

The Strife of the Princes



*Driven out of the court to become a sorrowful bird,
The wandering soul casts its lonely shadow deep in the
mountains.*

*Night after night, deprived of sleep, it longs in vain for rest;
Year after year, its deepening sorrow never reaches its bounds.
As its crying stops at dawn, the fading moon looks pale;
The stream of the spring ravine is dyed crimson by fallen petals.
When the sky is deaf to the blood-choked supplication,
Why should my grief-stricken soul have ears to listen?*

— King Tanjong, 6th King of Joseon (1441-1457),
reflecting on being deposed and his coming execution¹



The events of the late days of August 1398 are an impenetrable mystery. The official records of the *Taejo Sillok* share their version, but this version was written by diarists under the watch of the victor, while those who were thrown down lay dead.* No one today can know for certain how it all happened, but by the time the “First Strife of the Princes” settled down, the reign of King Taejo had ended. The details told here adhere

* One of the key editors of the *Taejo Sillok*'s version of these events was the scholar Jeong Yi-o. This scholar was aligned with the Yi Bang-won faction that ultimately triumphed in “The Strife of the Princes,” and had a very close relationship with people like Ha-Ryun who became high officials during the later reign of Yi Bang-won as King Taejong. As one scholar of the era argues, it can be expected that Jeong Yi-o's version of the events discussed here (as reported in the *Taejo Sillok*) was perhaps written in such a way as to “hide the uncomfortable truth about the prince's rebellion.” See Lee, J., “鄭以吾 交遊 Gwangyewa Jeongchi Hwal-dong” [“A Study on Jeong Yi-o's Companionship and Political Activities”].

to the story as generally understood, though many points remain murky and unresolved.

King Taejo often talked of his retirement from politics and even his ultimate passing—it sometimes worried his supporters. In the spring of 1394, Taejo once visited his future tomb site, something he did with some frequency. That afternoon, a drinking table was set up on a boat and everyone shared wine. Taejo's trusted advisor, Jeong Do-jeon, fell into tears at the thought of having to bury the King. Taejo laughed it off, saying he was only planning for the future. Still, his advisors were spooked.

As the party returned home, the King tried to chase after a roe deer that dashed by, hunting it on horseback as he did in his younger days. But Taejo's horseman held the King's horse tightly by the bridle and would not let the aged monarch gallop away. The King had to give up the chase and was returned safely to his capital home.²

There were many times in his reign that the King spoke of hunting, fishing, and wanting to retire to a quiet life away from the capital—just as he did in those days right before the coup d'état that brought him to the apex of power. The King sometimes talked softly about the halcyon days when he was out of public view, staying at home. He mostly owned barren lands and wasn't a rich man, but he didn't mind.³ The King missed his hometown and thought fondly of how he used to hunt freely across the fields and mountains of Dongbukmyeon (the northeastern area). The beautiful silver pampas grass of Hamyong, he missed that too. All over Korea, expansive fields of pampas grasses grow several feet tall, with plumes of misty feather emerging in pinks and purples in late summer and turning a silvery white with the coming of fall. Taejo always remembered the pampas grasses of North Korea's Hamhung area best of all, and often remarked on how he would like one day to be buried under those grasses.

With the passing years of his reign, the aged king seemed increasingly weary of court politics and the burdens of rule. Taejo's talk of missing his hometown, his sojourns to the hot springs, his frequent bouts of illness, and the planning for his own death often worried his advisors. It all must have drawn the court's attention to the thorny issue of dynastic

succession—certainly it drew the attention of his sons. In Taejo's final years, in fact, the question of royal succession became a bitter issue and provoked a famous "strife of the princes" that would ultimately drive the founding King into abdication and self-imposed exile back in his Hamhung hometown of old.

When King Taejo chose his youngest son, Yi Bang-seok of Lady Kang, to become crown prince, it was a decision the ambitious and achieved Yi Bang-won could not swallow but could not change. But now in the scorching summer days of 1398, the Joseon court was rocked with tension. Lady Kang had passed away just a few years previous and now King Taejo himself had fallen ill.

