

“Fish in a Cauldron, Gasping for Breath”



When he was just a boy, Yi Seong-gye liked to play “police and robbers” with his friends. Seong-gye especially liked to play the magistrate. One time, young Seong-gye told his friends to gather the next day at exactly the same time to continue their game, and said that he would be a stern magistrate and would punish anyone who was late.

One boy showed up late the next day and said he couldn’t help it, because his mother was combing his hair. Yi Seong-gye said that it didn’t matter: “You were late, and I must cut your head off, according to the law.”

Yi Seong-gye pulled out a small sword and cut off the head of his friend.¹



The triumphant return of Yi Seong-gye to Gaegyeong meant that the reformist ideas of Sungkyunkwan’s scholars were given new life. Jeong Do-jeon now sat at the right ear of the ascendant Yi Seong-gye. The once ignored Nam Eun, full of energy for radical reforms, was suddenly at the center of things. The scholarly heavyweight Cho Chun had been exiled by Yi In-im for speaking out against corruption, but now was brought back into Gaegyeong. He had spent four long years in the political wilderness, “studying the scriptures,” but now the once-exiled radical scholars were coming back into power.²

As for the relationship with Ming—who now occupied China’s “brilliant center” of Confucian influence so admired by Goryeo’s scholars—Yi Seong-gye sent word to Ming that King U was overthrown, and all talk of war was over in Goryeo. On June 4th, Yi Seong-gye had Chang issue a royal proclamation to begin using the name “Hongwu” once again for the Ming Emperor. Officials were ordered to wear Ming uniforms again,

not Mongol robes. Conscription of soldiers and construction on forts along the northern borderlands was called to a halt. All Ming talk of installing a fortress in Cheollyeong Pass also ended.³

In July, Yi Seong-gye oversaw the delegation of an envoy to the Ming, led by the well-respected scholar Yi Saek and including his own son, Yi Bang-won, who served as secretary. The envoy admitted the crimes of King U in planning an invasion of Liaodong and announced the accession of King Chang in his place.⁴ This envoy returned eight months later, in March of 1389 with a circumspect, but promising, reply from the Ming court.

To begin, the Ming's communique was openly critical of the military deposition of King U and the subsequent rise of boy-king Chang. "The throne is [now] held by a king pretending to be a Wang,"⁵ the Ming's communication ominously noted, referring to the old rumors that Monk Sin Don and the servant Banya were actually U and Chang's forebearers, not King Gongmin. This situation was unwise, the Ming court felt, and not in accord with Korean tradition. Still, the letter concluded that all these affairs were ultimately Goryeo's business, after all, and the Ming court didn't feel the needed to dive into the situation all that much.⁶ Most important, there was no implied Ming military threat and no mention of the proposed Ming fortress at Cheollyeong Pass—the issue that had precipitated Yi Seong-gye's march north was now moot.

While drinking at a tavern with the Goryeo envoys, one Chinese official even shared his exceptional respect for Yi Seong-gye's military prowess. "Though Choe Yeong had a hundred thousand troops under his command, Yi [Seong-gye] disposed of him as easily as catching a fly."⁷ It seemed that Ming would rather avoid war with Goryeo's seemingly undefeatable Yi Seong-gye. Though not wholly supportive of affairs in Goryeo, these communications from Ming were certainly good news for Yi Seong-gye and the bubbling forces of Goryeo reform. It seemed their powerful neighbor would remain north of the Yalu and would let Korean affairs unfold in their own way, south of the river.

