Joseon's sphere of influence.

The Jurchen leader Yi Chiran, Yi Seong-gye's blood brother and now a high military officer in Joseon, was a useful envoy in these causes. Yi Chiran had long worked to deliver his clan's resources to Yi Seong-gye's cause. Now that he was a military officer and merit subject, Chiran played a key role in recruiting other Jurchen clans to submit to peaceful co-existence with Taejo's Joseon. Right after King Taejo's rise, Yi Chiran was posted to the north, and tasked to build schools, open trading posts, and spread the word about King Taejo's virtues. King Taejo directed Chiran:

...to change [the Jurchen's] practice of letting out their hair, to cause them to wear hats, change the animalistic customs and accept propriety, and to have them marry people of our country, to impose on them the same corvée labor and taxation as ordinary subjects, to make them ashamed to be led by their chief and to make them all want to become subjects of the kingdom.¹⁶

This was exactly the kind of development that Ming rulers were most afraid of,¹⁷ so they kept growing their own forces along the border. In this tense situation, King Taejo built up a significant foreign intelligence network, sending secret missions into Liaodong and its regional capital, Shenyang. These agents would survey military installations, reach out to the locals, and gather information on Ming movements. In one case, Joseon monks paid blind beggars to travel across the Yalu, spying on the situation.¹⁸

On one occasion, alleged Joseon spies disguised as Japanese merchants caused a commotion by raping and plundering Liaodong locals. They were captured by Ming authorities, who then demanded that King Taejo explain why he was sending spies into Liaodong. Taejo claimed that these ruffians were definitely not his agents but were simply

Japanese “pirating types” who were lying about their identity so as to minimize punishment in Ming. The truth was hard to ferret.

In March of 1393, the Ming Emperor sent word that the constant (alleged) incursions of Korean spies and other intrigues had to stop. The imperial letter was read out loud to King Taejo in his court, as he bowed his head to receive the Emperor’s word. How come “the King of the Eastern tribes” keeps insulting us? Hongwu demanded. “You lured some ruffians from among the residents of Zhejiang to collect information on our domestic affairs and report to you.” Moreover, you bribed five hundred people with treasure and rice so they would cross the Yalu into your lands. “No crime can be more serious than this.” The Ming Emperor said he was a peaceful man, but he would wage war if all the defectors weren’t returned and Taejo didn’t account for himself. “I intend to turn swords into ploughshares...I also desire all my military generals to enjoy peace, traveling around in light clothes and riding fine horses. Why are the people of Goryeo anxious to fight?”¹⁹

King Taejo was angry at the Ming insult and complained to his ministers that the Emperor “make[s] endless demands on a small state such as ours, which were all unreasonable. Even now, he reprimands us for things we have little to do with and threatens war against us. How is it different from intimidating a child?”²⁰ But Taejo was the cautious general who had returned from Wihwado, so he offered soft words back to Hongwu. “Your stern instruction sounds very clear, and your awesome authority is quite palpable,” Taejo wrote. “Overwhelmed with fear, I would like to appeal to you.”²¹ He apologized for the poor condition of many tribute horses Joseon had sent to Ming, and craftily explained that the gift horses were probably so weak only because the emperor asked for so many horses and Joseon was running out of good ones to give.²²

Taejo also claimed innocence regarding any spies or tricks to lure people to defect across the Yalu. Travelling Koreans offering fabrics and other products to Liaodong residents were not trying to lure people south, he claimed; they were simply giving gifts “out of courtesy and respect.”

Most people who left Liaodong had not been “lured,” but were simply ethnic Koreans who had been displaced during hard times, and who now wanted to return to their homes now that things were stable in Joseon. Taejo offered to return all people of Jurchen or Han descent who had crossed into Joseon, but he would not return the Koreans.²³ One hundred and forty-seven households of Jurchen descent (504 people, total) were rounded up after a search, shackled, and turned over to the Ming Military Commission in Liaodong.²⁴

