

The Advent of General Yi



One day while hunting in the wild, young Yi Seong-gye came to rest amid some trees. Suddenly he heard a loud crash and saw another young man leaping through the bushes, chasing a deer. This other hunter brought down the deer, and quickly began drinking its blood. Yi Seong-gye admired the deer's size and asked to share a draught of the animal's blood. The other hunter refused, and the two men began to brawl. Yi Seong-gye was the stronger man and forced the hunter to share the deer's blood.

After this event, the two young men became best friends and declared themselves blood brothers. The hunter's name was Turan Temur, and he was a fierce warrior of the Jurchen people. He had the strength of a bear and a fine, beautiful face.

In later days, it came to pass that Yi Seong-gye and Turan Temur were hunting near a mountain spring. Turan said to Seong-gye: "Your beard is grand and powerful; it looks like a great dragon, flowing as a mountain spring! I predict that you will achieve a great thing." Yi Seong-gye said that before he could achieve a great thing, he should wait at this mountain spring for the water to burst like a fountain, and then he would drink of the fountain, as a sign from the dragon-king.

The two men waited and waited and returned to the spring many times, but the water never burst like a fountain. So Yi Seong-gye remained happy to just wander the north. Finally, Turan grew angry at his friend's inaction and yelled out: "Let's just pull out your great beard, since you are waiting forever!" Yi Seong-gye was angry and the two men fell to fighting. Again, Yi Seong-gye was the better man.

Turan Temur considered Seong-gye's fighting skills and realized that one day his friend would indeed achieve a great thing. The Jurchen warrior resolved to follow Yi Seong-gye for a long time.¹

Yi Jachun died in April of 1360. Because Jachun's eldest son had earlier been killed by a tiger while on a hunting trip, his second son, Seong-gye, inherited his honors and rank, including serving as a Goryeo senior *myriarch* (commander of 10,000 men) of the Dongbukmyeon (northeast) region.² Though he ostensibly could muster and command a large army of conscripts if commanded by the Goryeo crown, Yi's most important asset was his private "special forces"—about 1,500 elite soldiers who fought under Yi's personal banner and were not organized into larger armies.³ These private soldiers were freed from corvée labor projects and taxation by the Goryeo crown, so they could spend all their time training and drilling.

In addition, Yi could count on support from the mounted cavalry of a local Jurchen ally, Turan Temur (1331-1402), who was a close friend of the young commander. Turan Temur was a skilled warrior and horseman, whose father was Ara Buka, a Jurchen chieftain with title as leader of a thousand men (*chiliarch*) in the Yuan system. This Jurchen family had local notoriety, as they were effective warriors and were said to be descended from a general of the Chinese Southern Song dynasty.⁴

In these northern areas, Korean and Jurchen mixed closely. The two peoples hunted together, lived in the same villages, inter-married, and sometimes worked together to protect their areas from raids from competing tribes or Japanese pirates.⁵ But they also struggled for local influence and land, so Turan Temur sometimes had to work with his father to defend Jurchen households from the pressures of a growing population of ethnic Koreans near their Pukcheong home in Hamgyong province. By the 1350s, however, this task was growing ever more difficult as Goryeo's King Gongmin began pushing Korean control northward, ordering the Yi family to pacify the locals and drive the Mongols north. It became inevitable that local strongmen like Turan Temur and Yi Seong-gye would become either allies or enemies. The Yi clan had been ordered by King Gongmin to secure Goryeo's authority over these lands, so Jurchen tribes had to choose either to ally with the growing Korean power, or actively resist it, perhaps by joining in military campaigns of the displaced Mongols.

It was in this climate that young Yi Seong-gye met and joined forces with the Jurchen, Turan Temur. Folklore has it that he and Yi Seong-gye often hunted together and competed in local sporting contests while growing up. Thereby the two became close friends, a relationship that would serve Yi Seong-gye well all his life. In years to come, Turan Temur rose to command his own strong cavalry and would become a fiercely loyal part of Yi Seong-gye's private army, an elite force united by blood, mutual love, and regional roots in the northeast.⁶

The Dokro River Rebellion

In October of 1361, just a few months after the death of his father, Yi Seong-gye received his first direct order from the Goryeo crown: he was to march to the Dokro River basin (a tributary of the Yalu river, now called the Changja) and put down the small rebellion of commander Park Ui. This commander had murdered several of his own Goryeo officers and likely was joining with Yuan and Jurchen forces in the area in rebellion against King Gongmin's anti-Yuan initiatives. Unlike the Jurchen of Turan Temur's clan, these forces were choosing to resist Goryeo's growing authority in the north. King Gongmin had originally ordered his Minister of Punishments to organize a response against the mutinous officer. But this minister proved militarily inept, so King Gongmin turned to the lower-ranking Yi Seong-gye and ordered him to track down and punish Park's mutinous forces.

The *Taejo Sillok* describes how, as early winter snow fell over the mountains, Yi Seong-gye sped his 1,500 private troops to the river basin and prepared to assert Goryeo's claim to these lands. The opposed forces met at the Dokro River, and did battle on its ice-covered sheets, amid the sleet and snow. Though precise historical records of this engagement are sparse, later court historians of the King Taejo era report that after an initial engagement, the combatants separated to opposite riverbanks, and glowered at each other under their war banners. After a time, the court history says that Yi Seong-gye stepped forward, raised his strong bow, and nocked one of his famous crane feather arrows. He took aim, drew the string, and struck the enemy flagpole across the river, dropping its

flag unceremoniously to the icy ground. At the time, regional soldiers believed that gods of war and mystical energies animated these battle pennants,⁷ so a wave of demoralization swept over Park Ui's troops. Gloomy with the portents, Park's soldiers were happy that the sun was setting, putting an end to the day's battle. They could regroup and retire to their tents for the time being.