For some time after King U's deposition, it wasn't at all sure how these affairs would ultimately resolve in Goryeo's capital. It was an open question as to exactly how far Yi Seong-gye would go in challenging the foundations of the Goryeo dynasty. Though Yi Seong-gye certainly supported the forces of reform, he did not (openly, at least) seem eager to take on the mantle of a revolutionary, seeking a thorough and bloody transformation of Goryeo politics and society.* Instead, he pursued what could be called a soft landing for the socio-political changes to come, working to win over or defeat his opponents over a period of months and years.⁸

This was a pragmatic approach. Yi Seong-gye had risen to the heights of power, but the roots of a 500-year dynasty are deep, even one in terminal collapse. Though the national relief at avoiding war with Ming was real, and though there was plenty of populist discontent with Goryeo elites, there remained a reflexive worship of the ancient Godfathers of Goryeo. Yi himself always seemed to balk whenever the mind-boggling idea of putting an end to the 500-year Goryeo dynasty was raised by his allies. In this climate, General Yi worked hard to chart a course between the radicals who kept pushing him to terminate Goryeo and take over the throne and the old Goryeo loyalists who seemed poised to mount their own reaction against the Yi camp for any misstep, such as threatening the foundations of the Goryeo dynasty itself.⁹

What emerged in the 1388-1392 period of dynastic transition was a long series of factional struggles, whereby old Goryeo loyalists struggled to retain position and limit reforms, while the pro-Yi Seong-gye radicals sought to purge opponents and push new ideas—all in the context of an enduring Goryeo crown. A parade of names, factional disputes, exiles, and impeachments washed over the Goryeo court as it struggled to find a new center of gravity.¹⁰ People who didn't support Yi Seong-gye's *Wihwado Hoegun* went underground in the days

* For example, historical records of the time show several times when Yi Seong-gye claimed he was ill and requested to be allowed to retire back to his hometown area of Hamhung. The *Koryosa* says these requests were denied by the Goryeo King. See *Koryosa*, 6.1388. http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_033r_0010_0010_0060_0140

after his return, but often reappeared thereafter, finding a new place in the insular world of Goryeo politics. The landscape had changed, of course. Sometimes the old elites had to change colors to survive, and some of the influential families now agreed to bow down to the Confucian scholars, but these elite families weren't destroyed after all, and it wasn't wise for anyone to ignore their continued power.

In these struggles, there were two main factions: the moderates who embraced limited social reforms but also sought to preserve the Goryeo dynastic line at all costs, and the radical young turks who dreamed of changing the world and sought even the accession of Yi Seong-gye to the throne. As things unfolded, Jo Min-soo (the other general of the *Wihwado Hoegun*) and Jeong Mong-ju (a leading *sadaebu*) became leading voices of the moderates, while the *sadaebu* Jeong Do-jeon and Cho Chun became leading voices of the radicals. While Jeong Do-jeon and Cho Chun had strong followings amid the radical reformers, no Confucian *sadaebu* (save perhaps Yi Saek) had more influence than the moderate Jeong Mong-ju (who was descended from a wealthy and well-established family of Goryeo). Furthermore, Jo Min-soo was named the Prime Minister under the new King Chang, so the moderates certainly had a strong position in the days after the *Wihwado Hoegun*. It wasn't at all clear that some of the more radical ideas of the reformers would actually be implemented.

The Cho Chun Land Proposal

The question was put to the test two months after the ascent of seven-year-old King Chang, when the world-changing faction of Jeong Do-jeon and Cho Chun unexpectedly posted an appeal for nation-wide land reform. Striking while Yi Seong-gye's sword was still hot, the radicals proposed to return many *gwonmun sejok* lands to state ownership and to restrict inheritance of other lands.

With so many powerful families claiming land rights and high taxation on the harvest, farmers could never improve their situation, Jeong Do-jeon argued. "Even though they worked hard and diligently all year round, they still did not have enough to eat." Instead, rich families just take away all

the harvest, “until the poor became unable to support themselves and were eventually forced to abandon their land and become vagabonds. It was these people who turned to petty occupations and, in extreme cases, even became thieves and bandits.”¹¹

Cho Chun’s radical land proposal sought to do away with Goryeo’s increasingly dysfunctional system of a few powerful families claiming a private right to tax vast swaths of land, and to enslave those unable to pay the taxes. Currently, too many rich families claim vast lands, even when they hold no government posts nor serve in the military, Cho Chun observed. They “wearing silk robes while enjoying good food, they sit and enjoy their profits,” even as much of the country and the public treasury starves.¹² “Politics must begin with justice in land distribution,” Cho Chun argued. “The length or brevity of a country’s fate depends on the pain or joy of people’s lives, and the pain and joy of people’s lives depends on whether the land system is fair or not.”¹³