On the August 13, 1398, after two years of mourning his mother, Queen Sindeok, the crown prince Bang-seok took off his mourning clothes. The next day, the *Taejo Sillok* reports only a single line: "the King was not well."⁴ It was a dangerous moment for the young crown prince. His half-brother princes were known to disagree with his title, his mother had died, and his father was deadly ill. At the same time, as the summer ended, Jeong Do-jeon escalated his calls that that the grown princes of King Taejo had to disband their private armies in favor of a central army, controlled primarily by Jeong Do-jeon himself. It seemed King Taejo and Jeong Do-jeon were perhaps planning a questionable invasion of Ming. There was even rumor that Jeong Do-jeon might be plotting to kill Taejo's older sons from Lady Han in order to secure his own influence and secure the future of the young crown prince.

After the King fell ill on August 14, his health deteriorated day by day. It seemed the disastrous moment of his death might be approaching. His father's death would mean that Yi Bang-seok would become King and this is something the ambitious Prince Yi Bang-won just could not tolerate. Bang-won disagreed strongly with the moves towards war with Ming, he was angry at Jeong Do-jeon's military reorganization, and he had serious political ambitions of his own.

The Provincial Governor of Ansan-gun, Lee Seok-beon, was a supporter of Bang-won, and whispered darkly about how to solve things now that King Taejo was ill. Just act with conviction and turn the tables on Jeong Do-jeon, Lee advised.

Another supporter, Ha-Ryun, met with Bang-won right before Ha-Ryun was slated to leave Hanyang for a government post in a southern province. At Ha-Ryun's farewell party, the aide wanted a word with Bang-won in private. He arranged to "accidentally" spill wine on Bang-won's clothes. While Bang-won and Ha-Ryun went to the back room to clean the clothes, Ha-Ryun spoke up. He told Bang-won that a fortune-teller had prophesied that Yi Bang-won, not the crown prince, was the future of the country. Ha-Ryun believed it, and urged Bang-won to act now, before Jeong Do-jeon sent them all to war.

Yi Bang-won had earlier heard about another fortune teller that supposedly had met with Jeong Do-jeon. That fortune teller had predicted big changes and troubling times coming to the Joseon court, but Jeong Do-jeon had only replied that "They are to be removed pretty soon. Why should you worry?"⁵ It made Bang-won worry about what was on Jeong Do-jeon's mind, as King Taejo lay close to death.

Yi Bang-won conspired with some trusted allies, met with his two brothers (Bang-gwa and Bang-gan) and prepared his own troops. Weapons of private troops weren't allowed in the city, but Lee Seok-beon had a plan. He had a detachment of troops that were responsible for relieving the guard at Queen Sindeok's tomb (a guard was permanently set during the three-year mourning period) and when these troops entered the city for their duty, they could hide weapons as they came. This would add to the cache of weapons Yi Bang-won and his wife had hidden in the city earlier. The conspirators planned and watched for their opportunity.

King Taejo remained ill, and family members came and went to his side in the palace.

On August 22nd, a strange current of red energy streamed across the sky of the capital.

On August 23rd, there was heavy thunder and lightning, enough to make it into the permanent record. Hail and a rainbow followed.

On August 25th, a meteor streaked across the sky.⁶

The next day, August 26th, Yi Bang-won made preparations.* He had dispersed some of his soldiers around the city and palace, but only twenty were fully armed as he wanted to avoid suspicion.

It seemed everyone was on edge. At the Palace, Yi Bang-won saw his half-brother Yi Bang-beon nervously going into the Hall where his father lay ill. Bang-beon was the brother of the crown prince and Yi Bang-won felt something was going on. Then an attendant came out of Gyeongbuk Palace and called out to Bang-won; "The king is in an emergency, so all the princes should come in quickly!"

Yi Bang-won noticed that the lamps around the hall were not lit and grew suspicious of the dark. Instead of going into the Palace hall, he said his stomach hurt and made for a nearby toilet. While inside, he heard people running about, searching for him. It was all too suspicious. Prince Yi Bang-won concluded that the situation had become irreversible. The time had come to act.

