

The Ming Memorial Affair



Gongsun Chou asked, "What is the principle behind your policy of declining to meet with ruling lords?"

Mencius said, "In the past, if one was not a subject one did not appear in audience. Duangan Mu leapt over a wall to avoid a visit [with a ruling lord], and Xie Liu shut his gate against one...Zengzi said, 'It is more tiring to shrug one's shoulders and smile like a sycophant than to farm the fields in summer.' Zilu said, 'When men talk to those they disapprove of, you see how blushes color their faces. I am not capable of such conduct.'

— Mencius¹



Many affairs stabilized under King Taejo and the conditions of life improved for most people, but court politics are eternal. There were, for example, the differing perspectives of Jeong Do-jeon (Taejo's top advisor) and Yi Bang-won (Taejo's ambitious son) regarding the question of relations with Ming. Jeong Do-jeon was the first Joseon envoy to Ming, immediately after Yi Seong-gye's accession. The visit was tense. Though the Ming Emperor (Zhu) must have appreciated Jeong's intention to open the "Eastern Zhou dynasty," the Emperor and Jeong Do-jeon were alleged to have threatened war with each other in ways both overt and implied.

The Ming Emperor much preferred the compliant Yi Bang-won to the arrogant and unbending Jeong Do-jeon. When Yi Bang-won visited Ming in 1394 (helping resolve northern border disputes), it was a highwater moment of good Ming-Joseon relations. Bang-won returned with a re-opened northern border and a restoration of diplomatic relations. It even came to be known that the Ming Emperor happily called Yi Bang-Won the crown prince, though that honor was actually

bestowed upon Bang-won's younger half-brother, Yi Bang-seok.

Though Joseon-Ming relations improved following Bang-won's visit, it seemed that Jeong Do-jeon had different opinions about the virtues of Ming and was suspicious of Yi Bang-won's supplicating relationship with the Hongwu Emperor. Moreover, Jeong Do-jeon had tremendous power in Joseon and his perspective could not be avoided. He was the Head of the Finance Commission, the head of personnel appointments, and chief of the state's military. Beyond all that, he was King Taejo's most trusted advisor, serving as the wise minister who Jeong believed should always "correct the faults of the ruler...and prevent improper royal orders from being performed so as to lead the throne to attain the state of the great balance [in state affairs]."2

It's unclear how much the wily Jeong Do-jeon was or was not directly involved in a series of Joseon memorials that were to enrage the Hongwu emperor in King Taejo's later years, but Ming loudly claimed that he was the central offender. Perhaps Jeong had been careless in crafting a message to Ming. Maybe he meant to purposely poke insults at the Emperor. Or perhaps the Ming made much ado about nothing in the end. What we know is that in the fall of 1395 a long series of diplomatic conflicts with the Ming began to unfold. They would challenge Joseon-Ming relations for years and would help to catalyze the sad events that brought an end to King Taejo's reign.

Things began well enough that fall of 1395. Yi Bang-won had returned with a successful visit to Ming in 1394, Japanese piracy had been subdued after Park Wui's campaign of 1393, and Joseon seemed a new world on the rise. On October 30, 1395, there was a big poetry and dance party in the palace, with drumming, gongs, and festive singing. King Taejo and Jeong Do-jeon both enjoyed their wine and things grew boisterous. Remembering those dangerous days when King Taejo lay injured and politically vulnerable after a horsing accident, while Jeong Do-jeon was facing execution, a joyous Sambong playfully teased the God of Joseon. "I wish Your Majesty would not forget the days when you fell from your horse, and I the days when I wore a wooden collar around my neck!"3 The King laughed and told the musicians to play on

and pushed the scholar to take off his formal wear and dance about the great hall. Taejo then gave his good friend a fur-lined turtle jacket and asked the musicians to play the *Mundeokgok* ("The Enlightened Virtue of our King"). The King and the scholar danced and danced, until the early morning.⁴