As a solution, Cho Chun proposed an immediate halt to all private collection of taxes on Goryeo lands. Instead, for three years all taxes would only be collected by the central state, thus helping to fill state coffers for important purposes like paying officials and soldiers and providing food to people in crisis. Second, during this three-year period, there would be a national land survey to register all arable lands in Goryeo and identify the lands that had been illicitly stole from local farmers or improperly converted into private holdings by affluent *gwonmun sejok* families

Third, under a principle that only the state actually “owns” most lands, the temporary right to tax or farm these lands would be redistributed to the people, according to a rational system. Most notably, taxation rights on land would not be returned to households who no longer earned those right through specific government service, but would be distributed to current state ministers, scholar-officials, and military officers, as payment for their service. These rights would revert to the state on the completion of one’s service.¹⁴ As Cho Chun described it: “If you are not an official or soldier, you should not keep land. And we must set strict limits to prevent land recipients from being passed down after people

die. Only then can the people start a new life and our nation's finances be covered."¹⁵

Other proposed changes were that no plot of land could have more than one owner, in terms of taxation rights. Tax rates would be capped about no more than about 10% of the harvest.¹⁶

These reforms would dramatically reduce the tax burden on many Goryeo farmers. Moreover, they would systematically shift economic power away from traditional, landed aristocrats and towards the newly emerging intellectual class of neo-Confucian *sadaebu*, who would now be granted small land holdings and taxation rights, providing economic foundation for their work. Middle-class *sadaebu* and middling farmers would gain new power in Goryeo, at the expense of landed aristocrats.

Cho Chun's reformist partner Jeong Do-jeon wanted to push the reform even further and abolish not only private taxation rights, but private land holdings altogether. Jeong Do-jeon proposed nationalizing all land and redistributing most of it in small equal plots to all the farmers of Joseon, so that every family owned small, equal plots of arable land. According to Jeong Do-jeon, his more radical plan would insure everyone had some land to cultivate and would tear down the idle rich of Goryeo. There would be "no excessive differentiation between the rich and the poor and between the strong and the weak."¹⁷

These land reform proposals were a dramatic attack on the economic foundations of *gwonmun sejok* power. In Jeong Do-jeon's plan, all land rights of the wealthy would disappear forever, as land became equally distributed. Even under Cho Chun's less dramatic plan, most aristocratic land rights would disappear for three years and be strictly curtailed thereafter.

The shocked Goryeo aristocrats dug in and entrenched behind the moderate voice of Jo Min-soo, the Prime Minister, seeking to slow the rushing river of change. Jo Min-soo was himself a rich landowner with many enslaved servants. With his recent rise, he had even started expanding these holdings, and didn't mind watching his allies continue to pursue their own acquisitions of land and slaves. Cho certainly understood

the concerns of the acquisitive *gwonmun sejok*, for he was one of them.¹⁸

Jo Min-soo offered a counterproposal to Cho Chun’s plan. To reduce the problem of multiple parties claiming the right to tax farmers on a given plot of land, Jo suggested that the number of landowners able to claim taxing rights over any given parcel of land should be restricted to only one or two, but that most existing land/taxing rights should be preserved. This plan would be an improvement in many farmers’ situation (reducing their taxes by about half) but was a far less dramatic solution than Cho Chun’s plan to nationalize and redistribute taxation rights on all Goryeo’s lands (or Jeong Do-jeon’s idea to redistribute all land holdings equally). Prime Minister Jo Min-soo worked to get the young King Chang to issue a statement in support of his moderate counterproposal. Cho Chun’s radical plan would be too difficult for officials and the influential families to live under, announced King Chang in supporting Jo Min-soo’s plan, so we must allow most existing land rights to remain in place.

