

The Disappearing Messengers



An Old General

*The white horse neighing in the wind is tied to a willow;
The general's sword in the sheath, for there is no war.
Before he has done his share, he has grown old.
In his dreams,
he treads the mountainous front in deep snow.*

— Pak Wi-Gyeom¹



As the former king recovered from his illness, things looked promising for a time. Though the former was greatly aggrieved at the conflict of the princes and murder of his two youngest sons, there was at least some wan consolation in the fact that his well-tempered oldest son had now become King. Taejo had always loved to hunt with his older son—the new King Jeongjong—and respected his calm demeanor. Taejo said that Yi Bang-won had brought him great misery but that Jeongjong “has never hurt my heart before.” He is “by nature sincere and careful, displaying integrity in his conduct.”² The former king appreciated how Jeongjong had graciously received his advice when Taejo handed over the royal seal.

I also admonish you to carry yourself according to precedents and regulations. Try to befriend men of integrity and keep away from petty people. Do not impose your personal prejudice upon others; instead, decide your preference in accordance with popular opinion. Do not dare to abandon yourself to dissolution or neglect to pay attention to your duty. Let your successors prosper by making your throne secure forever. Ah! Your father, lacking virtue, is not worth emulating, but the

Way of the sage kings is recorded in the books. Get up early and go to bed late, always being reverent in your behavior.³

The former King also must have found it familiar to see his son facing those same old Confucian Remonstrators he always had. Soon after accession, Jeongjong found the censors at his side, urging him to avoid hunting, women, and frivolous poetry that focused only on “singing of the wind and moon.” “The ruler should not indulge in [these] things no matter where they are,” the Remonstrators warned. “If he does, it is inevitable that he loses his mind along with his judgement.”⁴ Instead of frivolities and “luxurious ease,” Jeongjong was urged to focus on rigorous Confucian studies and to attend the royal lectures. It was exacting standard, but Jeongjong seemed sincere to meet it, just as his father had been.

King Jeongjong’s very first royal edict mentioned that he was “terrified” to take over the rule from his father, but that he intended to rule with the same virtue as the former King Taejo. He announced a series of reforms to ease burdens on common people and committed his court to frugality. “The ceremonial weapons and banners, dresses, and vessels used in the palace shall be made as simple as possible,” he ordered. “Gold and silver, beads and jades, colorful flowers made of genuine silk thread, and such items shall all be prohibited.”⁵

The former king took some comfort in the familiarity of it all and searched to accommodate the new circumstances. In the early fall, as his health returned, Taejo enjoyed several banquets with all the new and old ministers, with plenty of drinking and dancing.⁶ But there was plenty to be bitter about. In early October, King Jeongjong had sealed a pact of loyalty with his own set of new Meritorious Retainers, joining together as “one, in body and soul.”⁷ These meritorious retainers included Yi Bang-won and Yi Bang-gan who had conspired against the former crown prince, killed Jeong Do-jeon, and (notably) been left off former King Taejo’s list of meritorious retainers. King Jeongjong noted that “their contributions [were] not recorded and publicly recognized” by Taejo, but “their contributions are so great that they cannot be forgotten.” Therefore, he bestowed each of them with 200 *kyol*

of land, 30 enslaved persons, a royal saddle horse, a gold-decorated belt, and “ordered shrines built in their honor and their portraits hung in them, and their contributions inscribed on the monuments.”⁸

While honoring his brothers and other meritorious supporters, Jeongjong ordered executions of those thought friendly to Jeong Do-jeon to continue, “so that the roots of treason can be eradicated.”⁹ Some were beheaded, one was drawn and quartered, and an accused concubine was drowned. Others were flogged 100 times and assigned to hard labor in the navy.¹⁰

While the former king watched this sad fate of the Jeong Do-jeon faction, it must have been bittersweet to see King Jeongjong and Yi Bang-won quickly move to abolish private armies, a long goal of King Taejo and Jeong Do-jeon. This issue of creating a national army and abolishing private forces had led Yi Bang-won to rise against Jeong Do-jeon, but now that he sat at the right hand of his brother’s power, Yi Bang-won was fully supportive of abolishing the private armies of others.¹¹