The party was glorious, but just weeks earlier a message had been sent to Ming that would contribute to years of trouble. Earlier that month, on October 10, King Taejo had sent a New Year's message of celebration to the Ming Emperor. Jeong Do-jeon was likely involved in drafting it. Taejo had no idea of the trouble this small missive would end up causing, but a royal headache was about to begin. In fact, when the Ming Emperor received the New Year's memorial, he was outraged. This is not a message of respect, the Emperor exclaimed, but a clever insult, containing several careless phrases and mocking passages with double meanings. It seemed as if Joseon was trying to secretly mock Hongwu, right under his nose. Hongwu later identified Jeong Do-jeon as the likely author and ordered him sent to Ming immediately to explain himself.⁵

Taejo's message to the Ming Emperor was a formal, ceremonial communication—a *piao*—a congratulatory message sent to the Emperor on a special occasion.⁶ All diplomatic messages with the Ming Emperor were highly important, ritualized communications, meant to demonstrate the sincerity and respect of a tributary country, and thereby allay any possible misunderstandings or tensions between countries. Reflecting their importance, messages had to be crafted on a specially prepared memorial paper. Highly skilled calligraphers transcribed the text in beautiful thin characters, with references to the emperor or the imperial state elevated and printed in bold to demonstrate Ming superiority. The document had standard dimensions of height and width, and precisely twenty rows of characters per column. The Joseon King's seal would be stamped on the document, and it was placed in a case of ritual specification. The moral order of the political universe was manifest in the document itself, with Ming's special place made clear.⁷

But now the Ming court believed that Jeong Do-jeon had hidden low insults inside all the gilded finery. There were all

sorts of insults hidden in the crafty diction, as well as purposefully miswritten characters, the Emperor proclaimed. The note was full of “ornate allusions” and “suspicious homophones,” insulting the Emperor and the imperial state.⁸ As divine emperor, Zhu prohibited any messages that reminded him of his humble peasant roots, so perhaps some characters violated that rule, leading Zhu to find frivolous and degrading phrases in the message. It’s all unclear, as the original messages has been lost to history.

For his part, King Taejo claimed no insight into what the problem could be. “Being originally a military person, I have little knowledge and understanding,” he reported to the Emperor.⁹ The point of all my communications are to celebrate and honor the great Ming empire, so how can we be hiding secret insults? Taejo asked. When presented with a beautiful face, the Ming Emperor seemed to be “blowing away hair to look for blemishes.”¹⁰ In fact, there is little evidence in any historical record as to what message could have been so offensive, and many historians agree with King Taejo that it all seemed to be a huge (purposeful?) over-reaction by the Ming court.¹¹ In any case, the incident soon metastasized into a three-year conflict with Ming, revealing a deadly undergrowth of deep tensions in Ming-Joseon relations and internal divisions about the future of the Joseon dynasty.

At the end of 1395, King Taejo held court with his advisors to decide what to do about Ming demands. There were demands that Joseon give up Jeong Do-jeon (Taejo’s top official) or face nasty consequences. Even though a majority of Taejo’s advisors supported sending Jeong Do-jeon on a dangerous trip to Ming, King Taejo would not do it. This was a highly dangerous assignment, as Ming officials frequently abused Joseon envoys. Envoys were detained for months and even years, made to walk for long distances without horses, beaten for small mistakes in etiquette, and sometimes even executed. One envoy to Ming was in such despair over possible consequences when he was found with a suspicious bit of shamanic text hidden in his clothes that he leapt into a well and drowned himself.¹² Jeong Do-jeon was simply too important an advisor, and the Emperor’s attitude too dire, to allow Taejo’s Chief of State to go to Ming.

King Taejo replied to the Ming court that Jeong Do-jeon didn't have much to do with drafting the offending missive. Instead, he sent an aged monk, Kim Yak-hang, as the supposed author. The elderly Kim could hardly walk, but staunchly agreed to go to Ming to account for the memorial. King Taejo sent him with an explanation that it was all an honest mistake caused by Joseon's inadequate knowledge. I am "surprised and deeply mortified" at our errors, Taejo apologized. Joseon is "crude in its use of words and too ignorant to master the various ways of composing memorials," Taejo admitted, but sincere in its loyalty.¹³

But the Hongwu Emperor would not bend. "Stop playing scholarly tricks," Zhu demanded, and just send us Jeong Do-jeon if you want to avoid war.¹⁴ It's unclear why Ming rulers were so set on punishing Jeong Do-jeon, but it could be that they were concerned that Jeong had militaristic intentions regarding Joseon's northern border with Ming. In fact, during this time, Jeong Do-jeon (as head of the army) had started serious military training of an increasingly centralized army, including preparations on the northern border, so Ming authorities had reasons to worry over his intentions.

