

A Tree With Deep Roots



Tribute to Yi Seong-gye Upon Defeating the Pirate Invasion

*Everyone felt your strength and leadership...
The island barbarians turned pale
when they saw your majestic army
And neighboring countries held their breath and trembled.
Everyone in the court stands in line to praise you,
and that's because
You have rendered service to the country,
which will last forever.*

— *Kim Kuyong, Goryeo State Finance Commission*¹



King Taejo planted deep roots for a dynasty that endured. Lasting 518 years, from its founding in 1392 to its demise in 1910 when colonial Japan annexed the Korean nation, Joseon became one of the longest-lasting and most exquisitely realized Confucian dynasties on earth. Though many of the old elite families of Goryeo reappeared as influential positions after the rise of Joseon, the situation had changed dramatically. Borders were more secure, taxes had become fairer and more rational, land reform stabilized the national economy, the agricultural situation had dramatically improved, a commitment to the written law had expanded, and the ideological empire of Confucianism swept over the nation.²

For most people in Joseon, life had improved. For several hundred years after Taejo's rule, Joseon experienced a golden era without foreign wars, and filled with scientific and literary achievement. During that time, Korea eagerly took up neo-Confucian philosophy and crafted one of East Asia's most highly developed civilizations. Social reforms and agricultural innovations dramatically reduced the corruption and widespread famine of the late Goryeo years. Scholars, artists,

scientists, and farmers all found new horizons opening before them. State support for studies among communities of virtuous Confucian scholars dramatically expanded, as the Joseon government established several national and regional schools and developed more rigorous and centrally managed merit exams to enter into government administration. In 1393, King Taejo sent medical instructors to every province to enhance the medical profession. In 1397 he supported the publication of a "Collection of Native Prescriptions to Save Life."³ Building on this tradition, thousands of scrolls and books were published during the decades following Joseon's founding, using a movable metal type that Koreans invented more than a hundred years before Gutenberg created his device.

King Taejo's grandson, King Sejong, continued this scholarly dedication by establishing his "Hall of Worthies," or *Jiphyeonjeon*. Sejong established this royal research institute in 1420, filled it with talented scholars, and set them to work on all manner of historical, philosophical, and practical research projects. In one astonishing achievement, Korea's written language of Hangeul was invented whole cloth by this Hall of Worthies. Before Hangeul, the only option for reading and writing in Korea was to master Chinese iconographic language, with its thousands of different symbols. Hangeul has only 24 letters, is much easier to master than iconographic Chinese, and is attributed with a significant rise in Korean literacy.⁴

It is fitting that the very first book ever printed in Hangeul was *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, a series of lyric Cantos telling the grand story of King Taejo, his four divine ancestors, and his son, King Taejong. The Cantos say these men were six divine dragons: "Their works all have the favor of Heaven."⁵ Yi Seong-gye's ancestors were all "submerged dragons." With the coming of King Taejo, the dragon took flight, and the foundations of Joseon were laid down, strong and enduring. Canto two of the Songs celebrates how the spirit of King Taejo would come to nurture his people for a long time.

*A tree with deep roots
 Because the wind sways it not
 Blossoms abundantly
 And bears fruit.
 The water from a deep spring,
 Because a drought dries it not,
 Becomes a stream
 And flows to the sea.⁶*

Today, King Taejo's deep roots remain under his burial mound of *Geonwolleung*, exquisitely maintained just as it was over 600 years ago. There are 119 royal tombs and burial mounds constructed throughout the Joseon dynasty for the Kings, Queens, crown princes and princesses of Joseon. Among all those royal burial mounds, silvery pampas grass grows on Taejo's tomb alone. The founding King always wanted to be buried under the pampas grass back home in Hamhung, so in the end his rebellious son, King Taejong, brought pampas grass from Hamhung to cover his father's burial tomb in the capital. Though all the other royal burial mounds have short, well-tended green grass, it is fitting that this tomb alone has the more rugged, tall grass of the wild. In the spring and summer, the green pampas stems grow unbroken and untamed above Taejo's burial mound. In the fall, the tall feathery grass turns purple and silver, waving in the wind. The great general of the northern borderlands never did make it home in the end, but a bit of home made it to him.

Though the King under this mound died lonely, the choices he made had consequence and bequeathed benefit to his country. Joseon became a "land of scholars"⁷ built by a military general from the unschooled north. Facing so many hard and complicated moments, this general and king took up the burden of history and made choices to create more value than he destroyed. Most important of all these choices, standing on the banks of the Yalu river in 1388, Yi Seong-gye made a momentous decision whose consequences reverberated across the centuries—the *Wihwado Hoegun*.

More than five hundred years later, when famed Korean independence activist Kim San told the story of Korean rebellion against the Japanese colonial forces that terminated

the Joseon dynasty (in his biography, *Song of Ariran*), it is telling that Kim dedicated his story “To the Return of Exiles across the Yalu River.”⁸ Kim San spent much of his biography reflecting on his own choice to cross the Yalu River into Manchu lands while being pursued by Japanese forces, and he dreamed of a day when the freedom fighters could return from the Yalu to put things right.

In 1927, Korea’s freedom fighter Kim San came to the same Yalu River as King Taejo did in 1388, and he recalled the choice of Yi Seong-gye so many years ago. He faced the hard decision of whether to cross the Yalu River into China, to live and fight another day, or return to Korea to face Japanese troops right then and there. In his biography, while facing execution in 1937, Kim offered a fitting summary of such moments of choice on the riverbanks of history.

*A man's name and his brief dream may be buried with his bones, but nothing that he has ever done or failed to do is lost in the final balance of forces. That is his immortality, his glory or shame. Not even he himself can change this objective fact, for he is history. Nothing can rob a man of a place in the movement of history. Nothing can grant him escape. His only individual decision is whether to move forward or backward, whether to fight or submit, whether to create value or destroy it.*⁹

Yi Seong-gye was a warlord who created more value than he destroyed. A submerged dragon who marched to the Yalu and returned. A King who rose above Goryeo’s end days and forged a new way. Still today, the general’s choice blossoms abundantly and bears fruit.