

The Horseman in the Capital



While Yi Seong-gye trained as a soldier in the north, he always sought the fastest horse. One day, he heard about a horse living a good distance away, on the coast. The horse was so fast that when it galloped the mountains shook and the air vibrated with a sound like thunder. However, people said the horse was completely wild. Anyone who came near was attacked, so none could approach.

Seong-gye decided to take a long journey to see the horse. On his way, he picked the finest grasses. When he arrived and presented the grass to the horse, the horse became docile and did not resist Seong-gye's approach. Yi Seong-gye then leapt on the horse's back to ride, and the horse galloped off as if it had been waiting for just this rider.

For a long time, Yi Seong-gye and his horse of lightning trained together, riding back and forth over the land. Seong-gye became an excellent rider, learning archery and other feats from the saddle. No horse, and no archer, could equal them. One day, Seong-gye decided to give the great horse a test.

He said to his horse: "I will fire an arrow at a pine tree in the distant woods. You must gallop to the tree and arrive before the arrow does, or I will cut off your head." The young warrior drew his bow and fired a speeding arrow at the tree.

His horse galloped off like the wind, but when it arrived, the arrow was already imbedded in the pine tree. Yi Seong-gye was in great distress, but he did as he promised. With streaming eyes, he took out his sword and beheaded the fastest horse of Goryeo.

As his horse's head fell to the ground, suddenly an arrow flew through the air and imbedded itself in the pine tree. Now Yi Seong-gye realized: the other arrow was there from a previous hunting trip. His horse of lightning had indeed outrun the arrow he had just fired. Yi was bereft. He built a commemorative pavilion and came often to venerate the horse that had helped him gain such great martial skills. The warrior hung his head and resolved to avoid human arrogance and careless judgement in the future.¹



Following his triumphant return to the Goryeo capital, Yi Jachun was promoted and honored with several honorary titles such as “Grand Master for Transmitting Discussions” and “Grand Master for Following Righteousness.”² When “Grand Master” Yi Jachun entered Gaegyeong as a conquering hero, his son Yi Seong-gye was by his side. Seong-gye was just 21 years old, and it was his first appearance in the political world of Goryeo—he was an unrefined mountain-man from the north, come to the big city.³

The backwoodsman would soon have his chance to impress his skills upon the Goryeo court. In celebration of the great victory at Ssangseong, a big festival was arranged, and some young military officers and sons of officials were selected to play *kyokku* on horseback. This ball game was something like polo, requiring players on fast horses to use mallets to drive the ball through goal posts.

The event was spectacular. A large area at the center of town was turned into a playing field. As described by the court records:

Then they set up a royal tent decorated with paintings of dragons and phoenixes, and the king held a banquet for high officials and noble ladies. The king watched the game from the tent along with his officials while entertaining girls danced to music. The ladies wearing their best silks, watched from tents along a side road. A huge crowd of spectators gathered to watch this spectacle.⁴

Everyone was in finery and ceremonial dress. The military heroes all stood together and swayed to the court music as the dancing girls swirled. The players' equipment was so luxurious that the cost of one saddle alone was said to equal the wealth of ten ordinary households.⁵ Young Yi Seong-gye, the northern provincial never before seen in the capital, was chosen as one of the players. A complete stranger among the fops of Goryeo, Yi Seong-gye mounted his horse, took up his mallet, and destroyed them all.

During the match, Seong-gye's horse was running so fast that on one occasion Seong-gye hit the ball into a stone and it bounced back behind his racing horse. All in one motion, Seong-gye spun around in his saddle, struck the ball just as it flew out from underneath his horse's hind legs, and drove it back through the front legs of his galloping horse and into the goal. The crowd went wild, and this scoring technique was later given a name for the ages: *pangmi*. Yi Seong-gye dismounted, approached the tent of the gathered royals, and bowed low to the King.