The Ming Emperor likely grumbled at the mixed reply, but Taejo’s bit of deft diplomacy was enough to prevent military escalation. Still, in July of 1393, Ming made their continuing dissatisfaction clear. A Joseon envoy in the Ming capital was charged with disrespect to the Emperor. He had bent his head when visiting the Emperor, instead of sitting perfectly upright, according to Ming protocol. Hongwu had this envoy (Yi Yeom) beaten with a heavy stick until he nearly died. Yi Yeom was barely revived with medicine and sent back to Joseon. But Hongwu would give him no horses, so he had to walk all the way from Nanjing to Joseon. As the haggard envoy finally left Liaodong and crossed into Joseon, an order from Ming was announced: “Let no envoys from Joseon cross our border... From this day forward, Koreans are not allowed to enter.”²⁵ As Ming beefed up its border fortresses in the coming months, Joseon sent a series of envoys to the border, but all were denied entrance.²⁶ Tensions ran high.

Six months later (January 1394), things blew up again when Ming authorities reported the capture of a secret guerilla force of Korean invaders. They claimed they had captured a Korean commando named Chong Kalmae, who had sailed along China’s Liaodong peninsula with seventeen ships and 629 soldiers, landing now and again to attack and plunder villages. When captured, this alleged commando blamed it all on a Joseon magistrate who had ordered him to disguise his ships as Japanese merchant vessels so that he could launch surprise attacks on Ming.²⁷ The Ming emperor complained to King Taejo, demanded an accounting, and asked Taejo to turn over the military officer who ordered this attack. Ming troops began staging armed demonstrations right across the Yalu River.

Again, King Taejo was outraged that Joseon was being accused and threatened with war. But still he kept his harsh thoughts from Hongwu. Instead, Taejo delivered two different replies to Ming, providing lengthy and polite responses to all their accusations.²⁸ His message began with the equivalent of a diplomatic prostration. Hearing your accusations, I am “ashamed to the point of sweating,” Taejo described. “I am in awe of your mighty power. I was fortunate to live in an enlightened age and to benefit from your noble instructions on multiple occasions.”

Then he got down to the heart of the matter, explaining that “I do not know who Chong Kalmae is.” Taejo maintained that Joseon had no relationship with this raider and explained that it would be senseless for Joseon to send sneaky bandits to slaughter and plunder people in Liaodong. My own people would hate me for instigating war with Ming, Taejo claimed. “How can I recklessly provoke you? ...I am not so senseless as wood or stone, why should I dare to cause trouble and bring disaster to myself for no reason, exhausting my spirit and energy?”

In addition, Taejo apologized for the constant errors in style and tone in Joseon’s diplomatic communications with the Ming suzerain. Taejo claimed that all his mistakes were because he was a simple man from the north who didn’t know refined customs and etiquette, not due to scheming or a desire to send tricky insults. Joseon is “located far from the advanced culture, [and] is incapable of communicating properly. Limited in knowledge and behind in education, we barely know only how to express ourselves. The mistakes made in the composition of memorials, therefore, had to do with our ignorance of proprieties and nothing else.” The Joseon King promised that he would learn to do better. “I believe that your severe reprimands were intended to make me a better person and your kind persuasion motivated to raise me with affection, which is similar to the words of a parent who raises a child.”

Taejo’s deft replies and promises were enough to keep Ming from entering the Korean peninsula. Ming forces kept brandishing their weapons just across the Yalu, but still the Emperor wavered. Waging war in the rugged mountains of Joseon, far from supplies, was a demanding and dangerous

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proposition after all. It had taken the Mongol’s powerful army thirty years to fully subjugate the peninsula. So the uneasy peace continued.

Then, on April 4, 1394, another Chinese envoy arrived at the Joseon capital. King Taejo led his officials, dressed in formal Ming robes, to the city gate and received the envoy’s carriage with full honors. The envoy stood up tall and announced that King Taejo would receive the Emperor’s message. King Taejo bowed his head to the ground. The envoy unrolled the imperial scroll and read the Emperor’s words.

In recent days our armed forces at the borders in Ganpu and other places captured five bandits, including one named Hue De. They stated in their depositions that they had been sent by the [Joseon] officials in charge of border defense to plunder our coastal areas and gather information.