King Jeongjong also decided to move the capital back to Gaegyeong. Hanyang had proven cursed. It was the site of the strife that tore his family apart. Soon after taking the throne, a flock of black crows had flown cackling into the palace, spooking the new king. Owls were heard constantly hooting on the roof of the palace pavilion.¹² It seemed a haunted place. So the new King turned his back on this symbol of his father’s great achievement. It threw the former King Taejo into deep sadness to turn Joseon’s back on Hanyang, so soon after he had chosen the new capital. At the very end of 1398, a disconsolate Taejo released all the wild animals kept in his back garden: the bear, the tiger, the monkey, and all the other tribute animals gathered over the years.*¹³

* As the *Annals of King Taejo* (the *Taejo Sillok*) come to an end with the close of 1398, this release of Taejo’s beasts is the final action of King Taejo that is mentioned in all of lengthy *Taejo Sillok*. The *Annals* of his sons, King Jeongjong and King Taejong, together with other records of the time, pick up the story from here.

As the former king left Hanyang, he wept while passing the tomb of Lady Kang; the dethroned king must have seemed something of a helpless old man.* Taejo's daughter, princess Gyeongsun born of Lady Kang, also remained in deep grief over the murder of her husband during the Strife of the Princes. Instead of moving back to Gaegyeong, where Jeongjong was returning the capital, Taejo encouraged the princess to shave her head and become a monk in the monastery, which she did.

Jeongjong moved the capital back to Gaegyeong, but his reign was uneasy. Prince Yi Bang-won, the architect of the earlier strife of the princes, could not be restrained for long while his less ambitious brother occupied the throne. But even if Yi Bang-won's older brother agreed to abdicate to the power-thirsty Bang-won, there was the problem of yet one other older brother—the middle brother, Yi Bang-gan—who stood between Yi Bang-won and the Phoenix throne. That problem was soon fixed.

Escalating conflict between Yi Bang-won and his older middle brother soon led to violent conflicts between differing supporters of the two brothers, which Yi Bang-won eagerly joined with his private military forces. Yi Bang-won's forces won the short battle later known as "The Second Strife of the Princes," which solved the problem of any claim his middle brother might have to the throne.¹⁴ He exiled his brother, Bang-gan, to a northern province, and executed some of his brother's supporters. Then Yi Bang-won turned his gaze on his oldest brother, who still sat on the throne as King Jeongjong, and probably was feeling a bit nervous.

The new King Jeongjong didn't much like all the familial strife and soon considered abdicating the throne to his ambitious younger brother—even though he had only served two years as king. In the summer of 1400, King Jeongjong

* In later years, after Yi Bang-won ascended the throne as King Taejong, he ordered Lady Kang's tomb removed from the capital city altogether and used some of the stones from her old tomb to help rebuild a city bridge. He also ordered construction of a new monument to his own mother, Yi Seong-gye's first wife, Lady Han. See *Taejong Sillok*, 2.18.14014, in *Sambongjip*, Vol. III, pp. 259-260.

asked his father how he would feel about turning over the crown to Yi Bang-won. Taejo instantly turned ice cold but had no power in the matter. "I can't tell you to do it, nor can I tell you not to do it," Taejo admitted stonily. "What can I do now that you are on the throne?"¹⁵

Indeed, there was nothing Taejo could do. King Jeongjong's advisors were already warning him of his danger, saying "Your Highness should seriously consider measures concerning your safety, and preparations for the troops to protect you cannot be delayed." The King grew anxious, wondering if he could really hold onto the crown.

When one of Jeongjong's concubines had a child and started calling this baby the "first-born" of the King (and thus the implied crown prince), everyone saw the disaster coming. The Dragon in the wings, eyeing the crown, certainly wouldn't appreciate this new hatchling.

Fix this situation, advisors warned. "You will certainly regret it unless you listen to what we say." King Jeongjong knew what his brother was capable of, so right away he renounced the supposed "first born."¹⁶ "This boy is not my son!" he declared, claiming the concubine was pregnant before even being brought to court. The boy was kicked out of the palace and exiled to remote provinces. In later days he was forced to become a monk, though he always claimed: "I am the son of Jeongjong."¹⁷

As it became clear that Yi Bang-won would inevitably take over the throne sometime soon, the former King Taejo requested that at least some of Yi Bang-won's supporters who had helped instigate the strife(s) of the princes should be banished from the capital. "If you trust mutineers, won't they soon be looking to mutiny versus you?" Taejo asked Bang-won. "How long will Joseon last?"¹⁸ But Bang-won refused to consider such exiles and had some of his aides visit Taejo to convince him not to try to impeach these meritorious retainers who had supported Yi Bang-won's rise. Taejo exploded in rage. "How can I stay here when all the people of the country are wrong? I will go where I want to go from now on!"¹⁹

