

“With Horses Driven Like That, One Can Go to War”



In ancient days, the Holy King of the East, Jumong, was the founding King of Goguryeo. Yuhwa, the mother of Jumong, was the daughter of Habaek, the river god, and it was on the banks of the Yalu River that Jumong was conceived. Jumong became an excellent horseman and archer of the northern lands and one day he crossed over the Yalu River on the backs of helpful turtles and fishes, coming south into the Korean peninsula. Jumong united many tribes of Korean peoples and founded the kingdom of Goguryeo. Goguryeo became a great power, ruling lands north and south of the Yalu river for 705 years, with 28 consecutive kings. Jumong and his kingdom drew power from the great Yalu River, where the spirit of his grandmother lived as a god.¹



There were good days in the spring of 1397. In late March, King Taejo took a trip to the hot springs to recuperate with Jeong Do-jeon, Cho Chun, and Nam Eun, three of Joseon’s leading radicals. Taejo enjoyed discussions with his old friends and recalled all they had achieved together. Before they left the springs, the King bestowed honorary straw hats and jade hat strings on the three eminent scholars.²

The next day, as they left the hot springs, King Taejo received a welcome update on the recent surrender of many Japanese pirates. The day after that, on his journey back to Hanyang, Taejo went hunting, with a falcon perched on his arm. These were good days of merriment and officials “engaged in boisterous, drunken merrymaking at night, joined by entertaining women and playing loud music.”³

But the troubling issue of relations with Ming festered. While spring festivities blossomed, Gwon Geun had returned alone from Ming that March with news that the other three Joseon envoys had been executed. King Taejo was so frustrated with the situation that he began to turn over an old

idea in his mind: perhaps the time had come to join with Jurchen and Mongol peoples and pour over the Yalu, taking those northern territories from Ming.

From his first days in power, Taejo had paid close attention to military matters. He created an elite royal guard to protect his family, filled mostly with loyal warriors from the north. He worked with Jeong Do-jeon and Cho Chun to begin centralizing the nation's military, hoping to replace the scattered private armies of influential families with a more professionally trained and centrally integrated national army.⁴ This process would take some time to complete, as so many military commanders and influential families had their own loyal private forces, and that included Taejo's own sons.⁵ But planning towards those ends got underway in the first year of King Taejo's reign.

By Taejo's order, Assistant Chancellor Jeong Do-jeon took the lead in the military planning and reorganization. To demonstrate his thinking on the matter, in the fall of 1393, Jeong produced some images called *Pictures of the Hunting Scenes in the Four Seasons* and presented them to the King. These scenes were of hunting parties, which Taejo was very fond of, but they also cleverly showed military formations for a new training system that Jeong Do-jeon was contemplating.⁶

Then Jeong Do-jeon had some troops perform a demonstration of his new military system for the King. In November of 1393, Jeong "mustered the troops on the *kyokku* ground and drew them up in a battle array. Then, he trained them to respond to the sound of drums and horns as well as banners and signals and practice advance and retreat."⁷ King Taejo was excited by what he saw and authorized Jeong to move forward with the long plan of nationalizing the military and overseeing a new training regimen.

Jeong Do-jeon had a vision of a unified military command, featuring well-trained, enlisted soldiers with required periods of mandatory service.⁸ But many commanders of Joseon's scattered private forces were loath to give up their personal armies. Several commanders simply refused to show up at Jeong's scheduled trainings.⁹ In January of 1394, a grand sacrifice to the banner of the central military commander

(Jeong Do-jeon) was organized. Central commander Jeong showed up in full military regalia to receive honors from other military officials—but several lesser commanders refused to even attend, and one was openly critical of the whole project. An enraged Taejo had many of these resistive commanders beaten with a paddle and he executed the most vocal critic.¹⁰

In February and March more trainings were held. On March 3rd, Jeong Do-jeon was appointed head of the three armies—Joseon’s central military forces. Several court officials complained about the increasing centralization of military and political power under Jeong Do-jeon, but King Taejo angrily dismissed anyone who spoke out strongly on this matter. When one Palace Censor interpreted “strange celestial phenomenon” as the voice of Heaven criticizing Taejo for elevating Jeong Do-jeon, Taejo had the Censor locked up, tortured, and exiled.¹¹

For his part, Jeong Do-jeon approached his job with gusto. He created a new military training book (*The Diagram of Troop Dispositions*), which King Taejo found promising. Taejo agreed with Jeong’s analysis that adequate military preparedness required constant training of soldiers in all seasons, just as in the days of China’s Zhou dynasty.¹² In the spring of 1395, Taejo ordered the Three Armies (the central armies of Joseon) to publish and study both of Jeong Do-jeon’s texts: *Pictures of Hunting Scenes* and *Diagram of Troop Dispositions*.¹³