In was in the midst of these contentious struggles, as the *sadaebu* stepped up their critiques of the wealth and corruption of old Goryeo elites, that Yi Seong-gye weighed in by ordering the execution of General Choe Yeong, who had previously been imprisoned in exile. General Choe was a member of the old elite, and his family was exceptionally wealthy, even if he personally was an honest and spartan warrior. In the unstable days after the *Hoegun*, the memory and living force of this man—thick and reliable as an old bull, and completely loyal to Goryeo of old—was dangerous to the Yi Seong-gye faction. So in December of 1388, as the dust from Cho Chun’s contentious land proposals was swirling, the 73-year-old General Choe Yeong was ordered taken out of his cell and executed.¹⁹

When the fate of Goryeo’s old bull was learned, merchants everywhere closed their shops. Those on horses dismounted, kneeled, and bowed by the side of the road. Wailing was heard from everywhere, “from street children to alley women.”²⁰ It didn’t matter that doomed Goryeo was so thoroughly corrupt, or that many people were glad of the reform efforts. And it didn’t matter that General Yi Seong-gye was widely popular.

Choe Yeong was beloved, and even the poor peasants tilling their fields of grass wished they could give something to help the doomed old General. In his retelling of this incident, Kim imagines how “the grasshoppers hoped that if there was a place to live in a cabin and if they could just eat rough rice with their families, they would do that so that even a country that had seen nothing but tyranny and exploitation would survive for one more day.”²¹

Yi Seong-gye’s order was a shot across the bow of the old Goryeo elites, letting them know he was serious about reforming the old order. But it was deeply unpopular move. In their grief, some people spoke ill of Yi Seong-gye. Certainly, many of the old elite did. Yi was called bloodthirsty, power-hungry, out for the crown. This uncertain moment of high stakes saber-rattling became a dangerous time for Yi Seong-gye when some of the old guard decided things were getting out of hand, and it was time to reverse the Yi Seong-gye revolution. Subsequent events of the brewing counter-revolution became known as “The Kim Jeo Incident.”

The Kim Jeo Incident

The incident began on November 11, 1389, when Kim Jeo had a secret meeting with the deposed King U on Ganghwa Island, where the King was exiled. Kim Jeo was a nephew of the imprisoned Choe Yeong and no fan of Yi Seong-gye. On Gangwha Island, the two men talked conspiracy against General Yi.* In the end, King U gave Kim Jeo a fine sword and desperately urged him to gather his associates, sneak into Yi Seong-gye’s mansion, and slay the General. “I can’t just stay

* Some later observers argue that many of the events of this “Kim Jeo Incident” were fabricated or greatly exaggerated by the Yi Seong-gye faction in order to undermine General Yi’s opponents and advance their own cause. See, for example, Lee H., “Developments in the political situation in the Late Koryo Dynasty and the Incident of Kim Jeo.” There are limited historical records, so the incident is cloaked in fog. The story told here adheres to the events shared in the *Koryosa* and the *Taejo Sillok*, though these documents admittedly were crafted by later historians of Yi Seong-gye’s own court (after he became King Taejo).

here and die without doing anything,” a weeping King U bemoaned, before urging the assassination. “I’ve always been on good terms with Kwak Chung-bo. I want you to plan with him the removal of Yi. Then my wish will be fulfilled.”²²

Kim Jeo agreed to the dark task and went straight to Kwak Chung-bo* (a mid-level military officer) to plan the assassination. But Kwak thought better of it and ran straightaway to General Yi to alert him to the conspiracy. So on the evening of November 12, when Kim Jeo snuck into Yi Seong-gye’s mansion, the General was ready. Prepared household guests of Yi Seong-gye fell upon the intruders as soon as they entered the house. Before he could be captured, one of the assassins (Jung Deuk-hoo) stabbed himself in the neck and died, but Kim Jeo was taken alive.