It was more of the same. Once again, the Emperor ordered Taejo to review the names of all the people Ming claimed were involved in this banditry and to send all those people across the Yalu to Ming authorities. After interrogation, Hue De had given up several alleged culprits’ names, the Emperor said to Taejo. “You shall transport them under escort and hand them over to us. The ones you shall send are twenty-five in total.”²⁹

The Ming emperor ended with another threat of war, saying that he was only holding off because of his humanity and because the difficulties of war in rugged Korea were serious. “I wished to raise an army immediately to chastise [King Taejo], but refrained from acting hastily because my larger army, once crossing the border, would certainly harm numerous lives. Besides [Joseon] is surrounded by sea on three sides and mountains on one side. It’s land, being rugged, stretches out several thousand li and therefore forms a natural fortress.” Still, “If Yi and his people continue to be arrogant and insulting, I will have no choice but to raise an army and to chastise them.”³⁰

Though Taejo was frustrated with constant Ming allegations, he tried to make peace. He denied that Joseon had

anything to do with border banditry and agreed to punish any such thieves they might capture in Joseon. He also raised a complaint of his own, mentioning the many times that his own envoys in the border area, even ones sent to welcome visiting Ming dignitaries, were kidnapped and taken by force into Liaodong by Ming troops. He refused to turn over the 25 people named by Ming (as he claimed they had nothing to do with events), but he did give the Chinese envoys some silk robes and five eunuchs to take back to the Ming Emperor.

The Chinese envoys were frustrated with the stalemate, but still Taejo's ministers prepared a fine farewell party for them at a royal pavilion. During the feast, one of the Chinese envoys became so drunk that he grew belligerent, complaining that Ming wasn't treated well by Joseon. "Tell me why you treat me now as if I were nobody?" He shouted out at Joseon's ministers. He tore off the robe they had gifted him and threw it on the ground, stomping on it while shouting out. "I would rather die here than see the emperor wearing this shabby looking robe!" Then the envoy pulled out a knife and began to stab himself in the neck.

Most Joseon ministers dashed away to get out of the belligerent envoy's reach, but an official in charge of entertainment rushed to grab the envoy's arm and stopped him from hurting himself or others. He offered kind and soothing words to the drunk envoy, calming him down. King Taejo ordered a Security Council Commissioner to rush and get a nice, new robe for the envoy. Things calmed down enough for the envoy to leave in one piece, wearing the gifted robes of Joseon.³¹

But the situation didn't improve. The Ming Emperor would not accept Taejo's explanations and continued to doubt his loyalty. Threats of war lingered. Things grew so bad that King Taejo decided to send his highly achieved son, Yi Bang-won, to Ming personally, ordering him to meet and placate the emperor. Yi Bang-won was intelligent, charming, and well trained in Confucian classics, so he could hold his own in the Ming court. Moreover, sending King Taejo's son into the mouth of the dragon was a sign of loyalty and respect to the Emperor. Taejo was worried for Bang-won's health and safety on the

long journey to China, and wept as his son left, but this option seemed best.³²

To further demonstrate his loyalty, while Yi Bang-won was travelling to China, King Taejo announced an order to control the Korean monks who Ming authorities alleged were behind so much of the proselytizing, spying and unrest in the north. “Henceforth, the monks frequenting the Northeast Region shall be beheaded, with no exception,” Taejo ordered.³³ Just as well, anyone else illegally crossing the border would also lose their head.³⁴ Perhaps these orders would smooth things for a successful visit of his son, Bang-won, in the court of Hongwu.

Yi Bang-won’s trip to the Ming would last five months, there and back again. With him was that aged minister Jo Ban, whose land-theft case had catalyzed the fall of the Yi In-im faction years previously.³⁵ When Bang-won arrived at the Ming court, he found great success. He met personally with the Emperor on three occasions and also met the Emperor’s fourth son while traveling on the road. He always displayed the perfect etiquette. Records show that “he stood there with gentle words and decorum...The food was served, and it was extremely rich and clean.”³⁶ When he met with the Emperor, Yi Bang-won was able to address all sorts of questions about alleged Joseon spying, alleged Korean raids on border villages, Ming’s refusal to receive Chinese envoys, and Joseon’s own complaints about kidnappings of Koreans into Liaodong.