At this time, the Ming court was holding several previous envoys hostage (now including Kim Yak-hang the elder) and refused to release any of them until King Taejo submitted Jeong Do-jeon.¹⁵ The Ming Emperor explained that he would hold these envoys for a long time, so Taejo should send their wives and servants, to attend them to during their long detention. If Taejo didn't send the families, the envoys would be impressed into military service in Ming.¹⁶

As Joseon prepared family members to join the detained envoys in Ming, the tense standoff continued into the summer of 1396. One Ming envoy arrived in Joseon in June of 1396 with new demands to give up Jeong Do-jeon. This envoy had even brought some soldiers with him to help escort Jeong back to Ming. King Taejo welcomed the Ming envoys with full honors and put them up in a lovely guest house. He invited them to feasts, night after night, and falcon hunts during the day. Sumptuous foods, dancing girls, refined *kisaeng*, and clever eunuchs were always available to entertain the envoys,

either in the colorful royal pavilions or afterhours in their guesthouse quarters.¹⁷

The festivities went one for three weeks, until finally the Ming envoy returned to the nasty business at hand. “We came here on a mission given by the Emperor, but we have not accomplished anything yet,” the envoy admitted to Taejo. “If we keep on enjoying ourselves, drinking wine, how should we report to the emperor when we return home? If you can tell us about the decision you have made, however, we don’t mind getting drunk day after day.” King Taejo deftly ignored this request for a decision and sent his grand councilors to the envoys the next day, inviting them to yet another party. The envoys decided that another day or two of debauchery couldn’t hurt and headed for the pavilion.¹⁸

A Joseon Poet in the Ming Court

The parties couldn’t go on forever and King Taejo finally had to give his answer. In early July, Taejo sent the Ming emperor four reasons he could not send Jeong Do-jeon to China. First, Jeong Do-jeon didn’t draft the missive. Second, Jeong is 55 years-old and the journey is difficult. Third, Jeong is Director of the State Finance Commission and has important work in Joseon. Fourth, Jeong had abdominal bloating and a troublesome disease.¹⁹ Once again, Taejo repeated that there was no insult intended in any messages sent to the Emperor. “So we are utterly at a loss” and can offer only gifts and respect, Taejo concluded. He sent along a new ritual missive, drafted to celebrate the Emperor’s birthday, and offered twelve quality horses as a gift.²⁰

King Taejo also sent along one other token of good will. He wouldn’t send Jeong Do-jeon, but he did send another envoy—the *sadaebu* Gwon Geun, a ranking official and highly achieved poet of Joseon, well versed in literary Chinese. While Jeong Do-jeon felt any trip to Ming was hopeless, Minister Gwon Geun stepped up and volunteered for the assignment. He argued that the voluntary journey of a high scholar-official like him would placate the Hongwu Emperor and convince him of Joseon’s loyalty. Many in Joseon’s court were greatly

impressed at Gwon Geun's courage and spoke poorly of Jeong Do-jeon, who seemed to be avoiding the risk.

Jeong Do-jeon grew angry and reminded King Taejo that Gwon Geun often sided with the conservative Yi Saek faction and had supported Jo Min-soo back when Chang became king over Yi Seong-gye's opposition, several years ago. He can't be trusted and "I urge you not to send him," Jeong warned. But Taejo disagreed and sent the poet to Ming.²¹ Jeong Do-jeon turned his attention to overseeing a new wave of military training, so Joseon could be ready for the days to come.

