

The Pampas Grass of Hamhung



At Pu-Byeok Pavilion

*Passing by Yeongmyeong Temple the other day
I ascended to Pu-byeok Pavilion.
The moon was floating above the castle ruin.
Clouds encircled the moss-grown steps.
The legendary stallion is gone forever.
Where are the successive monarchs loitering now?
I sigh, standing on the moonswept stairs.
The mountains are still green, the stream continues to flow.*

— Yi Saek¹



His final years were a lonely time for the former King, even when returning for short visits to the capital. Most ministers were avoiding him. His two wives had died. Two of his sons had been murdered. One son had become alcoholic, left the family due to loyalty to Goryeo, and died young. One daughter had shaved her head and went into seclusion as a monk. One son was banished due to the Second Strife of the Princes while another sat on the throne in violation of Taejo's wishes. His good friends Jeong Mong-ju and Jeong Do-jeon had both been murdered by his own son.

In the winter of 1402, the Jurchen warrior Yi Chiran died. This was Taejo's oldest friend and blood brother, the boy he had grown up beside and wrestled with over draughts of deer's blood in the mountains of Hamyong-do. In his death bed request to King Taejong, Yi Chiran asked only to be remembered with the traditions of the north and finally to be restored to his homelands.

Your minister is originally a man of the homeland who is dying in a foreign land. Please burn my corpse and return me for burial to the homeland. Your majesty, please have your officials bury me according to the practices of my country. And please, your majesty, rule with prudence and cultivate your virtue and preserve Joseon for all time.²

In 1405, Taejo's closest spiritual advisor Monk Muhak also passed away. Now Taejo was quite alone, looking longingly towards the pampas grasses of his northern homeland, where he hoped one day to join his blood brother in rest. He spent his last years mostly in seclusion and sorrow. In the spring of 1406, when a festive celebration of the new Deoksogung palace occurred, Taejo grew bittersweet. "When I was young, how would I have known there would be today?" he asked. "I just wanted to live long, but now seventy has passed and I'm not dead yet." While the former king pondered all that had passed, everyone at the party had a great time, "raising their glasses several times" until they became very drunk. Suddenly, Taejo stood up with a loud declaration to the current king Taejong and all the younger officials. "You all fall short of my knowledge and skills! If you want to learn, I will teach you!" In good humor, the partygoers commenced to wage drunken martial contests with the aged former monarch. Perhaps the contestants showed due honor to the elderly founder, for in the end he won all the contests. A sodden Taejo put on nice silks and rode home on horseback, followed by his servants on foot.³

But such happy occasions were rare. The former King grew increasingly annoyed with big affairs and court politics, and avoided both. On one occasion in 1405, he planned a quiet trip to the hot springs and grew exceptionally annoyed when a long line of officials showed up to see him off, and many servants tried to follow him to the springs. "I tried to go quietly, without word of mouth," a prickly Taejo complained. "Why is there all this hassle just to go out?" He ordered the servants to clear out and not follow him and told everyone be less troublesome in general.⁴

Taejo enjoyed hiking the mountains without entourage and praying quietly at Buddhist temple. He once sought the temple monks for advice regarding all that had been lost. “Your servant is honored to become a long-lived man, conquering the South and destroying the North. But he has committed so many murders that the more he looks back on it all, the more anguish he feels.” What can I do, Taejo asked, to settle my soul? The monks urged him to enter the mountains, cut his hair, and pray endlessly to Buddha to avoid bad karma after death. Taejo agreed and bowed his head. He entered the mountains, “forgetting the world’s work and entering the nirvana path.”⁵

So things continued until the dead of winter of 1408, when *Jeoseung Saja* *—that grim herald of the Korean underworld—finally began to call on the aged Taejo. In mid-January Taejo fell seriously ill. He suddenly could not stand or talk normally; it seems the former king had experienced a stroke. Though Taejo survived his stroke, he became bedridden. He was so incapacitated that he couldn’t even rise to receive his son, King Taejong, who left in tears when he tried to pay a visit to the Deoksogung palace where Taejo was lying in bed.⁶

King Taejong was so worried over his father’s condition that he sought otherworldly help, forgiving and releasing several prisoners in an appeal to Buddha’s mercy. Showing his filial piety to the gods, Taejong burned incense in the courtyard in front of Taejo’s healing room and sought to take his father’s suffering into himself by burning holes on his forearm with lit incense.⁷ Together with these spiritual pleas, Taejo was likely given tea of boiled chrysanthemum leaves, a common remedy at the time for such illnesses.⁸ Still, Taejo’s condition lingered into February and then into March and April. More prisoners were forgiven and released. More incense was burned into King Taejong’s filial forearms.⁹ On April 19th, five well-wishers came to the Deoksu palace and