Kim Jeo was immediately taken to prison and torture began, so as to extract the names of co-conspirators. During this torture, King U was moved to a more remote place of exile, in Gangneung on the east coast, while the newly installed King Chang was also taken into custody and taken to nearby Ganghwa island—the whole royal family was now under suspicion. King U’s father-in-law, son-in-law and nephew were all incarcerated and later exiled.²³

Dark clouds gathered over the unfortunate young kings. During his torture, Kim Jeo confessed to the crime and gave up the names of many others, including government ministers and top military officials. Byun An-yeol, Yi Rim Wang, Wang An-deok, Woo Hong-soo, Woo In-yeol, Wu Hyeon-bo: all were named under torture.²⁴ These men and many more were arrested; some of them were members of very wealthy families. Dozens of people thought hostile to Yi Seong-gye’s faction were expelled from the capital, including powerful people like Yi Saek (the cautious overseer of Sungkyunkwan Academy), Jo Min-soo (the Prime Minister and top Goryeo General), and Byeon An-yeol (an influential minister of *Dodang*).²⁵

* Kwak Jung-bo was the officer who had captured Cheo Yeong in the palace, during the assault on Gaegyeong’s palace after the *Wihwado Hoegun*. He was a supporter of the *Wihwado Hoegun*, though not of the proposed land reforms that followed.

The most powerful opponents of Yi Seong-gye's faction had been purged, others were cowed into retreat, and the floodgates to the coming Joseon Dynasty began to open. Just a few days after the assassination attempt, Yi Seong-gye summoned several top allies to join him at Heungguksa Temple. This was an important temple located just outside the great Southern gate into Gaegyeong, which often hosted birthdays for the Kings of Goryeo. On November 14, 1389, under tight security provided by Yi Seong-gye's soldiers, nine men gathered at Heungguksa to discuss the fate of Goryeo.²⁶

A few proffered that the time had come to end the Wang^{*} dynastic line and crown Yi Seong-gye as King, but the *Taejo Sillok* says that Yi would not hear of that.²⁷ Perhaps he maintained some loyalty to the Goryeo dynastic line even now, or perhaps he felt the time was not yet ripe for a dramatic termination of the venerable dynasty. Or perhaps General Yi was more supportive of terminating the Wang dynastic line than the *Taejo Sillok* later admitted, so as to present him as less of a power-hungry schemer. In any case, the Yi Seong-gye faction needed a strategy to depose the sitting king without appearing again to be disloyal traitors to Goryeo.

A solution was found by revisiting the old rumors of King U's paternity, once again. Wasn't King U born of monk Sin Don and his servant, Banya? In that case, neither King U, nor his son Chang, were descended from the Wang royal line, and neither were real Goryeo Kings. They were accused as imposters, bringing trials and tribulations ("evil after evil")²⁸ down on Goryeo. The nine men of Heungguksa agreed that the time had come to "abolish the false and restore the true."²⁹ In other words, they would eliminate the false kings of U and Chang and restore a true descendant of the Wang line to the throne. There was little evidence to sustain this serious charge, but it was a politically expedient way to advance the faction of Yi Seong-gye and became a more generally accepted interpretation over time due to most historical records of the time being produced by the Yi Seong-gye faction.³⁰

* All Goryeo kings, for nearly 500 years, had come from the royal Wang clan—founders of the Goryeo dynasty.

The nine lords of Goryeo settled on Gongyang as their royal candidate. Gongyang was an undisputed seventh generation descendant of a previous Goryeo king (King Seongjong, r. 1083–1094) and was already 45 years old, so he would be more prepared to lead than the eight-year-old King Chang. Gongyang had a reputation as being good tempered and docile,³¹ so he seemed a good choice for these fiery times. Moreover, he was related by marriage to Yi Seong-gye. Gongyang's niece had married Yi Bang-beon, the eldest son of Lady Kang (Yi Seong-gye's second wife). Having an uncle to his son on the throne of Goryeo likely helped reassure Yi Seong-gye as to the future direction of the monarchy.