These were darkening days. Mutual suspicions divided Jeong Do-jeon's faction from those that wanted to mollify the Ming by sending top officials on journeys of supplication. While Jeong Do-jeon strengthened the army and made preparations along the border, Ming constantly threatened war and invasion of its own. Several hostages were held in Nanjing. Some unusual natural disasters around Joseon led one of King Taejo's officials to even proclaim the judgement of Heaven and urged Taejo to submit more fully to Ming. "When a nation is not ruled properly, Heaven reacts with natural disaster," proclaimed a cheeky assistant director of the Security Council.²²

In the troubled late summer of 1396, more bad news came. As the poet Gwon Geun headed for Ming, the long illness of Taejo's wife, Lady Kang, reached a crisis. So that a baleful ghost would not be left to wander the palace if she died there, King Taejo's beloved second wife was taken out of the palace and transferred to the private home of Yi Tukhun, Director of Palace Attendants.²³ Kangbi had been sick all spring and summer. In January and February that year she had attended Buddhist temple on Geumgangsan (the site of the Maitreya enshrinement of the Sarira Reliquary, years before). There she prayed all night with King Taejo. In March, Taejo and Kangbi had visited a hot spring in Chungcheondo. It was their first hot springs trip together since he became King and their last happy occasion together. Soon after that trip, plague struck and Lady Kang fell ill, never to recover. By August 13, Lady Kang had fallen into a coma. That day, King Taejo held his queen close as she spoke incoherently. Finally, Kangbi closed her eyes and died; she was just 41 years old. One legend says

that among her final wishes, amid incoherent ramblings, Kangbi implored King Taejo to protect the crown prince, her young son Bang-seok.²⁴

The King fell into grief, cancelling all his meetings and closing the court and all the markets for the next ten days. He banned alcohol and falconry, both in the capital and in the provinces.²⁵ The King and all his officials put on dull sackcloth and hemp belts. Attendants wrapped the Queen's body in a shroud, and prepared mourning rites. Two days after her death, King Taejo put on a white mourning robe and travelled out of Hanyang to Anamdong to look over possible sites for the Queen's tomb, as none had yet been determined. Several sites were visited outside of the city, but officials argued so strongly over one proposed site that the King had them all severely flogged. Another site proved too marshy.²⁶

Finally, the King abandoned protocol and selected a tomb site in the very center of the new capital, right along the road leading from his palace to the southern gate of Sungnyemun, near Namdaemun market. Placing a tomb in the heart of the capital violated Confucian protocols that burials of any sort had to be located outside of the city walls, but the King pressed forward. Taejo was pleased to be able to supervise every aspect of the tomb's capital city construction and was happy that he would easily be able to venerate the Queen's remains. Showing respect for the fallen Queen, Taejo commissioned the governor of Tamna island (far to the south) to travel to the capital and oversee a team of master masons who carved intricate designs in the granite slabs that would encircle the Queen's tomb. Twelve spirit general carvings were among the massive stone slabs, each guarding the queen while standing among swirling clouds of carved stone.²⁷ He assigned a merit subject to watch over and maintain the deceased queen's tomb for three years. The grieving King returned to his court, and for the next three months ate no meat.²⁸

Two weeks after her death, the Court of Royal Sacrifices submitted Queen Sindeok as the sanctified temple name for Lady Kang, and *Jeongneung* as the name of her royal tomb. On the first day of 1397, hundreds of officials gathered for final rites for Queen's Sindeok's corpse. As final evening preparations were made for the transfer of the Queen's palace coffin

to its tomb, shooting stars streaked across the sky.²⁹ The next day, all the officials dressed in white robes with black belts and went to the palace hall where the Queen's coffin lay in state. There, they performed the final rituals before taking the queen's coffin to the royal tomb. The rites included a long ceremony of official proclamations, assigned wailers, burning of incense, presentation of ritual foods, hanging of banners, and lighting of a candle. Officials also prepared a spirit tablet for the Queen, in the Hall of Benevolent Tranquility.³⁰ This Hall was located on the grounds of Gyeongbok Palace, where the Queen's chestnut spirit tablet would remain until the death of the King, whereafter both the King and the Queen's spirits were expected to be enshrined together at the Jongmyo Ancestral Shrine.

Queen Sindeok's burial mound was in the center of the city, right next to a Buddhist Temple (Heungcheonsa) that King Taejo ordered built in her memory. Temple monks were directed to ring a large bronze bell and perform daily prayers for the soul of Queen Sindeok. For months to come; "in his affection and sorrow, [King Taejo] refused to pick up his utensils to eat until he heard the temple drum assuring him that the monks were offering prayers for the spirit of his beloved queen."³¹ In addition, the King regularly offered personal sacrifices to the Queen's spirit tablet, in the Hall of Benevolent Tranquility. The prominence of the Queen's tomb, the daily prayers of the monks, and the King's own sincere dedication, reminded everyone of Queen Sindeok's exalted status in the capital, and of the fact that she was mother of the young crown prince.