After the Ming Emperor executed the three Joseon envoys in the spring of 1397, Taejo’s heart hardened, and he ordered training to become more rigorous and widespread. In the summer of 1397, Taejo directed the *Diagram of Troop Dispositions* to be distributed to all his provincial commanders and subordinate officers. He commanded officers to study it carefully in preparation for field training to come. In August that year, Taejo dispatched instructors well versed in *Diagram of Troop Dispositions* to all the provinces. Provincial officers and soldiers of the three armies were ordered to gather on city and village streets and begin practicing the troop dispositions.¹⁴

Jeong Do-jeon and Nam Eun grew excited at the national mobilization that summer of 1397 and urged Taejo to raise an

army and send it to cross the Yalu and invade Liaodong. The two fiery philosophers wanted to get fellow radical Cho Chun on board, so they headed to his house, where Cho lay very ill in bed. But Cho Chun found the whole idea crazy and likely to ruin Joseon. Against the wishes of his friends, he rose from his sick bed, ordered his sedan, and was carried by servants to talk with the King. With animated opposition, Cho Chun convinced Taejo that invading Liaodong would be a disaster. "The two chancellors [Jeong Do-jeon and Nam Eun] might be good at handling a few bushels of grain but are incapable of discussing important affairs that concern the future of the state," Cho Chun insisted. In the end, Taejo shared Cho Chun's caution and promised he would not invade.¹⁵

Though Taejo was not prepared to send a serious military force to the northern border just yet, he did continue ambitious plans and made military preparations. In October of 1397, he received a memorial documenting a range of military issues needing attention. The granaries did not have enough food storage to support two years of war. The costs of the capital construction were so high that military expenditures had fallen behind. King Taejo was urged to tax surplus food heavily this year, and to spend frugally, so that the granary supply could be built up. Jeong Do-jeon was appointed Commissioner of Military Supply Warehouses to see this plan through. A plan was also introduced to rationalize the conscription of troops through a careful census of the population and innovative use of new "tiger tally" counting sticks whenever troops were called up.¹⁶

Things were also changing in the royal palace during these days. For one thing, crown Prince Bang-seok was growing older. Now fifteen years old, Bang-seok had presented wine to King Taejo on the occasion of the Hongwu Emperor's birthday (September 22). By this time, Bang-seok had also married Lady Sim of the Buyu Sim clan. On September 27th, the King dressed in his royal robes, invested Lady Sim as the crown princess in the royal audience hall, and bestowed her with the royal script and seal.¹⁷

While happily celebrating the growing maturity of the crown prince and newly invested crown princess, the troubling military squabble with Ming remained. At year's end

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(December 22, 1397), King Taejo decided it was time to send Jeong Do-jeon to the northern border, where he could oversee efforts to win local loyalties and prepare border defenses. Jeong was sent to the northeast and ordered to repair fortresses and ramparts, inspect granaries, create new postal relay stations, clarify civil and military positions, and untangle legal disputes. “Submit detailed reports on the number of resident populations, the quality of military officials in the district, and so forth,” said King Taejo. “And when you find ways to improve the lives of the people, carry them out on your own...”¹⁸

Jeong Do-jeon was a weary 55 years old at this point, with a serious stomach illness and other health problems.¹⁹ Moreover, this was a demanding trip to the rugged and frigid north. Still, Taejo felt that Jeong Do-jeon’s recent military work and his ideas about military action on the border made him the right person for this sensitive job. “[You are] extremely conversant with all kinds of learning throughout history and singularly talented both in literary and martial arts,” King Taejo said. “Hence, I appointed you chief pacification mobile inspector of the Northeast Region. Leave now to your new post and make sure nothing is amiss.”²⁰ To help in the demanding and dangerous work, Taejo sent along his blood brother, the Jurchen Yi Chiran, giving him title as chief regional military commander.

So ended the year 1397.