As he was pressured into the throne, the good natured Gongyang knew hard times were coming. He later recalled how in these days “the fate of the Royal Wang clan became that of a fish in a cauldron gasping for breath.”³² The new King wept upon his accession and wrote that “I couldn't sleep due to anxiety and worry.”³³ The unpleasantness began with having to order the sorry denouement of many of Goryeo's old notables, allegedly associated with the Kim Jeo plot to assassinate General Yi. Many once powerful elites were imprisoned, tortured, or exiled while several of those named by Kim Jeo were executed.³⁴

As for Prime Minister Jo Min-soo, Yi Seong-gye's old ally in the *Wihwado Hoegun*, he lost his place as Prime Minister and Governor of multiple Goryeo provinces. As a critic of Cho Chun's land reform plan, and one of the *gwonmun sejok* families with great holdings of land and enslaved persons, Jo Min-soo was impeached for embezzlement after the Kim Jeo incident, while also charged with conspiring against Yi Seong-gye. He was ultimately exiled “to a faraway place.”³⁵ His land and enslaved servants were seized by the state. In his place, Gongyong appointed Yi Seong-gye the Grand Chancellor (Prime Minister) of Goryeo. When Yi Seong-gye refused the appointment, the King named a Yi Seong-gye associate as Chancellor and Yi Seong-gye as Acting Chancellor.³⁶

Another grim task remained for the new King. At the end of 1389, the Yi Seong-gye faction concluded that the two former Kings, U and Chang, must be executed. King Gongyang was forced to issue an edict ordering the (alleged) pretenders

killed, proclaiming that: “Unfortunately, when King Gongmin passed away without a son, Yi In-im wanted to control the government, so he falsely claimed the child U was Wang and made him King.”³⁷ Soon thereafter, the two deposed Kings—father and son—were beheaded by allies of Yi Seong-gye.* King Chang was just 8 years old. The family members were said to weep day and night and had no will to eat for the next ten days.³⁸

While killing the old kings, Goyang also announced the names of nine “Meritorious Retainers,” all entitled to Goryeo’s highest honors. These retainers were the nine men of Heungguksa, who had brought down King Chang and installed King Gongmin: Jeong Do-jeon, Cho Chun, Sim Deok-bu, Ji Yong-ki, Park Wi, Jeong Mong-ju, Seol Jang-soo, Sung Seok-rim, and Yi Seong-gye.³⁹ Yi Seong-gye was granted twenty enslaved persons and a fief of one thousand households, with rights to privately tax three hundred households. His parents and wife were granted titles of nobility. His descendants were exempted from having to take the civil service examinations to receive government appointments. His sons, daughters, nephews, and nieces were all promoted by several ranks in state title and were permanently granted pardons when convicted of certain categories of crimes in the future. He was also granted the right to personally appoint seven government functionaries and ten private soldiers to serve him daily.⁴⁰ Yi Seong-gye was also named Director of the newly created Office of Royal Lecturers and commander of the armies in eight provinces. All the other nine meritorious retainers were given land and titles as well. These were the new Godfathers of Goryeo, all closely aligned with the rising dragon, General Yi Seong-gye.

* The *Koryosa* records that Yi Seong-gye himself argued against these executions, claiming that the old Kings were now powerless to do further damage. But these historical records were produced by later allies of the Yi Seong-gye faction, so Yi Seong-gye’s (possible) own role in these executions might have been downplayed in the interests of legitimating his later rule. See *Koryosa*, v. 34, 12, 1389. http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0020_0110_0060

In the aftermath, with many Yi Seong-gye opponents exiled or executed, dramatic new reform plans once again gathered steam. At the close of December 1389, Cho Chun again pushed forward a long list of reforms: a centralized military of trained and paid soldiers, better training of envoys, expansion of schools, limitations on usury, lower and more fair taxes, higher penalties for government corruption, a crackdown on brothels, and restrictions on Buddhist monks thought to be corrupt. Traditional provincial governors (with power gained largely through family heritage and local wealth) were stripped of some of their powers in favor of centrally appointed officers, more likely to have passed the central service exams and more loyal to the Yi Seong-gye faction.⁴¹ Personnel reform was advanced to make more appointments based on merit or high achievements (e.g., through centrally administered exams), rather than through bribery or elite connections. A nationwide land survey was announced to facilitate the redistribution of taxing rights away from the *gwonmun sejok*. Provincial land inspectors were dispatched. Some of these reforms would even challenge the rewards just granted to the nine meritorious retainers, but Yi Seong-gye supported them all. “Consequently, the whole country was overjoyed, and the hearts of the people turned to him further.”⁴²