* *Jeoseung Saja* is the herald of the underworld, a guide to the afterlife, akin to the Grim Reaper of Western mythos.

offered a small statue of Buddha to the former king, but he could not rise to look at them.¹⁰

Things became worse in May. By mid-May, the Joseon court fell under a state of emergency, for it was clear that *Jeoseung Saja's* shadow had fallen over The Grand Progenitor's bed, and the herald of the underworld would not be leaving alone. Taejo was brought to Cheondeok palace for care, but nothing could be done. Hundreds of monks gathered in the courtyard to pray for the former King's health. King Taejong made one last desperate appeal to heavenly mercy. Pleading for the Heavenly King to restore his father to health, Taejong dramatically forgave even the most serious of criminals in his own earthly realm. He forgave "rebellion, beating and killing grandparents, or parents, wives killing husbands, *nobi* (slaves) killing their masters, robbery, or illegal production of salt."¹¹

But none of it mattered. In the end, Taejo could not take food or even sit up. On May 24th, 1408, as the rain poured outside, the ailing king looked up twice at those around him and then passed away. His son, King Taejong, beat his chest and dropped to his knees, wailing.¹² A court eunuch went out onto the palace rooftop and vigorously shook out the royal robes of the King, calling three times for the spirit of the deceased king to come back into the palace.¹³ Then all the people knew. King Taejo, the "Destiny-opening" founder of what would be Joseon's 500-year dynasty, lay dead.

On the day of the King's death, his body was bathed and his hair washed clean with boiled birch and rice water. His fingernails and toenails were clipped, and the nail bits placed inside inner pockets of his clothes. Rice and a single pearl were placed inside his mouth. Then the King's sons fasted for three days. On the third day, the King's body was wrapped with 19 layers of clothes. On the fifth day, an additional 90 layers of cloth were wrapped around the King's body, and tied up with fabric, before the King was placed in a coffin.¹⁴

After the initial five days, a white silk was prepared and wrapped around the King's spirit tablet. The spirit was then taken to rest in *Honjeon* (the Royal Spirit hall, located in the palace). At the same time, Taejo's body was separately placed into a coffin and kept in *Binjeon* (the Royal Coffin Hall). King Taejo's body and spirit would remain in these halls for five

months until the funeral began.¹⁵ The body was preserved through the hot Hanyang summer by being enclosed in a bamboo casing and laid upon an icetray in one of Hanyang's two icehouses. The ice in these houses had been hacked out of the frozen Han River in the winter, stored through the summer in huge slabs.¹⁶

This was just the beginning of a ritual period lasting three years, in terms of complete entombment of the King's body and enshrinement of the spirit in the Jongmyo Ancestral Shrine.¹⁷ Mourners during much of this time (all the princes, princesses, queens, concubines and high officials) wore coarse hemp cloth and abstained from music, weddings, celebrations, sexual relations, horseback riding, alcohol, spice, slaughtering of animals, or eating of meat.¹⁸ The court issued a decree prohibiting dance, theater, musical performances, alcohol, weddings, or the butchering of livestock for three months. For five days after a King's death, markets were closed and essentials could only be acquired through the black market.¹⁹ Violation of mourning rules could result in loss of office.²⁰ When one high ranking official was given the job of announcing King Taejo's obituary to China, he unwisely tried to take contraband merchandise with him. But such merchandising was disallowed during the mourning period and when his violation was discovered the official was impeached and dismissed from office.²¹

Construction of Taejo's tomb on Mount Geoman east of Hanyang (near today's city of Guri) began in July, two months after his death.²² Though King Taejo had helped choose this site himself, in later years he grew disenchanted with resting for eternity near the capital. Throughout his final years, Taejo entreated his son King Taejong several times to bury his remains not in Hanyang, but up north in his hometown of Hamhung, under the silver pampas grasses of his youth. But Taejong found it inappropriate to bury the dynasty's founder in a far-away frontier town. The "*Grand Progenitor, Destiny-Opening, Divinely Martial, Great King*"²³ must be buried near the capital of Hanyang, he ordained. So tomb construction began on Geomansan, not far from Hanyang's eastern gate.