On another occasion, Seong-gye hit a ball so hard that it bounced off the pillar of a bridge, shooting to his left. Seong-gye quickly took his leg out of the right stirrup so he could lean far left off his horse, and struck the ball again, driving it through the goal. The cheering crowd later called this technique *hoengbang*. Once again, Yi Seong-gye approached the royal tent and bowed to the King. "Everyone in the country was amazed to see his great skill and said that such a talent was unprecedented."⁶

Though this glorified account of this *kyokku* contest was produced by King Taejo's own court historians in later years, such that one might be skeptical of some details, there is no reason to doubt that Yi Seong-gye was in fact skilled at horseback archery and other contests. Horseback prowess was an essential feat of arms in Goryeo at the time and young Yi Seong-gye was a successful field warrior with a growing record of military success, both on fields of battle and friendly competitions.

The Yi clan seemed on their way up in the Goryeo capital. Both Yi Jachun and Yi Seong-gye were awarded military promotions. Yi Jachun was granted a house in Gaegyeong and a

government post as a third rank official. He became Supreme General of the Thousand Bull Guard. By 1361 he was named Grand Master for Glorious Happiness, Minister of Revenue, and head of the Directorate for Palace Buildings. He was also named commander of the northeast region and sent back north, with orders to represent the crown.⁷

Some Gaegyeong ministers were nervous at this turn of developments. The rugged Yi clan from the “barbarian” north hardly matched the traditional mold of Gaegyeong elites—who were mostly either urbane bluebloods from long-influential families or educated scholar-officials of the Confucian academies.⁸ Moreover, some officials were quite nervous with empowering military men from northern border territories, an area of notoriously shifting political terrain and fluid loyalties. Although Mongol troops had been driven out of the Ssangseong area, it was entirely unclear that the Jurchen tribes and other residents of these unruly areas would really submit to Goryeo.⁹ How could the Goryeo court be certain of the loyalties of the Yi clan warlords who had once betrayed Goryeo to Yuan, and then later betrayed Yuan to Goryeo? Their long-ago ancestor, Yi Ui-bang, had even once overthrown a Goryeo king.

“Yi [Jachun] is originally a man of the Northeast and also a chiliarch of that region, therefore, it is not advisable to appoint him the military commander of the border,” fretted one minister.¹⁰ Still, King Gongmin felt he had few options but to trust the bold Yi clan and their fiercely loyal private troops to help Goryeo hold onto these newly recaptured northern territories, and so he sent commander Yi Jachun back home, with new authority. The northern warrior had been taken into the belly of Goryeo.

Nervous as they were with these developments, some of Gaegyeong’s ministers must have been reassured to learn of Yi Jachun’s death soon after leaving for the north. Life could be short in these times, and soon after Yi returned to his homelands he passed away, at 46 years old.¹¹ Yi Seong-gye was just 25 years old when he inherited the rank of northeast commander and the private troops of his father. Young and inexperienced, Yi Seong-gye was not expected to fill his father’s shoes and was not seen as much of a political danger

to the Goryeo court. Down in Gaegyeong, most ministers agreed that “there is now no one in the northeast region who can take [Yi Jachun’s] place.”¹²

For his part, Yi Seong-gye quietly fulfilled his filial duty. He spoke to two local monks about a good burial site for his father. Consulting divination and geomancy, the monks determined that one site would lead the family to great riches, while the other site would lead to great power. Yi Seong-gye chose the site of kingly power, frightening one of the old monks. “Isn’t that too much?” the monk nervously asked. Too much or not, an auspicious site of Kings on Kwija hill in Hamhung is where the legends say that Yi Seong-gye buried his father.

Yi Seong-gye then returned to life among his private troops—the *gabyeolcho*. These were elite forces of the northeast: skilled horse riders, expert archers, well trained men of battle. Several thousand of these troops, and all their families, looked to the Yi clan—not Goryeo leaders—for protection and prosperity.¹³ Yi Seong-gye lived, trained, and fought with these warriors, and all their families lived within his fence. For more than a hundred years the families of these private troops—a mixture of Han, Mongol and Jurchen—had gathered under the Yi banner and paid taxes directly to the Yi clan in exchange for protection and a degree of stability. The old bluebloods of the Goryeo capital didn’t expect much out of the young and rugged rustic who now led the Yi clan, but a dragon can rise from a small stream¹⁴ and the bluebloods should have remembered what was revealed in that game of *kyokku*.