But Yi Seong-gye's troops didn't sleep that night. Instead, commander Yi planned a secret river crossing in the dead of night, sneaking across the dark river without torchlight and surrounding Park Ui's encampment. Before Park knew what was upon him, the field was lost. His troops tried to flee, but they were chased down by Yi's cavalry and most were killed.⁸

Yi Seong-gye had been victorious at Ssangseong fortress and on the polo grounds of the capital. He commanded the fierce loyalty of 1,500 warriors of the north. And he had now won his first military command, with hardly any losses at all. As the young commander prepared to leave the northern battlefield, his growing reputation marched out before him.

The Red Turban Invasion

More battle, and more deadly, was to come. An isolated river valley rebellion was but a sideshow compared to the forces that were gathering just north of the Yalu River—hundreds of thousands of hungry rebels making up China's massive, millenarian Red Turban movement. Though the Goryeo military had pushed Yuan forces back across the Yalu, and Goryeo had declared its growing independence from the Mongol empire, there were increasing problems from Chinese Red Turban rebels who were assaulting the Chinggisids in China but were also crossing into Goryeo lands, plundering for grain and treasure.

In the summer of 1359, a communique arrived from the Chinese insurgents, advising Goryeo leaders that the Red Turban rebels aimed to take over all of China. The millenarian "White Lotus" teachings of this peasant movement were spreading like wildfire across the region, promising to expel corrupt elites from the world and "give salvation to mankind."⁹ The Red Turbans expected Goryeo to support their rising

populist power or face the consequences. “We will succor those people who join us; we will chastise those whose resist us in battle,” they warned.¹⁰

The Goryeo court ignored the entreaty, and in December of 1359 Red Turban raiding parties crossed the Yalu River into Goryeo territory. By the end of the month, larger armies were crossing the Yalu and the Red Turbans pushed south towards Seogyang (modern Pyongyang), gathering grain and pillaging villages as they went. On January 17, 1360, Seogyang itself fell to the Red Turbans. Though King Gongmin’s forces regained the city about a month later, casualties were high, great stores of food had been taken, and civilian damage was immense. Then in April of 1360 the Red Turbans engaged in another wave of Goryeo coastal raids, capturing more granaries and burning buildings wherever they could. A severe drought followed that year, leading to widespread famine and even episodes of cannibalism in Goryeo—King Gongmin reduced his own meals to one a day in a show of support for his starving people.¹¹

The situation was grim by the fall of 1361 and would only get worse. Just a few weeks after Yi Seong-gye defeated Park Ui’s rebellion in the northern borderlands, the Red Turbans crossed the Yalu in November with a second invasion force. According to estimates in the *Koryosa* and *Taejo Sillok*, somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 Red Turban troops moved south towards Goryeo’s capital. Though this estimate might well have been exaggerated, all records agree that this second Red Turban invasion was much larger than the first.¹² Red Turban officers themselves sent a written warning to the Korean Court with even higher claims of troop numbers: “We are now advancing towards the east with a force of 1.1 million soldiers. Come out quickly to welcome our army and surrender to us.”¹³

Commander Yi and his troops had only just weeks earlier won the day on the Dokro River battlefield. Now, on his way back to the Gaegyeong capital to report victory, Yi encountered a small Red Turban detachment. He routed them in battle, beheaded their commander and 100 soldiers, and delivered a live captive to King Gongmin in Gaegyeong.¹⁴ The reputation of Yi Seong-gye soared in the Goryeo court and on the street:

the young hero had never yet lost a battle! It was a reassuring victory, but on Yi's heels came the massive Chinese army, ushering an ominous winter storm.

There was little hope of stopping the main force of approaching Red Turban soldiers—it was simply too massive. In addition, the royal army was poorly trained and badly led. For years, military officer posts had been granted as a sinecure to decadent and untrained elites. Many of Goryeo's most influential elites had their own private militias (typically much smaller than Yi Seong-gye's private forces), but these elites did not offer their private troops to the defense of the capital.¹⁵ As compared these trained private militias, there was no professional training or even pay offered to part-time soldiers called to serve in the nation's army—they were simply conscripted as a form of national service. During a time of national crisis like the Red Turban invasions, even young boys and decrepit old men were sometimes ordered to report to service. As the Chinese army advanced, King Gongmin ordered his makeshift army of conscripts to fortify Gaegyeong as best it could. Prayers were made to the Gods of moats and walls, rivers and streams, mountains, and stars. But it was no use; there was no stopping the Red Turban advance. One scholar recalled how the Red Turbans “moved through our territory like a fire raging across a plain.”¹⁶

By mid-November 1361, the Goryeo court fled Gaegyeong altogether, making for nearby Ichon county and then travelled onwards to the southern areas of Sangju and Pokju (North Gyeongsang province, near today's Andong), out of reach of the invading forces. As the court fled, the Chinese Red Turban forces camped in the field before the gates of Gaegyeong. There they lit a grand bonfire, where the Red Turban commander casually dried his clothes before entering the capital in triumph.¹⁷