Everyone’s feathers were rubbed the right way and by the end of Bang-won’s visit, the Emperor was so reassured that he told Bang-won not to worry about any invasion. He also said Korean envoys could resume coming to Ming. The Emperor actually called Yi Bang-won the “Crown Prince” of Joseon several times, a point which Bang-won portentously did not correct. He was sent back home with full honors, a crown prince in Ming eyes if not his own father’s.³⁷

King Taejo followed this successful visit with a memorial of appreciation to the Emperor, apologizing for any previous errors and for the improper bowing and other poor etiquette of his envoys. The Ming emperor was so impressed with the sincerity of the King and his son that border relations stabilized for some time, and Joseon was actually allowed to

send three or four diplomatic envoy missions to the Ming every year going forward, rather than just one every three years as Hongwu had originally proposed some time ago.³⁸ Things were settling into mutual recognition by Joseon and Ming that that Yalu and Tumen rivers defined a firm border between the two polities. King Taejo was finally achieving a centuries-long goal of Korean kingdoms from Silla to Goryeo to secure claims to fluid northeastern lands up to the Yalu and Tumen rivers. Ming's Hongwu emperor may have been hungry to swallow up all that Yuan had once possessed in territories south of these rivers, but King Taejo's military prowess and diplomatic skills had built a northern fence for Joseon.³⁹

Calming the Southern Seas

The northern border with Ming wasn't the only border threat to Joseon. King Taejo had to carve a space for Koreans to thrive between both the colossus of Ming and the marauders of Japan. Relations with Ming required deft diplomacy, but the chaotic piracy of the Japanese islands called for a more blunt response. One of Taejo's royal envoys to Daemado (i.e., Tsushima, a hothouse of piracy activity) described Taejo's firm commitment. "When our king ascended the throne, he took pity on the innocent people who were suffering from the damage and decided to save them by exterminating the wicked pirates."⁴⁰

Accordingly, in his first royal edict, Taejo ordered serious improvement to his navy. He wanted to create a regional defense system along the coast, with naval units to both the right and left of Gyeonggi province (the capital city province). But the coastline was simply too long to constantly defend from surprise piracy attacks everywhere, so Taejo decided to send a navy to proactively search out and destroy pirate strongholds.⁴¹ Since Joseon was united and growing stronger, while pirates remained divided among Japanese islands at war with each other, Taejo was confident in success.

He ordered his commanders quickly to build a powerful navy that could "float in the sea and arrest the Japanese."⁴² In February of 1389, Park Wi set sail with 100 warships for Daemado. There, he sought out pirate strongholds and used

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gunpowder weapons to incinerate 300 Japanese ships. His troops stormed the island, but the Japanese pirates fled to higher land, and most couldn't be found. Still, Joseon had eliminated hundreds of enemy boats and proven its ability to take the fight to the pirates.⁴³ With this victory and the diplomatic successes with Ming, stability spread along Joseon's coastal areas.

Part of the reason for Joseon's success against pirates was that Japan was also moving towards more effective central rule (the North and South dynasties finally united in 1392, the same year Yi Seong-gye ascended to the throne). The increasingly centralized warlords of Japanese islands didn't appreciate ungovernable pirate forces in hidden coves and harbors any more than Joseon did.⁴⁴ Instead, the rulers of both Joseon and the Japanese islands wished to turn the pirates into regularized sailors and legitimate maritime merchants. To that end, after Joseon's anti-piracy campaigns, hundreds of Koreans taken prisoner in previous pirate raids were returned by Japanese warlords in 1394⁴⁵ and trade relations were opened up through the Korean port of Busan. Japanese merchants would trade local products, timber, silver, fish, and stoneware for Korean furs, ginseng, cloth, falcons, and hunting dogs.

Though the threat of piracy was dramatically reduced thereafter, another serious attack did occur. In August of 1396, about 120 Wako pirate ships appeared in Gyeongsang-do. They defeated local Joseon forces, killed commander Lee Chun-sa, captured several cities (including Pyeongseong) and began to plunder. This invasion led to a long series of cat-and-mouse battles between pirate raiders and the Joseon navy. King Taejo ordered his naval commanders to mobilize all the battleships of five provinces and to prepare a savage assault. Taejo had no desire to fight another war but explained that he had no option.