Bang-won fled the palace and sought out his associates. Near Gwanghwamun plaza, the three elder princes gathered on horseback: Yi Bang-won, Yi Bang-gwa, Yi Bang-gan. Other loyal supporters joined them: Yi Baek-gyeong, Yi Je-ju, Sim Jong. Racing on their horses, they sent word to Lee Seok-beon, whose soldiers were gathered and ready to act. Some had serious weapons, but many were given iron bars and sticks as

* For one record of all the events of August 26, 1398, described in the following paragraphs, see *Taejo Sillok*, 14:7 (1398.8.26). This official record was surely compiled with an eye to presenting the actions of Yi Bang-won (who would later become King Taejong) in a positive light, so it cannot be wholly relied upon. However, there aren't many alternative records to rely upon. The material presented in the following paragraphs draws upon the reporting of the *Taejo Sillok*, and secondary sources cited here. All quotes are from the *Taejo Sillok*, except where otherwise cited. Though events must have occurred something along the lines of the well-known story presented in this collection of sources, precise details will probably remain forever murky. For one representative speculative account of these events, see Kim, D., *Yi-Seong-gyewa, Cho Chun, Jung Do-jeonui Joseon Wangjo Gaechan* [The Foundation of Joseon Dynasty by Yi Seong-gye with Cho Chun and Jeong Do-jeon].

so many weapons had been previously destroyed. Yi Bang-won then rode to the house of a royal concubine, where it was learned that Jeong Do-jeon was steeped in wine. Yi Sook-burn shot three arrows into the roof of a nearby house, which was a signal to other troops to set fire to three neighboring houses. Jeong Do-jeon had been laughing and enjoying himself that evening, but as the flames went up all around his drinking chambers, he must have felt his doom approaching.

Jeong tried to flee to another nearby house, but the owner came running out, crying that a man with a bloated stomach was trying to hide in his home. Bang-won's soldiers surrounded the house and commanded Jeong to come out. "Hardly able to walk, he crawled out."⁷ The official history notes that Jeong Do-jeon looked up at Yi Bang-won and begged for his life. "Don't kill me," he pled. "I hope you save me today as you have saved me in old days."^{*} But Yi Bang-won accused Sambong, of conspiring to ruin the country with his military intrigues and planning to kill Yi Bang-won himself. Yi Bang-won ordered the scholar beheaded, right then and there.

Before the execution, it is said that Jeong Do-jeon quickly pulled out his small *pil-mook* (a travelling pen) and was allowed to leave a final poem (or perhaps he simply recited the poem). They are remembered as his final words and recorded in the *Sambongjip* (Anthology of Sambong).

*Consistently I put all my effort
into contemplation and reflection.
I have lived proudly
Without abandoning the lessons in the book.
Although I accomplished so much in the last 30 years
without any rest
Everything became in vain
with one drink at Song Hyeon- bang's Pavilion.⁸*

With this final missive, soldiers beheaded Jeong Do-jeon in the streets of Hanyang, with flames all about. Now Yi Bang-won

^{*} Jeong Do-jeon is referring here to the time Yi Bang-won saved his life by killing Jeong Mong-ju on the Sonjuk bridge, saving Jeong Do-jeon from a death sentence.

rode to the palace gates. By this time, the young princes of Lady Kang (Yi Bang-beon and crown prince Yi Bang-seok) had found time to raise their own troops. But when these troops rode out of the palace gate onto Gwanhwamun Plaza to confront Yi Bang-won, they panicked. It appeared to the loyalists of the crown prince that all of Gwanhwamun plaza was loaded with Yi Bang-won's troops, who stretched from the palace gates to the base of Mount Namsan, a mile away. Frightened by this display, the crown prince's troops retreated and melted into the night, unwilling to lose their lives.

Yi Bang-won then entered the palace gate and rode up to the Main Palace Hall, calling out the names of Park Wi and his supporting commanders, and ordering them to come out and surrender, or lose their lives. It was about 2:00 am, in the dead of night. Park Wi finally came out of the Hall, reluctantly, and stood before Yi Bang-won. Surveying the situation, he saw that Bang-won's forces looked weaker than expected, and he took heart. "I'll see what the day brings," said Commander Park, turning to go back in the Palace Hall. He hardly made it a step, as Yi Bang-won rushed forward and sliced his head off. All of Park's soldiers then threw down their weapons and took off their armor. Yi Bang-won ordered them to return to their homes and not come out again that night.