In distinction, the Goryeo King's flight from the capital was pitiful. “Young and old fell prostrate, while children and mothers abandoned one another. The suburbs were filled with those who had been crushed in the rush to escape the capital. The sounds of wailing moved Heaven and Earth.” Through a pouring rain, and then in cold and snowy weather, the queen had to ride on horseback rather than in a covered wagon,

while the King was freezing in his soaked garments. Along their journey south, one scholar observed that everyone they encountered seemed “panicked...like a started roe or a crouching hare...[refugees] were so numerous and desperate they would fill Heaven and Earth.”¹⁸

Back in Gaegyeong, the Red Turban forces occupied the capital on December 21st, and began to terrorize the population. Goryeo court historians described the terrible scene. “They butchered cattle and horses... butchered and roasted men and women. Fully indulging their depravity, some roasted women’s breasts to eat.”¹⁹ Though Goryeo’s own historians may be suspected of hyperbolic demonization of their enemies as flesh-eating cannibals, the reality is that episodes of such cannibalism (among Goryeo commoners as well as Red Turban invaders) occurred with some frequency during the famine-stricken final decades of the Yuan dynasty, especially in northern China, and are a documented (if minor) part of warfare during these years.²⁰

Holed up in the southern redoubt of Pokju, King Gongmin and his generals regrouped, gathered new troops, and planned to retake their capital. Yi Seong-gye had returned from his recent field victories and joined the military planning. On February 12, 1362, about 200,000 Goryeo troops advanced on the occupied Gaegyeong. They set up camp around their captured capital and prepared to lay siege. Among the Goryeo troops was a special unit under the command of Yi Seong-gye. Yi now had 2000 elite forces fighting under his personal standard and had never yet lost a battle.

In the pre-dawn hours, the war drums roared and the Goryeo forces attacked. Near the front were 2000 of Yi’s personal troops, charging in rain and snow against the walls. The battle at the walls continued all day, but Goryeo forces could not breach the walls. After sunset, the fighting calmed but the siege continued. Around midnight, Yi Seong-gye caught sight of an enemy detachment trying to break through the siege and escape. Yi pursued them on horseback to the East Gate of the city, where his soldiers and enemy troops became entangled in a desperate battle.

As told in the *Taejo Sillok*, “An enemy soldier with a spear tried to stab Taejo in the right ear from behind. Taejo at that

moment used his sword to cut down seven or eight of the enemy in front of him and, whipping his horse, jumped over the wall on horseback.”²¹ This great leap startled and demoralized Red Turban rebels within, giving Yi’s troops an opening to breach the walls.²² Precise records of these long-ago battles are sparse, but a modern Korean history committee imagines the kind of encouragement Yi Seong-gye may well have shouted. “We are unbeatable soldiers trained in the rugged mountains! Don’t be afraid of death and fight on!”²³ He then took aim at a Red Turban commander and dropped him dead with a heavy arrow from his famed bow. Red Turban forces panicked, and the rout was on. Within hours, the Red Turban forces were fleeing in disarray, reportedly trampling more than one thousand residents to death as they fled into the confused, dark night.²⁴ Young Yi Seong-gye was a key part of yet another victorious military battle.

Though Goryeo generals had recaptured their capital, King Gongmin delayed his return for months, preferring to remain in the suburb of Paju while the capital’s streets lay in ruin, and ambitious generals marched about with fully mobilized armies. The King had fled in disgrace, while the generals took back the city in triumph. It would be dangerous for the beleaguered king to return at this moment, to a city he had abandoned and that was now crowded with conquering generals and their loyal soldiers.

But Gongmin had a ruthless plan to handle those ambitious generals.* Within a few weeks of his generals’ great victory in recapturing Gaegyeong, King Gongmin arranged the murder of four of his top commanders. One was beat to death at a congratulatory banquet. Another was summoned to a special congratulatory meeting in the King’s private quarters, and then struck down by the King’s attendants. A third was

* It is unclear if King Gongmin was directly involved in ordering the murder of several of the leading generals who had recaptured Gaegyeong. The Official History of the Goryeo Dynasty absolves Gongmin of involvement in these executions, but the King’s subsequent support of those involved in the murders suggests he approved of these events and may well have ordered them himself (Robinson, D., *Empire’s Twilight*, pp. 190–92).

called to welcome a visiting family member. He was sliced with a sword and killed while bowing in respect before his relative.

Another was branded a traitor and beheaded while the gruesome trophy was displayed on a pike in his hometown. All were slain due to Gongmin's fear that one of them might rise to challenge his vulnerable dynasty, following their great military victory. With many of his top generals all dead, that danger seemed well mitigated.²⁵ In the aftermath, two surviving generals soon rose to the most prominent positions in Goryeo's military: General Choe Yeong who became the highest-ranking commander in Goryeo, and General Yi Seong-gye, the rapidly rising northern star.²⁶

But things were not at all certain for the King, for there were plenty of others who were becoming skeptical of their mercurial leader. Gongmin's chaotic flight from the capital, and now shocking murders of his commanders, were the talk of the realm. One despairing scholar delivered a withering critique in a eulogy to one of the slain generals, Kim Teuk-pae. "He labored at the enterprise of saving Goryeo...Why, when the sweat of his horses was not dry and the songs of his triumphant return not yet still, was his enormous merit (as heavy as Mt. Tai) transformed into blood on a sharp sword? This is why I weep tears of blood and beseech Heaven....What can be done? What can be done?"²⁷