After a few months of preparing her tomb and mourning for Queen Sindeok, King Taejo returned to diplomacy with the Ming envoys remaining in Joseon. On the 8th day of the 11th month in 1396, Taejo visited the Chinese envoy Niu Niu at the guest house, where he had been staying for months. For the first time since Queen Sindeok died, Taejo ate meat. The next day, the Chinese envoys set out through the palace grounds to thank Taejo, but one of them fell off his horse and grew enraged. He started furiously whipping the Joseon official sent to greet him. To calm everything down, Taejo had to have the

stable manager locked up in the Capital Constabulary for the crime of providing the Chinese envoy with an unruly horse.³²

A few weeks after that, on the 23rd of November, the Chinese envoy was finally set to return home, leaving on the same day that Joseon court officials were allowed to remove their mourning clothes for Kangbi. King Taejo sent several supplicating memorials along with the Chinese envoy, including details about how some members of a Ming envoy party had recently drowned in the Yalu River crossing over to Joseon, but explaining that it was not Joseon's fault. It seemed the envoy had overloaded his boat with cattle, and it had tipped over in some rapids on the flooded Yalu River, drowning the boatman and several envoys amid a throng of panicked cows.³³

Though this incident was unfortunate, things were in fact looking up for Joseon's relations with Ming. When the poet Gwon Geun arrived at the Ming capital a few months earlier, the Emperor was very impressed with his erudite Chinese and delicate words.³⁴ He bestowed royal court robes upon Gwon Geun and three other envoys who had been detained in Ming (Jeong Chong, Kim Yak-hang, No In-do) and invited Gwon Geun to travel about Nanjing for three days. Gwon Geun could see the sites of Nanjing, fraternize with court scholars, attend feasts, and compose poetry.

It was a glorious time for Gwon Geun. He was shown around by Ming Ministers and eminent scholars, who he said looked "like ornate orioles and brilliant phoenix flying about the Forbidden Forest." Every meal was a feast of "rare foods and fragrant fish."³⁵ Perfumed dancing girls, beautiful views and fine wine filled his three-day literary sojourn.

After one day, Gwon wrote his poetic praise: "Returning to My Quarters After Having Drinks at Nanshi Pavilion."

*Watching exciting dances while having a gold
cup full of wine,
I could not help reciting a new poem again to
the sound of the lute.
Having already found great favor with the
emperor, how can I decline to drink?*

*As I returned to my quarters quite drunk, the
moon was high in the sky.*

After two days, more poetry poured out in Gwon's "Revisiting Heming Pavilion and Listening to the Sound of Jade Pendants."

*A girl wearing jade pendants walks
towards me lightly.
It's such a pleasure to listen to her song,
To the accompaniment of the exquisite
lute.
But it's equally wonderful to observe her
slim hand offering wine in a gold cup.*

After three days, following a visit to Belshi Tower, more poetry.

*Relaxing I drink and open my heart,
Truly falling beyond debauchery.
Getting help to go home, I felt lonely as
the wind blows.³⁶*

The result of this resplendent experience was a set of poems that Gwon Geun and the Emperor of China came to exchange with each other. Gwon Geun's poems celebrated the beauty of Ming and the greatness of the Emperor. He wrote about how all the vassal states of Asia were a chess board of loyal pieces, admiring the Emperor. "Wide open is the palace gate of the great nation...I wish that I could spread my loyalty and sincerity on it, and that the Emperor could notice it even a little." Geun's "Arriving at the Capital with My Order from Joseon" well represented the mood of several poems that he dedicated to the Hongwu Emperor.