Taejo then stormed out of Gaegyeong to hole up in a Buddhist temple (Sinamsa) some distance to the south. With his father self-exiled to Buddhist temple, on November 13,

1400, Yi Bang-won took over the throne in Gaegyeong's Suchang Palace. He would become known as King Taejong, the third King of the Joseon dynasty. After taking the throne, Taejong tried to visit his father to perform the very important ceremonial bow known as *sebae* on New Year's, 1401, but Taejo would not leave the temple to see his son.²⁰

The former king continued to sojourn in Buddhist temples throughout much of the next two years, staying mostly at Hoemsa temple near Mt. Soyosan. In late 1402, Taejo received word that his blood brother and close childhood friend Yi Chiran had died. Taejo's growing loneliness and grief at the passage of all his loved ones must have played a role in his decision in early November 1402, to leave Hoemsa altogether and head for his ancestral home back north, in Hamhung. He said he wished to feel the more wholesome spirit of his old life and to die in his hometown area.²¹

The newly installed King Taejong was greatly aggrieved—even to the point of tears—by his Father's temple sojourn and long absence from the capital.²² Such a situation surely troubled Taejong's sense of filial piety, while also being a serious political disadvantage. In addition, former King Taejo had taken the royal seal that signified the legitimacy of a king's rule with him when he left for the temples, and now for Hamhung, and refused to turn it over to Taejong. It was a politically difficult situation for the new King Taejong, who after all had rose to power through contentious fratricidal struggle and who even now did not have access to the royal seal.

As the former King Taejo made for the north on a strong station horse, the capital was abuzz with all the family conflict. Different factions had aligned themselves this way and that, and now the much-respected former king had turned his back on his son, the new King Taejong. Bringing the old king back to the capital, acquiring the royal seal, and reuniting the family Yi would surely be best for the country, the new King Taejong realized.

And so Taejong begged his father to return. Or rather, a series of unfortunate messengers did.* As told in the *Yeollyeosil Gisul (The Narratives of Yeollyeosil)*, Taejong began to send messengers to Hamhung, begging the former King to forgive him for the murder of his half-brothers, and to return to the capital. According to popular folklore, these messengers rarely returned home. Legend has it that the former king, in anger at his son's fratricide, killed the messengers that came to him, sending his son an unmistakable message. Thus the origin of the Korean term "*hamhungchasa*," used in Korea to this day to describe someone who has left someplace and is never heard from again.

The stories say that one of these messengers was Sung Seok-rin, an old friend of the former King. He once showed up in common hemp clothes just beyond Hamhung's entrance. He tied his white horse at a tree and began preparing some rice on the road. Noticing his old friend, Taejo sent a eunuch out to ask what was going on. Sung Seok-rin said he had business in the area and was simply passing by. Taejo invited the old friend in for drinks and food.

During their conversation, Sung Seok-rin steered things to talking a bit about King Taejong and then asked whether Taejo would ever return to the capital. Taejo turned white and grabbed his old battle sword. "Did you come to comfort me for your king?!!" he raged. Sung fell to his knees, begging. "I swear on your sword I was not put up to this, or may my descendants be blinded!" Taejo let the old friend leave his house with his head intact, but legend has it that both the sons and the grandsons of Sung seok-rin were all born blind.²³

Then there was the visit of Park Soon-sik. He arrived in the chilly November of 1402 for a casual visit with his old friend Taejo. He happened to be riding a mare who had recently calved a foal, and the baby horse followed along behind. Arriving at Hamhung, Park Soon-sik didn't ride the mare into town but told Taejo that he left the mother horse in

* The story of the "disappearing messengers" is likely apocryphal, at least in terms of Taejo himself possibly killing several of them. We share the old legend here, followed in later pages with an alternative explanation for the fate of at least one "disappearing messenger."

the field with her foal, saying that he couldn't bear to see the mother and child apart.

The reference to family bonds seemed a bit suspicious, but Taejo sat down to drinking and playing some Korean chess with his old friend. During their game, a mouse suddenly fell from the ceiling rafters. It was a mother mouse, and though she had fallen to her death, she had kept her baby mouse clutched to her chest. It reminded Park Soon-sik of the depth of parental love, and he fell to the ground weeping, begging Taejo to return to the capital. Taejo, too, fell into tears.