Since I ascended the throne, I have never recklessly mobilized the military, trying to follow the precedents set by the old sages, and the reason was that I was afraid people might be agitated. [But] these days, despicable barbarians from islands were mad

enough to dare invade our coasts...I am afraid that there will be no peace within our borders unless we eliminate them in one stroke by attacking them both at sea and on land.⁴⁶

The King went to the south gate to see his naval Commander, Sahyeong, off personally. He bestowed Sahyeong with the symbolic battle axe of war, a saddled horse, armor, a helmet, a fine bow and a medicine box. "Your personality is austere and awe-inspiring," Taejo said to the commander. "The enemy will be scared to death."⁴⁷

The battles were touch-and-go for a time. Both the Korean navy and the Japanese pirates had some successes. King Taejo was merciless in his demands for victory and refused audience with his commanders who lost a battle. In fact, those that lost battles were paddled 100 times, while those that fled a battle had their faces painted black and were beheaded.⁴⁸

Joseon's navy wore the pirates down in the end. One unusual unit of the Joseon navy were Taejo's "stone throwers." In earlier years, while travelling the countryside, King Taejo would sometimes come across stone fights. These were occasions where people would line up on opposite sides of a creek or ditch and proceed to wage a friendly stone war against each other, driving the other side off the field by pelting them with rocks and boulders. Taejo enjoyed watching these brutal affairs.⁴⁹ One time, the King even ordered some of his military commanders to participate a stone fight, which went on all afternoon, until the sun set. Many of the stone-fighters were killed or wounded that day.⁵⁰ In April of 1394 the King decided that stone-throwing warriors had potential. He created a "stone-throwing" army unit and ordered them to train and perform with other military units.⁵¹ This unit came in useful against the Japanese pirates. On a few different occasions, special attack squads of Joseon warships were sent to hunt pirates, featuring trained units of armored stone throwers, who must have acted like small canon fire against the enemy ships.⁵²

Joseon warships and stone throwers attacked the pirates relentlessly, even assaulting their hometowns, until the pirates were ready to surrender. There were several different

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occasions of surrender at the end of 1396 and early months of 1397. One mass surrender occurred after impoverished and famished pirate leaders requested a small bit of land on Korea's southern coast where they could survive. “We will not dare to betray you and will also prevent other thieves from what they are doing,” the pirate leaders promised. King Taejo found these surrender terms acceptable. When the local Joseon magistrate showed up, all the pirates “took off their armor and bowed down, standing in a line and awaiting orders.”⁵³

Some days later, the Japanese pirate chief (Kyuroku) was allowed an audience with King Taejo. Kyuroku presented a long sword and saber to the King, who then bestowed a robe and fine hat upon the pirate captain. Taejo also organized a grand banquet for the Japanese chief and his attendants, where Kyuroku again submitted and swore his loyalty to King Taejo. During the banquet, Taejo awarded several Japanese officers with government titles and bestowed silk robes and caps upon them, speaking words of comfort. Only days before many of these defeated Japanese raiders had been enemies of Joseon, famished and adrift, on the verge of death. Now they had a new and honorable future in Joseon. “Awestruck, Kyuroku dared not look up at the King, but only broke out in a sweat and shed tears.”⁵⁴

To lure the surrender of pirating crews, chieftains were commonly given new titles in Joseon, in addition to silk, silver belts, fine clothes, rice, soybeans and paper.⁵⁵ Even though many of these raiders might have previously plundered and killed Joseon residents, surrendering pirate units were often granted land access on Joseon's coast to farm and fish. It is a necessary step to win the support of poor island people who have faced “a life of tragedy due to lack of land and food,” said Taejo's son, King Taejong. This is how we avoid a cycle of anger and constant coastal invasions. “It is well worth it to become an ideal world.”⁵⁶

Some pirates were allowed to return to Japan, with promises to refrain from marauding. As for the warlords of Daemado, King Taejo implored them to get piracy from their islands under control, or face invasion from Joseon. Southern people of Joseon are begging for my help, Taejo said. “They

have repeatedly made requests that battleships be prepared on a massive scale and that our armed forces be dispatched to exterminate the bandits from the islands and thus remove the trouble by the roots." But Taejo wanted to avoid this kind of ongoing warfare. He promised that if only the Lord of Daemado would suppress "the wicked gang" of pirates, then "your beautiful honor and righteous spirit will be known to the whole world and the friendly relationship between [our] two countries will last forever."⁵⁷

In reply, the Japanese general on Daemado sent several horses as tribute to the Joseon court and promised that he would henceforth control piracy on his island.