*The flourishing majesty of Your Highness'
sagely rule brings peace and security to all,
people from afar come bearing tribute that has
crossed distant mountains and streams.*

*Auspicious mists gather in profusion,
surrounding your august abode in a
magnificent aura, resplendent in radiant
vestments, the emperor's affairs flourish.*

*Mists of dawn withdraw, revealing the sun-like
demeanor of Your Highness, a divine wind
delivers fragrance from the incense burner.*

*This humble servant is bathed in favor of your
imperial grace, entering to wait upon your
majesty and draw near to your radiance.³⁷*

By the end of this splendid poetic exchange, the emperor was impressed with Joseon's erudition and sincerity and was reassured about Joseon's non-military intentions. The Emperor informed all four envoys that they could return home to Joseon with good news. The envoys long held hostage, together with the poet Gwon Geun, were all told they could finally go home.

The Mourning Clothes Incident

On the day the four envoys gathered in the imperial court to bid the Emperor farewell, only the poet Gwon Geun wore the formal court robes bestowed upon them by the Emperor. The other three wore white mourning clothes in honor of Joseon's Deceased Queen Sindeok, whose passing they had only recently learned about. But such white robes violated Ming court etiquette and the Emperor grew enraged. He ordered Jeong Chong, Yak Hang, and No Indo all taken away for brutal interrogation. Only Gwon Geun was allowed to leave for home. All three of the other envoys were soon executed in Ming. They had all been highly achieved officials and Merit Subjects in Joseon.³⁸

When Gwon Geun arrived in Joseon, he brought mixed news. Though the other envoys had been executed, Ming was ready to restore good relations. The Emperor invited Joseon to send envoys without risk in the future, under certain conditions. First of all, Joseon should be more careful in always

sincerely respecting the more powerful Ming. "There is only one sun, and you cannot look down on it," the Hongwu Emperor observed. Furthermore, "when you send envoys to China, send the ones who are proficient in Chinese language; otherwise do not send envoys at all."³⁹

The Ming Emperor also sent along touching condolences for the deceased Lady Kang, calling her Taejo's "first queen consort," and "mother for the nation."⁴⁰ In an imperial letter of condolence, a Chinese envoy shared the emperor's message to the King of Joseon.

When he transformed his old household into the royal family of the nation, Lady Kang supported him as his wife and set a good example as the mother for the nation, didn't she? Though she left him, he finds her traces everywhere, so he feels her absence more poignantly, doesn't he? When she was alive, she got up early to assist him to dress and made sure that he was not late for his schedule, constantly checking the water clock. And when he was late for dinner, being too busy with state affairs, she helped him to have meals properly. When he went out to preside over the morning audience, she saw him off with court ladies, and when he returned in the evening after dark, she waited for him along with court ladies, holding a candle in her hand, and escorted him to his bed chamber.

Now she is gone forever and there is no one who looks at the mirror hanging on the wall. Neither is there one who attends the King when he goes out early to preside over the morning audience nor one who shares conversation with him when he returns late to his bedchamber. The only ones that he sees are the court ladies and female servants who shed tears, touching and stroking her coffin.⁴¹

It was a touching tribute and suggested a growing civility in Ming-Joseon relations. Then, the Ming Emperor raised one other promising subject in terms of Ming-Joseon relations. "I have grandsons and the King of Joseon has granddaughters. Let's have them marry each other."⁴²

This marriage proposal was a promising development indeed, even though the Hongwu Emperor once again also denounced Jeong Do-jeon. He urged King Taejo to avoid "a few aberrant Confucian scholars," strutting about with pretend strength and "bringing disaster to their people."⁴³ "What they do is dangerous enough to bring the disaster of war to the land of Joseon and deprive the king of his domain. What is the use of employing such worthless people?" The Emperor urged King Taejo to "deeply think over what I have said."⁴⁴

King Taejo deeply thought things over but refused to demote Jeong Do-jeon. But he did plan to accept the arranged marriage proposal. Joseon's royal family would now be intermarried into the Ming Dynasty. King Taejo celebrated the excellent work of Gwon Geun in restoring relations and rewarded the scholar nicely.

But Jeong Do-jeon was enraged about the constant insults and felt that Gwon Geun might have had something to do with the Ming's continued hostility towards him. He instigated the Inspector General to impeach Gwon for returning home while other envoys were still detained and subsequently executed in Ming. And he urged King Taejo to inspect where in the world Gwon Geun had obtained all his recent gold. Didn't it seem like ill-gotten gains? Perhaps even bribery from Ming?

"How do you know that Geun was awarded gold?" King Taejo asked.