There were mixed portents to start 1398. In early January, reports arrived that Japanese invasions were dying down after Joseon’s 1397 anti-piracy campaign. As pirates were defeated and new fortresses and moats were built in coastal territories, displaced people began to return home, repopulating the local villages. Fish and salt production were increasing, as were related tax revenues. With the improved economic situation, and to further win the hearts of the people, King Taejo announced increased salaries for officials, the expansion of northern fortresses, and reduced taxes on monasteries, salt, and fish.²¹

More “hearts and minds” legitimation projects were to follow. In February, a grand royal portrait was finished of King Taejo and was sent to be enshrined in the Hall of Deep

Origin in Hamhung.²² This was an ambitious project, meant to project the King's charismatic authority into the fluid northern lands. Once the portrait was finished by the court's best artists, a massive procession was organized to transport the portrait from Hanyang to Hamhung, taking over a week of travel. The procession involved hundreds of people, marching hundreds of li through the countryside. It was headed by the provincial Governor and his guards. Then came the governors and other municipal officers of areas that were passed through along the route.²³ Then came a contingent of guards, carrying ceremonial flags. Next marched a band of musicians, brightly clad in yellow, and playing lutes, cymbals, flutes, drums, and conch horns. Then passed a contingent of guards with horses, tall umbrellas, and ritual specialists guarding palanquin carrying the incense burner. Then passed another collection of musicians, followed by the palanquin carrying the King's portrait. Next another musical band marched, followed by a collection of officials overseeing the whole procession, and finally came a group of rear-guard soldiers. A small army of cooks, teamsters, mechanics, and other attendants accompanied the procession.²⁴

As the procession passed through all the towns and villages on the way to Hamhung, it must have been an awesome spectacle, inevitably radiating a sense of power, purpose, even divinity.²⁵ Those that came to view the grand portrait of the King in Hamhung were affected. The visual shock drove many to tears, others to prayer, some to poetry and prose. King Taejo was systematically projecting and solidifying his charismatic reach towards the border lands.

Back in Hanyang, there were other good signs that spring of 1398. In April, a massive bell meant for the capital's Jongno Pavilion finally finished its journey up from Kwangju, where it had been cast. One thousand and three hundred soldiers were required to transport this bell to Hanyang, where it would be installed as a manifestation of Joseon's new order: ringing the days in and out and proclaiming meritorious deeds. The poet Gwon Geun, only recently returned from Ming, inscribed the bell on the auspicious occasion of its installation at Jongno.

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When Songdo [Gaegyeong] was our capital, the nation was in terrible shape. Then our King took over the nation and replaced tyranny with benevolence. The people no longer saw wars and the clouds looming over the court suddenly cleared. The wise and talented were united in their efforts to bring about peace. Those in near and distant places began to return until the streets were filled with people and their renewed energy. For this reason, a bell was made that will be rung at dawn and at night.²⁶

Jeong Do-jeon offered King Taejo some poetry of his own in these happy days of April, celebrating all that Joseon had become. One poem celebrated all the lovely food cargo ships filling the rivers.²⁷

*Ships gather in the West river from all
quarters,
Fast as dragons carrying thousands of tons of
grain.
Look at the ceiling of the granary getting
rotten with grains.
The secret of good government is to secure
sufficient food.*

Another poem remarked on all the busy, happy enterprise of the new country.

*As the water at the South Ferry runs with
rolling waves
Travelers gather from all quarters to make the
place bustle.
As old people rest while the young carry
baggage,
They exchange songs back and forth while
walking.*

But one of Jeong Do-jeon's poems that April was more foreboding, speaking of how his well-trained soldiers were now prepared for war.

*The resounding sound of bells and drums shake
the earth,
And the flying banners and flags reach out to
the sky.
More than ten thousand horses move as if they
were one.
With the horses driven like that, one can go to
war.*

Jeong Do-jeon faced the mighty Ming empire and didn't blink. For the first three months of 1398, he had surveyed and prepared the northern border forces. It was a dismal, cold time to travel along the Yalu river, so King Taejo used his casual pen name of Song Heon ("Pine Hut") to send the scholar care packages of liquor, warm clothes and political updates to keep his spirits up. "Many days have passed since your departure, so my anxiety about you is growing," wrote Song Heon to Sambong.²⁸

Indeed, it was an anxious time, for when Sambong returned from the border, he spoke of war. Joseon's armies were strong and well trained, he reported. "*With the horses driven like that, one can go to war.*" The Ming rulers deserved punishment for their constant harassment of Joseon. King Taejo was popular among northern Jurchen and Mongol peoples and there were many old Goguryeo lands north of the Yalu River that were ripe for the taking.²⁹ The radical *sadaebu* Nam Eun shared Jeong Do-jeon's enthusiasm for invasion of Liaodong. "The troops have been well-trained, and we have enough provisions," he wrote. "When the time is right, we will be able to recapture the territory that had once belonged to King Tongmyeong of Goguryeo."³⁰

Jeong Do-jeon brought out a book of prophecy and showed it to Taejo to further make the case that the time was right. He told Taejo that the northern peoples of the border regions were the strongest force in China, meaning that if King Taejo won their support, he could even conquer all of the