As for the streets of the capital, they were a wasteland. The palace was ruined. "Whitened bones [of the dead] stood in piles."²⁸ Residents had fled the city en masse, taxes for repairs could not be collected, and a drought spread over the land. The King's advisors grew concerned over the lamentations of the people, while officials delivered biting critiques: "The chaotic flight to the south in 1361; the loss of the ancestral altars to the enemy; the disgrace of His Highness' exile; they have become an object of ridicule throughout the realm. [All because] Your Excellency did not make plans in advance."²⁹ On top of all that, the King remained absent from the capital throughout the rest of 1361 and all of 1362, spending time in the nearby suburbs, watching archery contests, attending *kyokku* (polo) games, hunting, and boating to divert his attention from the struggles of the slowly recovering capital.³⁰

Nahachu on the Plain of Hamhung

While the king dithered, the battles never ended for Yi Seong-gye. Even while Chinese raiders had crossed the northwest border and pushed south into Gaegyeong, a different enemy had crossed the loosely governed northeast border and pressed into South Hamyong province, where Yi's hometown of Hamhung was located. A Yuan-allied commander named Nahachu, the most powerful warlord in the northern highlands around the Yalu River, determined that both Goryeo and the Red Turban forces were weak from fighting each other and now was the moment to advance Jurchen and Yuan claims on north Korean territories.

The Yi father-son combination, together with other Goryeo commanders, had driven the Yuan out of the Ssangseong commandery five years ago, but the unstable north remained a fluid land of mixed ethnicities, heavily populated by Jurchen peoples, and up for claim by whoever had the necessary power. Goryeo had claimed this land of steep mountains, narrow passes, and high plateaus five years ago, but at a cost—now it had to defend them from area warlords like Nahachu.³¹ As Nahachu occupied northern provinces, he burned slave registers and household registers, undermining the ability of the Goryeo court to govern and tax these areas.³²

Nahachu of (later-named) Manchuria had already defeated one hapless Goryeo commander after crossing the border in 1361 with thousands of warriors, so Goryeo had few options other than to send the swashbuckling Yi Seong-gye on yet another campaign. Though Nahachu's forces were strong and Goryeo was sorely weakened from Red Turban invasions, sending Yi Seong-gye was quite a card to play. The Hamyong province was Yi's home territory, where he was very popular among the local peoples. Yi could count on their support as he headed north to confront Nahachu. Also, Yi was a master of the complicated landscape in the area. The trails and roads near Hamhung were "tortuously winding and crisscrossed in many

places," but Yi had roamed and hunted these lands endlessly in younger years. He knew his way around.*

In July of 1362 Yi Seong-gye travelled back to his Hamhung roots. According to the *Taejo Sillok*, When Yi arrived, he linked up with his boyhood friend, Turan Temur of the Jurchen, who committed his own skilled cavalry to help Yi Seong-gye's campaign. With these joint forces, General Yi was pleased to catch up with Nahachu's forces at Hamwallyong Pass, near a village called Taldandong. Each commander had powerful cavalry and was comfortable with mounted battle in mountainous terrain, but on this day, Yi Seong-gye would win the field. His troops won this first encounter, chasing Nahachu's troops over the mountain pass and killing many. To regroup, Yi Seong-gye then withdrew to a mountain valley, while Nahachu made his way back near the fields of the original battle, to rest for the night.

But commander Yi was waiting for Nahachu and laid into him in a surprise night attack, putting the Yuan enemy again to flight. Yi kept on Nahachu's tail through the next day and soon attacked an unguarded detachment of Yuan wood-gatherers, followed up by a surprise cavalry attack with 600 of his best troops. But in this encounter, Yi's troops were having a hard time of it. Every time they tried to advance, "an enemy general clad with iron armor decorated with red ox-tails suddenly jumped out, brandishing a spear." He was terrifying and strong, and Yi's soldiers would not advance against the warrior.

So general Yi stepped forward and confronted the armored terror himself, pretending to run away as soon as the armored fighter rushed to attack with his spear. The red ox-tail warrior shouted in victory and chased after Yi Seong-gye. Fleeing on horseback, Yi quickly slid underneath the belly of his horse, shocking his opponent, who lost balance and fell off his own horse. Yi quickly rolled back into the saddle and fired a deadly arrow into the fallen enemy with the red-ox tails.

* All the details in this paragraph and subsequent paragraphs regarding Yi's encounter with Nahachu, are found in *Taejo Sillok*, "Cheongseo" ["General Introduction"], Kindle loc. 684-757. See also Im, J., op. cit., pp. 50-56.

“With their champion dead, the enemy troops were thrown into disarray and ran away” as the sun set behind tall peaks.

That night, Nahachu’s wife was nervous. “It has been a long time since you traveled the world, but you have not met such a formidable foe yet, have you?” she reflected in their tent. “You had better avoid meeting him again and return home quickly.”

But Nahachu resolved to campaign on. A few days later, the two great commanders each rode out on the field of battle with ten cavalymen at their side and met for parlay. Nahachu admitted that Yi had the stronger forces, and said he was prepared to surrender the field. But General Yi suspected deception, and calmly fired an arrow into one of the commanders riding next to Nahachu, and then shot Nahachu’s own horse dead. Battle broke out. Once again Yi Seong-gye had the better of it, until Nahachu was given another horse by his nearby commanders and fled again into the sunset. As night fell, General Yi withdrew and protected his rear guard.