"I heard that Geun used gold to pay for his expenses. Unless the gold was bestowed by the emperor, how could such a poor scholar obtain gold?" Jeong Do-jeon cleverly replied.

King Taejo burst out laughing. "Even though he is a poor scholar, are there no ways for him to get gold?" Taejo then told Jeong Do-jeon that he himself had awarded Geun with gold for all his great service. "At a time when the emperor was enraged, [Geun] volunteered to go to China and mollify the emperor. As a result, the emperor no longer demanded that you appear at his imperial court. So Geun made contributions

not only to the country but also to you yourself. I was going to reward him, but you want me to punish him?"

Jeong Do-jeon fell silent and retreated for a time.⁴⁵

The Etched Saddle Affair

King Taejo now set out to pursue the proposal of marrying his granddaughter into the imperial family. Several gift horses were prepared with fine saddles to indicate King Taejo's pleasant reception of the Emperor's recent messages, including his proposal of a royal marriage. Upon delivery of King Taejo's gift horses, however, there arose the unfortunate "Etched Saddle Affair." When Joseon's gift saddle horses arrived in Ming, the Emperor inspected them and found the horses and saddles all to be weak and flawed. He immediately sent an envoy to Joseon, putting a pause on the marriage idea. "Upon seeing how the gifts were produced and presented, I could not help but be disappointed and skeptical because such an unfavorable beginning of our new relationship foreboded an undesirable consequence in the end."⁴⁶

It got worse. It seems that a few days earlier, a different saddle had been presented to Ming by the Director of Joseon's Saddlery Service. The Emperor's people had inspected this fine golden saddle and found the character for "Heaven" etched upon it. The Emperor was outraged at such a thing. "A saddle is a thing that a man sits on. How then can a man sit on Heaven? This is an insult to me." The Hongwu Emperor likely took the insult quite personally, considering he claimed to be the "Son of Heaven," specially chosen by God to rule "All under Heaven."⁴⁷ The angry emperor had the saddle burned.⁴⁸

Based on this previous incident, the Emperor now had all of King Taejo's marriage-gift saddles inspected, even tearing them apart to see the insides. Sure enough, the saddles were found with secret insults. As the Emperor reported to Taejo, "When we pulled them apart, we found some characters inscribed inside them...Several eunuchs cut the saddles apart, and they found the Chinese character *tian* [signifying heaven] inscribed on both sides of the seat upside down, and characters such as *xuan* [signifying darkness] and *shi* [signifying ten] inscribed on other parts of the seat." It seems

there might have been some secret insults and strange shamanic hexes embedded with these inscriptions.

Finding the damning evidence, Hongwu stood up slowly and personally examined the saddle. "How can they be as tricky as that?" he wondered. "When we write characters on documents, we always make sure that the character *tian* comes first, on top. I have never ridden on a saddle like that."⁴⁹

Joseon seemed to purposely be casting dangerous curses towards Ming and it was unforgiveable. The proposed marriage was called off. Hongwu demanded that Joseon provide 20,000 troops to Ming to help make up for the etched saddle insult. A Joseon envoy was detained at the border for 42 days until finally being denied entry and sent home. Another Joseon envoy at the end of the year was detained and taken hostage into Ming.⁵⁰ A renewed round of critiques were sent regarding Joseon's insulting memorials and requiring the submission of Jeong Do-jeon. Things were back at square one.

About a month after the Etched Saddle Affair, Ming sent yet another missive to Joseon charging that Joseon officials were purposely insulting Ming and deserved punishment. Three low-level Joseon officials were charged with adding trickery to a memorial on the birthday of the imperial crown prince. According to Ming accusations, these three had conspired to produce a memorial with some clever homophones in it that might insult the Chinese crown prince without the Ming court even realizing it. "Why don't we produce some characters similar in sound and have them hidden in the memorial?" the three tricksters said to each other. "Let's find out if China has scholars intelligent enough to discover them." This, anyway, is what the Ming envoy alleged the Joseon officials to have said.⁵¹

King Taejo's advisors were at a loss. The three accused officials were all rather obscure. One was illiterate in Chinese, and the other two only had basic skills, so how would they have pulled off such a literary conspiracy? These three officials "did not attempt to mock or insult the Chinese court, and the spirits of heaven and earth are our witnesses!" maintained court officials.