But still, the foundations of Goryeo survived, a Wang king was on the throne, and many old aristocrats remained. After Gongyang became King, some of the peripheral members of the Kim Jeo faction even found their way back into government position, tying their fortunes to alliance with King Gongyang.⁴³ For example, after Gongyang ascended to the throne, Yi Saek was brought back into government (after being exiled during the Kim Jeo incident) and became the governor of the Panmunjom area, near today’s DMZ. Jeong Mong-ju was another moderate who remained popular and who always balked at the most ambitious reform plans coming from the Yi Seong-gye camp.

The case of General Byun An-yeol is indicative of the continuing instability between different factions. Although Byun An-yeol was named by Kim Jeo as a conspirator during torture, he was a powerful military man who escaped the

death penalty for some time.⁴⁴ Like Jo Min-soo, he was particularly dangerous to Yi Seong-gye because he had thousands of his own private troops. Flaunting his resistance to the Yi Seong-gye faction, he even wrote a poem on the heels of the Kim Jeo incident, professing his eternal loyalty to old Goryeo. He called it “*Haega*” or “Song of Invincible Loyalty.”

*Even if a hole is pierced in my chest,
And my heart is threaded with a rope,
Dragged back and forth,
Pulled back and forth,
And my body becomes ashes,
my strong will towards my beloved will never
bend.*⁴⁵

Even after the King Jeo incident, and even with such open defiance of the Yi Seong-gye faction, Byun An-yeol survived for some time, together with a great many other elites and officials attached far more to Goryeo *as it was* than to Goryeo *as dreamed of* by Yi Seong-gye’s radicals. The *Koryosa* compared Byun An-yeol to a villainous fox, slinking about in holes, but always avoiding death and causing danger to the Yi Seong-gye faction.⁴⁶ Yi hadn’t ended the Wang line after all, or burned down its court, and Goryeo still survived in myriad minds and magistrates.

It drove General Yi to sadness and a nostalgic loneliness for simpler days in his Hamhung home. He spoke often of retiring from everything. In March of 1390, Yi Seong-gye withdrew entirely from public life for a short time, complaining of illness.⁴⁷ He cloistered in his Gaegyeong home with Lady Kang.

According to the *Taejo Sillok*, King Gongyang wouldn’t hear of Yi Seong-gye’s retirement. Considering Yi Seong-gye was enthroning and dethroning kings at will, it’s hard to understand why Gongyang would feel this way. Perhaps Gongyang felt that he had been brought into power amid violent circumstances with Yi Seong-gye’s support and surely didn’t want to be abandoned to whatever wolves would rise up if General Yi disappeared. Moreover, it may have seemed wise to keep the powerful general in the capital city where he could

be closely watched, rather than allowing him to return with his troops to his northeastern power base. Or perhaps the story of Yi Seong-gye's virtuous desire to return home, and Gongyang's insistence that he stay on to serve in the capital, were both fabrications by the Yi Seong-gye faction that later produced the *Taejo Sillok*. In any case, the *Taejo Sillok* reports that after a month of recuperation from his illness, Yi Seong-gye was called back by the King and ordered to return to work at court. To welcome Yi back, King Gongyang offered a long memorial to General Yi's great merits and achievements.

“You are the bravest among all the army commanders and hold a higher rank than anyone else at court, but you are not conceited about your honor and position,” the King noted. Moreover, you love to read the Confucian classics. You are disciplined and seek honest advice from “men of talent and wisdom.”

Gongyang described how General Yi always advised good policies, like land reform and prohibitions on buying and selling government offices. You always try to help the struggling little people, Gongyang praised. You have defeated the Japanese pirates and the northern raiders and protected our country. “Being endowed with both learning and military arts, you are qualified to assist the king; disregarding the personal affairs before the national crisis, you are a minister who can save the country; and born with special talents provided by Heaven and your ancestors, the safety and danger of the country became your responsibility!”