In the following days, Yi hunted Nahachu relentlessly through the winding mountain roads. On one occasion, Yi was ambushed, and two enemy generals clad in silver armor and with long spears nearly ran him through. But the *Taejo Sillok* reports that Yi spun around on his horse, “shot both generals and killed twenty more enemy soldiers in short order.” During the subsequent battle, Yi rolled and dodged on his horse, attacking the enemy from all manner of surprising directions, and owning the field. He saw one enemy take aim at his torso, but quickly lifted up on his saddle and let the arrow pass between his legs. In another case, an enemy was “completely covered with armor and wore a helmet secured by a chinstrap,” making it difficult for anyone to bring him down with arrows. So Yi shot the man’s horse, which rose up in the air with pain. When the disoriented enemy opened his mouth to command and calm the horse, Yi fired another arrow straight into the exposed mouth and killed the enemy. Once again, Nahachu’s forces were thrown into a disarrayed retreat. “In their panic, the enemy soldiers trampled one another, and many died or were captured.”

But Nahachu still would not surrender, and Yi had to plan for one more encounter. He directed his reliable Jurchen ally,

Turan Temur, to take his men and lurk in the woods near the Hamhung plain, hiding and preparing for a surprise. In that day's battle with Nahachu, Yi's forces had the worst of it, and kept retreating down the mountain towards the plains below. These wide plains were exactly the kind of terrain Nahachu's Mongol cavalry loved to fight on, so his cavalry pursued Yi's soldiers relentlessly. They chased Yi Seong-gye all the way to the plain of Hamhung, where Yi's forces looked weary and panicked. There, where the Hamhung plain met mountain forest, Nahachu celebrated and howled with pride at his impending victory.

Though Yi's panicked troops retreated desperately onto the plains, General Yi did not give up. Following Nahachu's taunt, Yi turned on horseback to charge the enemy single-handedly, drawing out three enemy warriors who began to chase him at full gallop. As the three enemies came close behind his own galloping horse, Yi suddenly pulled up on his reins and brought his well-trained horse to a sudden halt. The three enemies roared past in surprise, unable to stop their horses quickly. The predators had become the prey, and Yi shot each of three pursuers in the back with his great bow, killing them all. Then charged Nahachu's main force of thousands, pursuing Yi and his retreating soldiers onto the plain of Hamhung, pouring like angry fire through the golden pampas grass of late summer.

But it was all a trap. Yi Seong-gye had disguised the true size of his army, and thousands of Turan Temur's troops were hiding in the forest. As Nahachu's men charged onto the plain, Yi Seong-gye suddenly turned his own forces around to do battle, and the hidden forces of Turan Temur emerged from their forest shadows behind Nahachu. In groups of three horses, standing side-by-side, Turan Temur's forces stood with long spears—a spiky fence blocking the enemy's retreat and ready "to sweep the enemy away." The trap was sprung, Nahachu was surrounded, and thousands of his best troops were slaughtered that day. General Yi pursued all the Jurchen soldiers he could, raging "like a meteor,"³³ but a small remnant, including Nahachu himself, fled the field.

The next day, Nahachu sued for peace. Though his army was much smaller, Yi Seong-gye had handily defeated the great

Jurchen commander and best hope of the northern Yuan. Nahachu told his troops that Yi Seong-gye was probably the best general they would ever meet in their lives. "No one can surpass him in the world," agreed Nahachu's sister. Nahachu offered General Yi a drum and a fine horse as a peace tribute and promised Yi that he would forevermore remain North of the Yalu. Nahachu recalled how he had long ago met Yi's father in these parts. "Years ago, Yi [Jachun] said he had a talented son. Indeed, he did not lie." When he returned to the Goryeo capital, Yi Seong-gye "presented to the king the trophies that he had collected, including tablets and seals made of silver and copper, respectively, as well as innumerable other spoils."

For his part, after he abandoned Goryeo lands for haunts north of the Yalu, Nahachu later sent a note of commendation to the Goryeo court and promised to respect the Tumen and Yalu river borders in the future. "How is General Yi doing?" Nahachu asked. "Though he is young, he is incredible in commanding his army. He is a real genius. I believe he will become a man of great responsibilities in your country in the days ahead."³⁴

Yuan Invasion and the Battle of Chongju

In one year of deadly battles, Yi Seong-gye had helped drive Mongol troops out of Hamhung, Chinese marauders out of Gaegyeong, and Jurchen warriors from the northern reaches of Goryeo. The northern border grew increasingly peaceful as Nahachu was now rumored to be "scared even by the blowing wind and suspicious of croaking cranes."³⁵ Yi Seong-gye was no longer just the son of Yi Jachun, but had become the great General Yi, building the fence of Goryeo. It was good that *someone* was building Goryeo's defense, since King Gongmin himself hadn't even yet returned to the capital city, following the purge of the Red Turban raiders. At the tail end of 1362, with the King still not returned to the old capital city, more bad news arrived.