Thousands of laborers worked the project, which took a month and half to complete.* Royal sculptors prepared stone monuments surrounding the tomb, while royal painters covered the interior walls of the tomb with a blue dragon of the east, white tiger of the west, red phoenix of the south and black warrior of the north. The ceiling was painted with the sun, moon, constellations, and Milky Way.²⁴ The tomb's funerary inscription told how "Our progenitor was first in battle...his awesome reputation began to spread...He was victorious wherever he turned."²⁵

On the day of Taejo's funeral (September 4, 1408), his son King Taejong wore white mourning robes and a white headpiece.²⁶ A small army of 218 soldiers conveyed the massive coffin palanquin. These soldiers had to work in six separate shifts to cover the 30 li (about 15 kilometers) between the capital and the tomb location, so 1,308 soldiers in total were involved in carrying the coffin. In front of the coffin came a long procession of smaller palanquins carrying ceremonial objects

One for the Chinese emperor's letter of approval; one for the jade book on which the late King's elevated titles are engraved; one for his posthumous titles written on strips of jade called *sichaek*; one for his posthumous gold seal; one for the folded and tied silk cloth in lieu of the spirit tablet; five palanquins for burial objects of many kinds such as small scale sets of porcelain dishes and bowls, those made of bamboo, of wood,

* Though the records don't say exactly how many laborers were involved, for the later funeral of King Injo in 1649 official records tell us that 6,438 people were mobilized to prepare events of the day, while 2,848 laborers worked to construct the royal tomb (Yi, S. "Introduction to the UigweRoyal Documents of the Joseon Dynasty," n.d.; See also Korean Cultural Heritage Administration, "*Donggureung Iyagi*" ["The Story of Donggureung"] https://royaltombs.cha.go.kr/tombs/selectTombInfoList.do?tombseq=104&mn=RT_01_01_01).

[statues of] wooden slaves; a small sedan chair containing layers of the late king's costumes; *yoyeo* for formal ceremonial costumes, one daily outfit and other items of leisure such as musical instruments; one carrying eulogies written on the jade book.²⁷

In front of it all went a troop of musicians, playing the sad sounds of mourning. Behind it all came the wailers, whose grief could be heard far and wide. Thousands of onlookers observed the procession. When the procession arrived at the tomb, four demon quellers were called forth. These *bansangi* went down into the empty tomb, wearing fierce golden masks with four eyes, draped with bear-hides, and wielding long weapons. They bravely chased away any evil spirits lurking in the dark, preparing the way for the King above.

Temporary spirit tablets of mulberry wood were inscribed here and taken back to the Royal Spirit Hall in the palace, where the spirit of Taejo would live until it was enshrined in Jongmyo, as a permanent resting place, 27 months later.²⁸ Finally, Taejo's body in its coffin was lowered to his underground palace—the tomb of King Taejo, named *Geonwolleung*. A tablet was included to memorialize the achievements of the founding king.

He had a heart of gold. He faced the declining last years of the preceding dynasty, he was able to settle many difficulties, and created a large kingdom... In the martial arts, he was like wind and thunder. He lighted the world like the sun and the moon...He repaired and renewed the country's name...He made the life of the people comfortable, and because he has opened up our inexhaustible luck, we are truly rooted in the heart of prosperity. First and foremost, his grace fell upon the animals and the plants...He gave many blessings to preserve his offspring for 100 billion years.²⁹

As evidence of his filial piety, King Taejong supplemented his father's well-crafted tomb site with dedication of nearby land for a relocated Buddhist temple (Gaegyeongsa), to which he assigned 150 enslaved persons to assist several hundred monks in their regular prayers for the soul of his father.³⁰

Taejong even sought a way to honor his father's wish for burial under the northern pampas grass. Though King Taejong would not suffer his father's body to be taken far north for burial, he did arrange for the transit of cartloads of dirt and pampas grass from Hamhung to the capital of Hanyang (a journey of about 500 li or 250 kilometers). He then covered the tomb of his father with the silver grass of home. He also arranged for numerous pine trees to be planted all around *Geonwolleung*, in tribute to his father's origins in the pine-covered mountains and his pen name of Song Heon ("Pine Tree").³¹ Watchers were set about the tomb of King Taejo, and the mourners returned to the capital. The mourning period continued for 27 additional months, when the auspicious day for permanent enshrining of the King's spirit in Jongmyo would arrive.³² By that time, the silver pampas grass of Hamhung must have grown high above the bucolic burial mound of Korea's dynastic founder.