Bang-won then turned his aim to the princes of Lady Kang, Yi Bang-beon and Yi Bang-seok, the crown prince. When Bang-won ordered Bang-seok to come out and surrender, Bang-seok's wife Hyun-bin wailed, grabbing the hem of his clothes and begging him not to go. Yi Bang-won shouted to the Crown Prince that he had no choice, but that he was safe. "What harm can come to you if you come out?" Bang-won asked. "The battle is over." Bang-seok nervously came out to surrender. Yi Bang-won brought horses for both Bang-seok and Bang-beon and told them they would be escorted to a distant place until things had calmed down in the palace. "You're only safe in the remote part of the country...[but] even if you leave the palace now, you will be back in a short time."

The two sons of Lady Kang were then ordered into exile. As they left the palace they were slain on the trail. The two princes were just 16 and 17 years old. The husband of Princess Gyeongsun (King Taejo and Lady Kang's daughter) was also

killed. Other relatives and associates of the crown prince and Lady Kang were later hunted down and either beheaded, imprisoned, exiled, or flogged. Jeong Do-jeon's second son was killed during the night's battles, and his youngest son killed himself at home after hearing the news. Only Sambong's eldest son survived, later becoming demoted in office and sent to a post with the Jeolla provincial army, far south.

Yi Bang-won had "turned his hand over" and transformed the Joseon Court. Immediately thereafter, Yi Bang-won pushed his older brother, Yi Bang-gwa to accept the now vacant position of crown prince and presented the accession of the oldest son to King Taejo as a *fait accompli*. King Taejo was laying in his death bed and saw no way to resist. The deathly-ill King agreed to issue the royal proclamation presented to him. "To establish the eldest son born of the legal wife as crown prince is the law and the tradition handed down for ten thousand generations," the proclamation read. It then alleged that Lady Kang's children had committed conspiracy against the older Han princes, and supported the designation of King Taejo's eldest son, born of queen Han, as the new crown prince. "My eldest son is by nature sincere and cautious, practicing loyalty and filial piety. Hence, he deserves to be crown prince," proclaimed the King. Then a profoundly saddened King Taejo retired to his sickbed and quietly mourned his two executed sons.

A few days later, King Taejo began to feel a bit better, in terms of health. He was also pleased that at least his older, calm-headed son had become the crown prince and not the fiery and violent Bang-won. Taejo ordered the new crown prince to move into the palace's eastern bedchamber, giving him a bit of advice as they visited the Royal portrait hall. "Since I no longer have my father, I made this portrait to preserve his memory," the King told his oldest son. "Though my health has broken down, I am still breathing, which I believe is fortunate for you. While my illness continues, I wish for some grapes."⁹ The word went out, and all the princes and officials ordered searches of the Royal Forest for grapes. When mountain grapes half ripe in the frost were discovered, the King was extremely pleased. "Whenever the King felt thirsty, he tasted

one or two grapes, and thereafter the King started recovering from his illness.”¹⁰ King Taejo was not yet fated to die, after all.

It was just a few days after that—five days after the strife of the princes—that the recovering King decided he wanted no further part of court politics. Aghast at recent developments, demoralized that his sons would commit fratricide for the crown, and mourning his dead queen and her two executed sons, the weary King Taejo had seen enough.

How long can I leave unattended the numerous things that happen every day? Whenever I think of this, I feel my condition worsen...Staying in the military for a long time and often exposed to frost and dew, I am worried that I have now become too old and sick to carry out various affairs of state from early in the morning until late at night... Now I want to abdicate the throne to the crown prince so that I can live out my last days while coping with my illness without worries.¹¹

His eldest son, the crown prince Bang-gwa, agreed to take over the crown from his ailing father. Thereupon, King Taejo passed the royal seal to the crown prince, who changed his dress into the golden dragon robe, and put on a crown of hanging beads. He then bestowed upon his father the eulogistic title of “Supreme King” (*Sangwang*) and bowed low to the old founder, and before all the gathered officials. A new King sat upon the Phoenix throne of Joseon.¹²

As for the former King Taejo, he shook hands with his sadness. He was recovering, but still frail. Thinking about the deaths of his two sons, Taejo wouldn’t eat meat for weeks after the Strife of the Princes, so the members of the Privy Council began trying to sneak meat into his meals, hoping it would give him strength.¹³ About a week after abdicating, Taejo heard a lonely hoot owl calling out all night in the northern garden of Gyeongbok Palace. The next day, the King moved his quarters to that very place, where he could sleep with his loneliness.¹⁴