Taejo was touched and promised his friend he would think seriously about it, and then saw Park off to journey home. Some of Taejo's attendants were suspicious. King Taejong is playing on your emotions, and his messengers are lying to you, they said. "You should have Park Soon-sik killed!" they urged. Taejo placated his angry attendants with a bit of a gamble. He ordered his attendants to follow after Park Soon-sik, some time after he had left, and to make sure he was crossing the nearby river to head back down south. If Park hadn't yet crossed the Heugryong (Yonghong) River, that meant he was suspiciously delaying his travels for some reason, and he should be killed.

Unfortunately for Park Soon-sik, when he reached the river, he had fallen ill. Therefore, he had delayed his river crossing for some time, and was resting on a boat in the river when Taejo's men showed up on the riverbank. Park Soon-sik had not made it all the way across the river, so the men did as they were directed and slew him on the boat.

When Taejo heard what happened he was grievous. He was sure that Park would have already made it across the river some time ago and did not expect his men to actually kill his old friend. Back in the capital, Park's wife hung herself when she heard the news. In Hamhung, Taejo hung a portrait of his friend on the wall and cried often while gazing at it.²⁴

Though stories of these disappearing messengers are commonly told, the facts may have been different. Evidence suggests that few, if any, messengers were killed by the former King, though it is clear that there was serious tension regarding Taejo's flight to the north and Taejong's effort to retrieve him. In fact, at the very moment that Taejo was riding

north on his station-horse, a rebellion of northern forces resistive to King Taejong was gathering. Loyalists to a faction of Queen Sindeok (Lady Kang), whose sons had been murdered by Taejong, had constantly whispered about “Kang’s revenge” in Taejo’s ears since the First Strife of the Princes. Now, in November of 1402 an actual conclave of pro-Kang rebels started to gather in the north, with a dangerous goal to rekindle her family.²⁵

Taejong was understandably anxious at the idea of his father, that old military hero, joining with these rebellious northern forces. Taejo had said he planned to travel all about the northern provinces, visiting the ancestral tombs and taking comfort in meals with old friends and northern customs. Amid all the discontent and rebellion brewing in the border lands, the former King’s northern journeys didn’t sound too promising to the current monarch.

As his father rode north, Taejong sent messengers to find his father and bring him back to the capital. He also sent thousands of troops into the field to track down and defeat the growing rebel forces. Some of his troops were sent to the northeast, through Anbyeon and on up to Hamhung. Others were sent into northwest territories. A contingency garrison was posted at Seogyang (Pyongyang).²⁶

It was during this time of northern discontent that Park Soon-sik (one of Taejong’s alleged messengers sent to persuade to his father) had supposedly been killed by Taejo’s soldiers while lying sick on a boat in the middle of the river. It seems likely that Park—a military man after all—may actually have been killed by northern rebels, under suspicion of being a spy for Taejong.²⁷ In the end, the former King Taejo barely made it back to his northern homelands before the small northern rebellion had been crushed. King Taejong effectively mobilized the centralized army that he had inherited from Jeong Do-jeon’s efforts and sent it north to destroy the uprising. Though there was no battle near the Hamhung east coast, where Taejo had travelled, Taejong’s northwestern army did encounter and defeat rebel forces on November 19-20 of 1402.²⁸ It was brutally cold and many of the ragtag rebels froze to death even without ever entering battle. Others drowned when the ice broke as they tried to flee across the

frozen Cheongcheon river (about 150 li north of Pyongyang). About 50 rebel cavalymen made it all the way back to Anbyeon near the east coast, but they were captured there and taken back to the capital. A group of rebel leaders and their sons were executed on December 12, 1402.²⁹

It was unclear how much the former King Taejo might have been involved in this uprising personally, but its demise coincided with his decision finally to abide by King Taejong's constant appeals to return to Gaegyeong. The last messenger who arrived in Hamhung to convince the former king that he should return to the capital was Monk Muhak. It had to be a heartfelt meeting between the two former revolutionaries. Monk Muhak had once interpreted Yi Seong-gye's dreams of divine kingship. He had prayed with Yi Seong-gye in messianic rituals of Maitreya. He had planned the outline of the new capital and the course of Hanyang's walls. And now he had arrived to urge the fallen king to return to the capital he had once abandoned (Gaegyeong) and hold hands with the son who had broken his heart.