Even though General Yi had driven Nahachu out of the north, King Gongmin now received news that Yuan leaders were mobilizing yet another effort to recapture Goryeo's loyalties and planned to forcibly conscript Goryeo troops into

campaigns against the Chinese Red Turban rebels. In December 1362, King Gongmin learned that the Yuan emperor had decided to forcibly dethrone Gongmin and replace him with Tash-Temur. Tash-Temur happened to be Gongmin's uncle but was slavishly pro-Yuan and a great favorite of Empress Ki, who still sought revenge for the earlier purges of the Goryeo Ki family. Empress Ki is recorded to have bitterly pushed her Chinggisid son, Ayushiridara, to move against the Goryeo court. "'You are now already grown," she harangued. "Why do you not avenge me!"³⁶ Empress Ki's anger helped drive the Chinggisids to conceive a plan to dethrone the Goryeo King and replace him with a hand-picked member of the Ki family.

From afar, the Yuan court announced the dethronement of Goryeo's King Gongmin, who in March of 1363 was still living in the Gaegyeong suburbs, where he had erected a small temporary palace. According to the Yuan, King Gongmin was no longer even running things in Gaegyeong, so they planned to put a new king on the throne.³⁷

In fact, the blustering Yuan had retreated to the Mongolian steppes in the face of Red Turban assaults, and they didn't have much power to enforce their edicts on the peninsula. Still, they could engineer dangerous court intrigues in Goryeo. In April of 1363, the existential danger to Gongmin's position was made clear. On April 15th, deep in the night, one of Gongmin's own senior officials sent fifty assassins to kill the King in his sleep. They drove away Gongmin's bodyguard, but his eunuchs prevailed. One eunuch ran off with King Gongmin perched on his back, while another eunuch dressed up and pretended to be the King as assassins entered the royal chambers. The assassins murdered the eunuch imposter and ran through the temporary palace, seeking out the fugitive King. They found him hiding in the Queen dowager's quarters, seeking cover behind the royal widow who sat unmoving in the doorway. This Queen dowager was a Mongolian royal, who have married into the Goryeo court, as was so common in those days. When the Mongolian royal wouldn't budge, the cowering King Gongmin behind her was spared the assassin's blade. "Although willing to commit regicide, the assassins balked at harming a member of the Mongolian aristocracy,"

THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

which provides some evidence that the Yuan court itself probably had something to do with the assassination attempt.³⁸ Confronted by the implacable Queen, the assassins lost their nerve and fled.

Once things calmed down, and Gongmin's troops had restored royal authority, Gongmin exiled or executed those responsible for the assassination attempt. But the danger was hardly passed. For one thing, the Yuan court didn't consider Gongmin the King any longer. They had sent Tash-Temur travelling from Daidu towards Gaegyeong, where he intended to be installed as Goryeo's new king. In January of 1364, Tash-Temur travelled as far as the Liaodong peninsula border area, where he awaited Yuan cavalry to escort him across the Yalu River and into Goryeo. There, Tash-Temur spun fantastical tales of future riches. He promised his Mongolian and Chinese soldiers that there would be great treasures awaiting them once they took over in Gaegyeong. All the "wives, concubines and property of Goryeo ministers would be their reward."³⁹

On the first day of January 1364, a hundred thousand Yuan troops crossed the Yalu at the town of Uiju, in advance of the would-be King of Goryeo. But Goryeo military forces met them in the field, including the elite troops of commander Yi Seong-gye, who had never yet lost a battle. General Yi's troops marched north to guard the country amid brutal winter conditions. "Soldiers were so cold and hungry they could not remain upright...One after another died of hunger in the roads as they begged. Their faces were pale and emaciated."⁴⁰ And yet, the forces remained loyal to Yi and their other commanders and stood prepared to battle the Yuan.

After a series of small engagements that saw the Yuan driving Goryeo forces south, things ultimately turned around at the decisive Battle of Chongju in February of 1364. There, one Goryeo general beat a detachment of Yuan troops and executed a Yuan general in front of his own army. The very next day, Yi Seong-gye played his own important role, fighting alongside 1,000 crack troops. The night before, Yi had sternly reprimanded the cowardice of fellow commanders who were not fully committing to battle. The other commanders wryly noted that since he was so brave, Yi should "take charge of tomorrow's battle alone, then." Yi was challenged to lead his

private forces into battle himself, at the front of the charge. The unflappable commander Yi agreed to do just that.⁴¹ The next day, Yi Seong-gye's forces led the charge and stood unbroken, and Goryeo forces drove the Yuan into a serious defeat.

In the end, Goryeo's two most important commanders (Generals Choe Yeong and Yi Seong-gye) pushed the Yuan completely out of Goryeo and across the Yalu River, with their would-be king in tow, just fifteen days after the Yuan had invaded. The Yuan army suffered a massive loss of life. Only seventeen Yuan mounted cavalry troops made it back across the Yalu, through many more unmounted soldiers survived. It was the first time Goryeo troops had defeated a large Mongol army in battle for more than a century.⁴² Recognizing the new reality, in October of 1364 the Yuan court finally agreed to confirm Gongmin once again as Goryeo's king, and Goryeo essentially became wholly independent of the Mongol empire.