I have no intention of betraying your great grace...In [the past] Kansai's strong servants disobeyed the order of the Joseon dynasty and invaded the country with reckless military force...The people of [our] periphery launched their own enemy ships every year to plunder the men and women of the coastal waters of your country. They burned the Buddha. This was not ordered by the national government, but now our land is unified, and the sea and land are calm and quiet, and the people are afraid of the law. In the future, we will punish pirates and send captive Koreans back and our coastal waters will be managed without problems.⁵⁸

By the end of King Taejo's reign, Japanese piracy had almost disappeared, and flourished only in small and hidden places like Ulleungdo—a small and isolated volcanic island for north of the Japanese archipelago.

Paying Tribute to Joseon

As existential border threats of Ming invasions and massive pirate raids were brought under control, space was opened for what Joseon royals called "*hyangwpha*," a concept describing less elevated persons "submitting to edification" in the

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presence of the Joseon monarch.⁵⁹ This term described how Joseon leaders viewed the transformative process whereby a morally superior king supposedly had a “civilizing” or edifying influence on foreign peoples who came in contact with him.⁶⁰ In this way of thinking, King Taejo had achieved so much, and his virtue was so evident, that the process northern peoples and pillaging Japanese raiders submitting to edification was now inevitable.

Certainly, there was evidence that many Jurchen people now recognized the authority of the King of Joseon. A steady parade of northern chieftains came to Taejo’s palace and bowed down to him, offering tribute and praise. As *Songs of the Dragons* describes: “Great being his repute, the Jurchen came to court; they did not contend with quarrels for primacy.”⁶¹ Hundreds of Jurchen had submitted to Yi Seong-gye in the late days of Goryeo before he even became King⁶² and now came more. The Woduli, Walong, and Jurchen peoples all came to Joseon with frequent gifts of local products.⁶³ In 1393, one Jurchen chief gave a live tiger as a New Year’s gift celebrating Taejo’s accession. Another gift from the north was a baby black bear, which Taejo raised in the back yard of his palace, together with the tiger, peacocks, and other wild things.⁶⁴ The *Taejo Sillok* describes the constant stream of tribute:

Tribes of different customs across the river [Tumen] and other areas reaching as far as Juzhou heard the rumor and admired our culture. So they personally visited our court or sent their sons and brothers or voluntarily made themselves retainers to attend our king. Some of them requested public employment, migrated to our territory, or presented their local products, and people like them formed long lines on the road. If their mares gave birth to foals of outstanding quality, they vied with one another to present them to us.⁶⁵

One time after Taejo returned from the hot springs, a Jurchen leader presented the king with two fine bows made out of

horn. It was bittersweet for the king who loved to hunt, but who was now so old and busy that he hardly ever could do it. "If I were a general as I used to be, I would accept your gift," Taejo said. "What would I do with it now?"⁶⁶ The King then said he was still ill and too weary from his trip to the hot springs and would not be able to meet properly with his northern visitor for a few more days.

Many northern leaders, after presenting tribute and loyalty to King Taejo, were given fine clothes, land and military title and many turned up later among the ranking and powerful clans of Joseon. Others became accomplished diplomats and military heroes.⁶⁷ Over time, the northern provinces in this way were knit ever closer into the Joseon cultural sphere.

When various Joseon elites travelled north to visit these lands, the *Taejo Sillok* describes how more and more Jurchen peoples wanted to meet the Joseon officials, hosting feasts, and doing hunts together. Joseon legal codes came to be adopted up north, and when riverside people of the Yalu had disputes, the Joseon government adjudicated between parties, "either putting them into jail or punishing them by beating them with the paddle, but none dared to complain against our military commanders on the border."⁶⁸ Schools were spread across the north, and southern educators arrived to provide teaching on Joseon culture and the Confucian classics.