Middle Kingdom and sit on the dragon throne itself. Moreover, an invasion of Liaodong was a good way to abolish all the private military forces in Joseon and require everyone to join together in a powerful central army.³¹ Abolishing private forces was a dramatic step, and Nam Eun realized that King Taejo’s own private forces had once been vital in overthrowing Goryeo. Without Taejo’s private troops, “I, too, would not have been able to be here with you today” Nam Eun admitted. “[But] years have passed since then and the time has finally arrived to abolish the provincial military commissioner system. If you bring those military units together to form a regular army, it will be much safer.”³²

This was hardly a popular proposal among those with private troops. The meritorious retainers with troops (including King Taejo’s own sons) feared a loss of influence if their troops were absorbed into the central army, and many of them were suspicious of Jeong Do-jeon’s ever growing power. Also, there was the very real possibility of losing a war against Ming if Joseon crossed the Yalu. There were powerful enemies of this war buildup, and Jeong Do-jeon realized the dangerous path he walked. “Because I am foolish by nature and coarse in my learning, I am exposed to frequent attacks and interference every time I made a move, until my life is on the line.”³³

Though no one spoke openly of an actual plan to invade Ming, rumors were in the air. Thousands of commoners were mobilized for corvée labor to enhance Hanyang’s walls and repair old fortresses that summer. More military training went forward in the late spring and summer of 1398. In late May, Jeong Do-jeon ordered the private troops of all the Meritorious Retainers and provincial commanders to join in training according to the *Diagram of Troop Dispositions*. But many commanders simply didn’t show up and those that did show up had not studied the field manuals. Angry at the situation, Jeong Do-jeon became a brutal taskmaster. “Having decided the rules and movements for the provincial commanders and troops, he suddenly had them practice these, beating and lashing the soldiers so there were many who complained about him.”³⁴

This uneasy and tense situation continued into the summer. One minister returned from a field inspection across the peninsula to report that “each garrison failed to give instruction in the *Diagram of Troop Dispositions*.” King Taejo was indignant and ordered all the instructors of each garrison arrested and the garrison commanders investigated. Any garrison commander who hadn’t mastered the *Diagram of Troop Dispositions* was ordered flogged.³⁵

The summer was strange and unsettled. In mid-June, a blood rain fell from the dusty sky, panicking the people. It was an omen of disaster.³⁶ Late spring weather had been unusually scorching, with dry windstorms. Amid the drought, Pine trees browned and withered, and everything dried up around the capital. The barley didn’t grow, and everyone despaired about the harvest. During these days, a huge fire broke out. It burned hundreds of houses and the palace granary, consuming even the chickens and dogs. Watching the blaze, Taejo despaired: “The drought we have had is already too extreme. Now, we are struck by fire. What did I do wrong?”³⁷

Monks held dharma assemblies to pray for the elimination of disasters.³⁸ Many of the *sadaebu* censors said it must be due to disorder in the royal house. The King should look into his own faults and determine what he had done to outrage the heavens, implored the Remonstrators, bowing before the King.

We request that Your Majesty, revering the anger of Heaven and emulating the heart of King Tang, stop all the construction work and return the workers to their homes to look after their families. Then their complaints and resentments will cease, and peace and harmony will be restored.³⁹

In addition to releasing workers from their toil on the city wall and fortresses, Taejo was urged to look into his own vices and daily missteps. One petition that summer urged the King to surround himself daily with more Remonstrators. “Your Majesty now stays mostly in the auxiliary palace, spending time with military officials and enjoying their company, and I

am very concerned about it,” the petitioner noted. It would be better for the King to sit in the palace listening to Confucian censors so that he could learn to “comport yourself” and “regulate your conduct.” “I urge you to let remonstrating officials attend you all the time,” the petition implored. “If you make sure that their words are implemented, and their remonstrance accepted without fail...you will have no problems of erring in judgment.”⁴⁰

One particular complaint was that the King wasn’t attending enough morning audiences with the Confucian Remonstrators and department officials and was spending too much time focused on military matters. So Taejo agreed to do better. The next day he sat on the throne in the Hall of Diligent Government at the crack of dawn, lighting the torches and sounding the drum, and asked his officials to come before him with whatever issues they had. For a few days, hardly anything important was brought up at all, which upset the King. “Why am I coming here at dawn if you don’t have important issues to bring up?” he fumed. But many officials were so frightened at the King’s mercurial temper lately that “they dared not advance towards the king.”⁴¹

After one of these mostly unproductive morning assemblies, even before sunrise, King Taejo returned to his inner royal hall to have a drink on the terrace. He called the Left and Right Chancellors (Jeong Do-jeon and Nam Eun) to join him. The three revolutionary friends became drunk that morning, “discussing the incidents related to founding the new dynasty.”⁴²

After several occasions of attending early morning audiences, the King began skipping them again while the scorching summer wore on. There was even a time when all the high officials assembled in their robes, but the King was not there. Instead, Taejo had went to inspect the Heunchangsa temple under construction in honor of Queen Sindeok and reflected upon her memory.⁴³ Called to account for always missing morning audiences, the King said he would try to do better, but that he was simply wore down and feeling ill. “The reason I failed to attend the morning audience recently is that I was unable to get up early due to my poor health.”⁴⁴ Taejo

resolved to attend more morning assemblies, even if sick, but the King's health was failing fast.