During these days, Yi Seong-gye's own cousins (Samson and Samgae) saw fit to create some problems back home in Hamhung. These two men were known as petty bullies who liked to run with a group of local toughs. They had gathered a small band to plunder as they pleased, holing up in a fort near Hamhung with some Jurchen tribesmen. But things changed quickly when Yi Seong-gye returned to Hamhung immediately after driving Yuan troops across the Yalu. It didn't take him long to scour Samson and Samgae from their stronghold and to restore order to the area. The two raiders, General Yi's own cousins, fled north across the Yalu and never returned to Goryeo.⁴³

For his part in driving the Yuan out of Goryeo and winning his country's independence (as well as restoring order in Hamhung), the King promoted Yi Seong-gye to assistant royal secretary and commander of the northeast region, while raising his rank to Grand Master for Service and Assistance. Furthermore, the King bestowed upon Yi the prestigious title of "Extremely-Sincere, Brilliantly-Faithful, and Respectfully-Assisting Merit Subject", as well as giving him a golden belt as a sign of royal favor.⁴⁴ Gongmin then appointed Yi to keep watch on the Northern territories, including surveilling the situation north of the Yalu River, keeping watch

on lands long ago controlled by the Korean people, but now conquered by the Chinese and the Yuan.

The Liaodong Campaign

Things were on decline everywhere for Yuan forces. Not only had Goryeo pushed them out of the Korean peninsula, but across the Bohai Gulf, Red Turban Rebels drove the Mongols out of Beijing and all of China in 1368 and then declared the arrival of the Ming dynasty. Empress Ki, Emperor Toghon Temur, and the Mongol army fled into the interior Mongol highlands. Taking advantage of the weakening of the Mongol empire, in 1369-1370, King Gongmin declared to residents just north of Yalu River in Liaodong that they were considered citizens of Goryeo. There were perhaps 30,000-35,000 Goryeo residents near the city of Liaoyang at this time, living among thousands of Jurchens, Mongols and Han Chinese. Gongmin had decided the time was right to reclaim these lands north of the Yalu that had once belonged to the ancient Korean kingdom of Goguryeo, which once claimed to title to vast lands both south and north of the Yalu River.⁴⁵

To enforce the king's will, General Yi Seong-gye mustered 5,000 cavalry and 5,000 soldiers on a mission to cross the Yalu river and conquer the ancient Mountain fortress (*Urasanseong*) that guarded those territories and was long ago built as the first capital of the ancient Korean kingdom of Goguryeo.⁴⁶ It was the largest Goryeo military force sent abroad since Yuan's ill-fated attacks on Japan one hundred years earlier (in 1274 and 1281).⁴⁷

Yuan armed forces in the area targeted by Yi Seong-gye's troops were led by the son of Gi-Cheol,* so it was another opportunity to attack the remnants of the old Goryeo-Yuan alliance that King Gongmin had so thoroughly shattered. Fulfilling his charge, Yi marched his troops northwards for 1300 li (650 kilometers). Strong winds were incessant and "a

* Gi-cheol was the brother of Empress Ki (who had ruled the Yuan Dynasty with Toghon Temur from the Dragon throne in Daidu) and a member of the Ki clan that King Gongmin purged through surprise assassinations.

vast continent of snowflakes unfolded,” but Yi made the journey in just 10 days.⁴⁸ He crossed the Yalu on a floating bridge and blew his famous conch horn upon entering the Liao lands beyond.

It so happened that a brilliant episode of the Northern Lights appeared above Gaegyeong that very night, with a glittering display extending all the way from the northern borderlands to the capital. Such a dynamic and beautiful aurora would almost certainly be seen as portentous by Yi Seong-gye’s forces. Reading the heavens for portents was a common feature of Goryeo life, so much so that about half of the thousands of portents recorded in historical Goryeo documents relate to heavenly phenomenon.⁴⁹ We can guess that Yi Seong-gye might well have believed that the northern lights welcomed their crossing into Liaodong, even the sky flying the flag of victory at their coming.⁵⁰ Down in Gaegyeong, the officials of the Directorate of the Astronomical and Meteorological Observatory concluded that the brilliant night sky “portends a valiant general.” Pleased with the heavenly portents, the King replied: “The sign must have to do with Yi, whom I sent to the north.”⁵¹

General Yi faced demanding conditions in Liao lands on his way to Goguryeo’s old *Urasanseong* Mountain fortress. Winter winds and snowstorms slowed his troops whose horses constantly slipped on the roads. Soldiers became incapacitated and froze to death.⁵² This was doubly dire since Yi’s soldiers were already badly outnumbered by the troops of Nahachu (his old enemy from the Plain of Hamhung) who patrolled these areas north of the Yalu. Nahachu’s army began to hunt down Yi Seong-gye’s exposed forces as they became extended beyond their home territory, far out in the field).⁵³ It was a dangerous moment when Nahachu discovered Yi’s exposed troops on a cold snowy field, since Nahachu had a three-to-one advantage in numbers.

Yi Seong-gye was committed to pressing on as ordered, since he was now only about 10 li (5 kilometers) east of the fortress. But he knew Nahachu had been chasing after his army for a few days and didn’t want to alert the enemy to his dangerously depleted numbers. Therefore, Yi ordered his troops to camp openly in the field, and to spend precious time

building toilets and stables. He also ordered them to build several campfires for each small group of soldiers, rather than just one. The many campfires suggested an army far larger than what Yi actually had, and the field construction project confused Nahachu. "Since they built toilets and stables [in the field], their troops must be well prepared," Nahachu concluded. "It is impossible to attack them." Therefore, Nahachu withdrew from the field and returned to his base camp, leaving the mountain fortress to its fate.⁵⁴