By 1395, the *Taejo Sillok* was describing the results of Joseon's cultural imperialism in the north. "As a result, [the Jurchen] abandoned their custom of having their hair loose and wore hats and belts. They also changed their barbarous behavior and practiced proper manners. They intermarried with our people, performed corvée service, and paid taxes just as our people did."⁶⁹ The official records list 27 Jurchen chiefs and tribal leaders by name ("...and so on") who submitted to King Taejo in his first four years of rule.⁷⁰

Sometimes royal envoys from King Taejo would visit the northern tribes in the field. During these visits, locals would bow at attention while the royal envoy read words of edification from the King. Then they would be expected to get to their knees and ritually bow several times towards King Taejo's location.⁷¹

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As for King Taejo, whenever he paid a personal visit to his ancestral tombs in the mountains of the Northeast, the *Taejo Sillok* reports that “the Jurchens who lived across the river vied with one another to see him, and those who were unable to come in time returned home shedding tears. The Jurchens still become emotional remembering the king’s generous treatment of them in olden days whenever they have talks over drinks with our border commanders.”⁷² *Songs of the Dragons* similarly described the King’s edifying influence on supposedly less civilized culture along the border.

*His Majesty and graciousness having spread,
Those with untied locks put on caps and belts:
From that time to this day,
His profound virtue has overwhelmed their
hearts.*⁷³

Japanese residents of the southern islands also came to respect Joseon’s new strength and cultural influence. When the Japanese pirates surrendered, they were described as “submitting foreigners,” and were given titles and new lands as they were assumed to now live under the edifying influence of King Taejo.⁷⁴ There were many such tribute visits from Japanese delegations, bringing local products and swords, and promising respect to Joseon. In the fall of 1393, one envoy arrived with twenty fine swords, which Taejo distributed to his high officials.⁷⁵ Japanese island chieftains frequently arrived in Joseon court, offering local products and imploring for peace and Taejo’s benevolence, saying “we express our respect to you from a distant place.”⁷⁶ Through all of Taejo’s reign, visit after visit arrived, offering constant tribute of local products.⁷⁷ One tribute envoy gave Taejo a monkey, which he kept in the back yard with his tiger, bear and peacocks.⁷⁸

Even the alleged son of a deposed King of Ryuku (Rakaon) came to live in Joseon and submit to Taejo, together with his twelve subordinates. Sitting in his Hall of Diligent Government, King Taejo received the former royalty of Ryuku on the April 26th, 1397. The King bestowed Rakaon with a “silk robe, a ramie robe, a cap, a silver belt, and a pair of men’s wooden-

sole deer skin boots.” Each of the 12 attendants also received a ramie robe.⁷⁹

Other tribute streamed in. The unruly Tamna island—holdout of Yuan influence—gave fine horses to the King, and Taejo reciprocated with gifts of silk, wine, and loads of rice.⁸⁰ An envoy from Siam arrived in 1394. Though they had lost most of their tribute treasure to pirates during their long journey, they were able to offer Taejo “a sword, armor, copperware, and two dark-skinned servants.”⁸¹

On the first day of the New Year in 1398, the final year of King Taejo’s reign, envoys from around the region showed up as manifestations of Joseon’s influence over northern Jurchens and southern islanders. Wuduli and Wulangha chiefs were there, as were chiefs from Iki, Tsushima (Daemado), Hakata and other Japanese islands. They all came together to present local products in the Hall of Diligent Government and to offer felicitations to King Taejo’s rule.⁸²

Joseon had become a nation of consequence. King Taejo had deftly carved a space for Korean life between China and Japan, the borders of Joseon were secure, and the harvest of peace could now begin. Court scholars attributed it all to the moral influence of the King.⁸³ On the occasion of Taejo’s Sixtieth birthday, the poet Mokeun put it to words.

*Like the ocean, Taejo is embracing all.
Old loyalists and new in his new palace.
High in the sky rises the loyal sun.
The sea is calm because the fog has lifted.*⁸⁴