"Your face looks like a pig," said a morose King Taejo, making an oinking sound after Muhak arrived.

"Well, your face looks like the Buddha," complimented Muhak in return.

"Ah! I was trying to joke around, but you only flatter me," said a disappointed Taejo.

"But consider this," Muhak replied. "Everything looks a pig from the eyes of a pig, and everything looks like a Buddha from the eyes of a Buddha."

At that, the two old rebels fell into laughter and became like old friends again.³⁰ They talked, drank wine, and played *baduk* together for several days. Through the rest of November 1402, Muhak softly cajoled the former king to come home. Muhak often berated King Taejong's failures and weaknesses during these talks, which Taejo liked. But he also argued that Taejo had no choice. If he wanted to salvage some good for the dynasty he had worked so hard to found, he needed to return to the capital and support King Taejong. It is a tragedy to say it, Muhak admitted to Taejo, but the brutal and disrespectful Taejong is the only son left who actually matters to the dynasty you founded. There is no other option, for all the other

sons who might have taken the throne are either dead or afraid of dying.

“Frankly speaking, Yi Bang-won made a lot of mistakes, but Your Majesty’s beloved sons are all dead except for him,” Muhak noted. “If Your Majesty ended up abandoning this son (Taejong) too, who will carry out the cause Your Majesty has worked so hard for all this while? Rather than leaving the work in another’s hands, it will be better to let Your Majesty’s own bloodline handle it.”³¹

Furthermore, Muhak cajoled, you can return to the capital you founded—Hanyang—because King Taejong is moving the capital back there after all. King Taejong hoped that his plans to return the capital to Hanyang, and to build a new royal residence for his father there, would help soften the former king’s will. Though King Taejong ascended the throne in Suchang palace in Gaegyeong (where his brother had returned the Joseon capital), a large fire erupted and burned down the whole palace soon thereafter. It was bad energy to build the new kingdom on the ashes of the old, so Taejong decided once again to move the capital back to Hanyang, just as his father had done. It took a few years of debate with some of his ministers, but in the end Taejong concluded that Hanyang was intimately tied to the opening of the new dynasty and reflected the will of his father. Therefore, he planned to return the capital to Hanyang, where the ancestors were enshrined in Jongmyo.³²

Monk Muhak’s reasoning about preserving the Yi dynasty was sound, and in December of 1402 Taejo finally agreed to come back to the Hanyang area and be greeted by his son. Monk Muhak travelled with Taejo as far as Seogyang (modern Pyongyang), before saying goodbye and returning to life at Hoemsa and Geumgansan temples.³³ Further south, King Taejong happily prepared a huge, decorated tent of celebration out on the road to the capital to welcome his father back personally.³⁴

The Narratives of Yeollyeosil (*Yeollyeosil Gisul*, dating back to early Joseon) provide one accounting of the events of this uneasy reunion, focusing on the high drama of the moment. Though this account may well be apocryphal and isn’t backed up in other historical records, including the

Annals of the Joseon Dynasty (the *Sillok*), it has provided the basis for centuries of Korean retellings over the years (including several loose historical TV dramatizations in the modern era).

According to these folktales, one of Taejong's advisors was very cautious about the return of Taejo to the capital. This councilor warned that the abdicated King Taejo was still very angry and that Taejong should be ready to take cover behind a large tree if Taejo took out his bow. Taejong agreed with this advice and built his welcoming tent around a large tree trunk.

Sure enough, the stories say that when his father showed up, the retired King's anger flared. He took out his legendary bow and fired several shafts at his son, the new King. But Taejong hid behind the big tree trunk, and the tree took all the arrows. Taejo eventually released all the anger burning inside him and accepted it all as the will of Heaven. He did not rise in violence against his son again.

After firing his arrows, Taejo walked up to King Taejong and took the royal seal out of his robes. "This is what you want, so take it now," he said, laying the seal before the new king. Taejong refused to pick it up three times, and fell into tears, trying to get his father to sit down for the banquet. The tense standoff continued.

Then Ha-ryun, Taejo's close aide, whispered to "give him a drink of liquor!" So King Taejong had a eunuch go to the former king and offer some wine. Taejo took the drink, and then several more, and grew more compliant. He sat down to the banquet, softly saying that "everything is Heaven's will."³⁵

Historical records suggest that Taejo continued to drink all night, growing quite drunk and morose. But at least the father and son were reunited, and the founding King was setting eyes on his old capital once again.