The next day, as the wily General Yi marched towards the fortress, one local leader came out voluntarily, took off his armor and surrendered. He claimed that his ancestors were originally from Goryeo and that he wished to return to the Goryeo kingdom. This man (Yi Won-gyeong) only had a small contingent of thirty soldiers and 300 village households, but the surrender suggested better things to come. In fact, soon after this surrender, other local villages felt the winds changing and another 10,000 households (about 50,000 people) came over to Yi Seong-gye's side, swearing they would be loyal to his Goryeo command.⁵⁵

Several months after these initial victories (after delivering some of the surrendering families and leaders to King Gongmin in Gaegyeong), General Yi was back campaigning in Liaodong. In late November 1370, he made it to *Urasanseong* Mountain Fortress, built up on high cliffs. He surrounded the cliffs with 20,000 troops. Inside was the much smaller force of Go Ki-win, still loyal to the Yuan and shouting out that the surrendering Won-gyeong was a traitor. Won-gyeong rode his horse up to the fortress walls and shouted back: "There's nothing we can do about it. The fate of the Yuan dynasty has come to an end." In response, fortress commander Go Ki-win simply shot arrows into Won-gyeong's horse, which screamed loudly as it collapsed and died.⁵⁶

General Yi had no choice but to lay siege. His forces surrounded the fortress and watched the castle walls light up with watch torches as night fell. According to both the *Taejo Sillok* and the Goryeo history of the account, which likely exaggerates Yi Seong-gye's military prowess, the general spent the night demoralizing the fortress defenders. All that night, Yi Seong-gye became a shadowy sniper, moving quietly in the

dark below the castle and taking aim with his great bow. One by one, Yi would lock onto a target and send a whistling bolt of doom through the night. The records say that General Yi killed seventy guardsmen on the fortress walls that night, completely demoralizing the defenders. By the next day, the fortress lay quiet and near abandoned. Panicked by the army at their doorstep and the deadly sniper in the dark, many defending soldiers had fled as the sun came up. The few remaining enemy captains in the fortress surrendered to Yi Seong-gye that morning and news quickly arrived that other nearby forts were also surrendering to the Goryeo forces.⁵⁷

The general was magnanimous in victory. When he entered the fortress and its protected town, Yi espied one elderly man standing in the wreckage, naked and wailing in the snowy waste. "Who is that man standing naked and crying in this cold winter?" asked the general. He learned this man was an elderly Confucian scholar: an old Goryeo loyalist who had become lost to the Yuan and was now about to die in the wild, far from his old home. Yi took the old scholar in, clothed him, and gave him a title of "Judge." He later took the old scholar with him back to Gaegyeong, presenting him to the court as a loyalist, and gave him the nickname of *Hanbok* ("Korean clothes").⁵⁸

In capturing the mountain fortress, Yi had won two thousand oxen and several hundred horses that were managed by fortress overseers. He returned all this livestock to local villagers who once lived in Goryeo, promising them that the rule of Goryeo would be generous and just. The northern locals were so impressed that they began to follow General Yi around like crowds in a marketplace.⁵⁹

It was after this campaign that Yi Seong-gye's boyhood friend, Turan Temur, was finally persuaded to fully swear his loyalty to General Yi. The general responded by naming Turan Temur as his brother, giving him the new family name of Yi, making him known hereafter as Yi Turan, of the General's Hamhung Yi clan (later, the name evolved to "Yi Chiran").⁶⁰ The Jurchen commander Choe Myeong also swore fealty to Yi Seong-gye, together with the Mongol Yuan general, Jomu. Many of these submitting warriors would fight beside General

Yi in later campaigns, showing up in battles against Japanese pirates down south, for example.⁶¹

Goguryeo's old Liaodong lands suddenly seemed within reach of Goryeo control. Yet for all his success, Yi Seong-gye had to abandon these Liaodong lands north of the Yalu in the end. Though King Gongmin had dreams of recapturing all these lands for Goryeo rule, the reality is that the winter campaign had proved demanding on Yi Seong-gye's troops and Goryeo didn't have the supplies or manpower to sustain a military occupation through the brutal winter and year to come, especially if Yuan and/or Ming forces mounted a response, which seemed likely. Goryeo soldiers had to butcher their own horses for food.⁶² Supply problems were exacerbated when a fire broke out in a local warehouse and destroyed a good deal of food. Some Goryeo court advisors pointed out the difficulties of holding on to these territories, which would require substantial manpower and constant envoys, and argued that the area should be turned over to governance by local tribes and clans, since it could act as an independent buffer zone against both Mongol and Chinese forces beyond. In addition, down on the Korean peninsula, attacks from Japanese pirates were escalating along the coastlines, making new demands on the Goryeo military.⁶³

Furthermore, King Gongmin was increasingly despondent over the unexpected loss of his beloved Queen Noh Guk, who had tragically died during a recent childbirth. King Gongmin just didn't seem to have his heart in complicated matters of governance any longer, which was unfortunate, since serious threats to Goryeo dynastic future were only going to worsen in this critical time of Yuan-Ming transition in the east Asian hierarchy. In the face of all these mounting challenges, General Yi's troops were ordered to return to Goryeo lands south of the Yalu, soon after conquering the *Urasanseong* mountain fortress. Though General Yi returned with several hundred households from the north, and 50 surrendered leaders, Goryeo could not hope to sustain its reach of power into territory beyond the Yalu.⁶⁴ The lands and people that had once belonged to Korea's ancient Goguryeo kingdom were left in the shadow of the Ming dynasty's growing reach, and Goryeo's great Liaodong adventure had come to an end.