On July 5th, a weary King Taejo heard a troubling report about some locals in Hamhung who cast aspersions on all the fine attention being paid to the old tombs of the King's ancestors. A minister of works had been sent that summer for a site visit to the Dongbukmyeon (Northeast) region. Upon return, the minister noted that the ancestral tombs were looking wonderful. "*Sulleung* [the royal tomb of the King's grandmother] was relocated, and the stone sheep and tiger statues as well as the stone chamber of her tomb were extremely luxurious and splendid," he reported. However, this minister of works also reported negatively on another official who had earlier been sent to the Hamhung region in exile—a certain Chon Si. It seems this exiled minister was taking issue with the excessive pampering of the tombs of the King's ancestors. "Isn't it a little too much for the tomb of the King's grandmother?" Chon Si asked. But the tomb of the King's father-in-law is similarly luxurious, the visiting minister of works observed. To which the exiled Chon noted that this other tomb was *also* excessive and overly luxurious.⁴⁵

When King Taejo heard of this disrespect of his ancestors—and implicit critique of his own decisions—he grew infuriated. He ordered the severe torture of minister Chon Si, until he revealed the names of ten others who had also said critical words about the King and the tombs. All were exiled.

The King must have been in a foul mood because just one week later he heard of another incident whereby several local officials got drunk and voiced criticism of the lavish house of the Prime Minister Cho Chun, who was loyal to King Taejo, as they drunkenly walked by his house in the night. "To say that Chun's fortune will not last is to say that the fortune of the Joseon dynasty is short-lived," fumed the King. He would have none of it. He ordered one official beheaded, had one severely flogged, and lashed another. Nineteen other government inspectors who had been at the drinking party were fired. In a related case, reported that same day in the *Taejo Sillok*, a court official was arrested and tortured for "making critical

remarks related to the Royal Tomb of the King’s grandmother.”⁴⁶

The earth was scorching and the pine trees on the guardian mountains of Hanyang were dying.⁴⁷ Complaints and insults about the fledgling Joseon dynasty seemed to be growing. Now the testy king was ordering beheadings, torture sessions, floggings, lashings, and dismissals for drunken insults, seeing enemies all about. As the summer wore on, Taejo’s illness grew. All the while, the situation of military preparations for possible war against Ming fractured the royal family.

In early summer, King Taejo ordered the creation of a Military Supply Warehouse for the very first time and said that he intended to address the situation of people in eight northern provinces having to endure “prolonged barbarian control.”⁴⁸ Unpopular trainings to create a centralized military continued. On August first, many officers once again skipped a required military training—this one was organized as a comprehensive evaluation of troop readiness. The soldiers of Yi Bang-gwa, Yi Bang-won, Yi Chiran, and Yi Hwa—the King’s sons and his blood brother—all failed the evaluation miserably. It was humiliating to have his own children ignore him in this way and King Taejo became enraged.

Between August 4th and 9th, King Taejo began to mete out punishments for poor military readiness, unleashing a torrent of shock therapy. The princes and other commanders were reprimanded in public. Multiple officials were dismissed from office. Some subordinates of the princes were slated for execution for refusing military training. Three high officers and 292 other people were impeached for their failures. One hundred trainers from the provinces were held responsible for neglect of duty and were arrested. The royal princes couldn’t be physically punished directly, but lower-level officers under the princes’ command were “beaten with a paddle” and “lashed on the buttocks” as a warning and punishment to the resistive Princes.⁴⁹ There was even an appeal from the Ministry of Education to retrieve the military licenses of all the Princes’ influential supporters.⁵⁰

On August 9th, King Taejo again ordered the Princes to participate in all future trainings. He issued an order to

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disband their private troops and ordered their weapons confiscated. Though evidence is murky, the folklore is that Yi Bang-won worked with his wife to hide some of his troops' weapons in the city, instead of destroying them.

The Palace became a hotbed of resentment and intrigue.

On August 14th, King Taejo fell deathly ill.⁵¹