Everyone believed that there must be something bigger behind all these preposterous charges—some reason that the

Ming rulers constantly “try to conspire against us.”⁵² But no one could determine exactly why Ming was so angry at Joseon. A majority at court felt there was unfortunately little option but to give up the three unlucky officials and hope for the best. King Taejo sent a letter to Ming, along with the three hapless officials, explaining that they all had poor literary skills and couldn’t possibly have pulled off such a clever trick. Having read Ming’s charges, “I am so surprised and awed that I am completely at a loss,” Taejo said. The charges are ridiculous, but Taejo still planned to deliver the officials to Ming.⁵³

The Drunken Eunuch Incident

As the unfortunate officials were sent north to Ming in early summer, they must have crossed paths with yet another Ming envoy that was travelling south and arrived in Joseon in late June. On June 22, the eunuch Sin Kwisaeng arrived in Joseon with a letter from China’s Ministry of Rites. Kwisaeng was a Korean native but had served as a court eunuch in Ming for decades. He had come to love Ming culture and power so now the Ming court decided to send him back home to tell Joseon all about Ming superiority. On June 22, Sin Kwisaeng arrived at the south gate of Hanyang. Taejo sent attendants to greet Sin with music, dancers, and royal wine at the gate. He also ordered his own eunuch, Yi Kwang, to bestow new clothing, a hat, and new shoes upon the envoy.

But Sin Kwisaeng was insulted at the slight. Why had King Taejo himself not come out to greet him? Kwisaeng angrily pulled out a scroll and arrogantly demanded to see the King immediately. “This is an instruction given by the emperor himself!” Kwisaeng proclaimed.⁵⁴

Therefore, King Taejo prepared to receive the eunuch Kwisaeng in the royal palace, in ceremonial dress. Kwisaeng ascended to a high seat in the hall, and King Taejo knelt down to receive the letter from the Emperor. It was a strange missive. For some time, the letter went on and on about the fantastic skills and high intelligence of Kwisaeng and described how the emperor had trained him well. The letter then proclaimed that the job of Kwisaeng was to educate the Joseon court about how elevated and inspiring everything was in

Ming and cause Joseon officials to be awestruck. "This is the instruction of the Emperor, and we duly convey it to you," said Kwisaeng pompously, as he waited on King Taejo to perform the ritual kowtows before him.⁵⁵

All Joseon's ministers were greatly offended and found Kwisaeng insufferable as he strutted about, instructing them on various aspects of Ming superiority. They learned that Kwisaeng had also showed off to Korean field officers all along the road into Hanyang, bragging about all the items the Emperor had bestowed upon him. Kwisaeng would place these items on top of a table to show them off, and then sit down to guard them fiercely, pulling out his sword. Everywhere along the road, he would place these prized items in a horse-drawn carriage and follow behind, brandishing a menacing sword.

It was soon discovered that all these supposed gifts of the emperor were actually just the eunuch's own possessions.⁵⁶ King Taejo refused to entertain the deceptive and arrogant envoy personally, which caused Kwisaeng to grow so indignant he would not drink with anyone else who attended him. Finally, King Taejo agreed to host a dinner for Sin Kwisaeng on July 3rd. Unfortunately, Kwisaeng got very drunk and belligerent at that dinner, pulling out his sword and waving it about angrily.⁵⁷

Other than that unfortunate incident, the King ignored Kwisaeng's visit, and focused instead on the status of central army troop training. Affairs with Ming seemed to be deteriorating, to the point of Ming sending insulting drunks as envoys, and Taejo was determined to build a more effective military. Jeong Do-jeon had developed an innovative system of new field maneuvers guided by long work on his "Diagram of Troop Dispositions." King Taejo had ordered manuals of these troop dispositions sent to all the provincial army commanders and he was eager to see how their training was going.⁵⁸ Jeong Do-jeon also continued to reinforce garrisons on the northern border and stepped up his campaign to absorb private military forces into a state-managed central army, under his control.

But Yi Bang-won, who had once greatly impressed the Ming court, refused to participate in Jeong Do-jeon's training and kept his private troops to himself.⁵⁹ It was a direct violation of the King's own orders.