Having said all that, the king bestowed Yi Seong-gye with new royal rewards: 100 *kyol** of farmland, a royal horse, 50 taels of white gold, 5 rolls of fine silk, a golden belt, and a fine banquet in his honor. “Ah! This reward is too little to repay for your outstanding service! You saved the people, revived the royal house, and rescued our country. How can I possibly repay you for such great service?”⁴⁸ It was the spring of 1390.

* The “*kyol*” was a measurement of land needed to produce 100 “loads” of grain. The measurement varied based on the fertility of the land, typically ranging from about 6-25 acres per *kyol*. See Hunt, J.H. “Land Tenure and the Price of Land.” In *The Korean Repository*, volume III, p. 317.

The Yoon I & Yi Cho Affair

While Gongyang held General Yi tight, others did not. Yi Seong-gye always had to be wary. Some of the most notorious malefactors of the Kim Jeo incident (most notably Byun An-yeol) had escaped punishment and it grated on the General. Around the same time as Yi's return to court, Gongyang planned a trip to the coast to inspect warships, but there was concern that he would use his time away from the capital to meet with anti-Yi forces. When Shim Deok-bun, one of the "nine meritorious retainers of Heungguksa," supported the trip it made Yi Seong-gye suspicious, even of this close ally. Shortly after this coastal trip, King Gongyang expelled a Yi Seong-gye ally from the capital, which led Yi's allies on *Dodang* to demand a new round of interrogation and punishment of those like Byun An-yeol, who had escaped responsibility for the Kim Jeo incident.

Byun An-yeol was arrested and accused of treason that spring. Threatened with death, Byun seemed ready to admit conspiracy and give up names of his allies but ended up quickly executed before any of this information could be extracted.⁴⁹ Broader investigations, torture, and exile of accused counter-revolutionary forces continued.⁵⁰ Enemies were everywhere, and it was impossible to know who to trust or how much of it all was perhaps instigated by the Yi faction to support his continued ascendance.

Then, in May of 1390, a Goryeo envoy arrived back from its trip to Ming, carrying shocking news. The venerable Jo Ban* was a member of this envoy. On returning to Goryeo, he reported that he had witnessed some members of the trip trying to convince Ming rulers to invade Goryeo to overthrow King Gongyang and Yi Seong-gye.⁵¹ The facts of the matter are obscure, so it's unclear whether the anti-Yi faction was truly scheming to eliminate Yi Seong-gye, or a pro-Yi faction was inventing these allegations so as to create cause to punish

* Jo Ban was the retired minister of the "Jo Ban Incident" several years previously, when his land was illegitimately seized by corrupt officials of the Yi In-im faction, thus leading to their unexpected purge.

those opposed to Yi's ascendance. In any case, the allegations were that some members of King U's old royal faction were reaching out to Ming leaders with lies, in order to undermine Yi Seong-gye. They told Ming rulers that Yi Seong-gye and Gongyang were plotting to invade China. They reported that General Yi was waging a bloodbath in Goryeo, killing all his opponents (when in fact most of his opponents had only been exiled). They urged Ming to send an army to Goryeo to make things right. Two envoys named Yun I and Yi Cho were alleged by Jo Ban to have presented all these accusations in a memorial to the Ming court, which mentioned notable persons like Yi Saek (of the Confucian Academy), Yi In-im (the old malefactor who ruled as regent under King U) and Jo Min-soo (co-commander of the Wihwado excursion) as supporting the charges against General Yi.

It must have been particularly demoralizing for Yi Seong-gye that Shim Deok-bu's name showed up as a conspirator. He was one of the nine meritorious retainers of Heungguksa, now discovered perhaps to be mobilizing against General Yi. Also, Jo Min-soo and Byun An-Yeol, with their thousands of private troops, seem to have been involved. Numerous alleged conspirators were imprisoned, either in Gaegyeong or Chongju, and interrogation and torture began. Jo Min-soo was sent to the east coast town of Samcheok, under exile. One of the principal accused persons (Yun I) starved himself to death, one escaped before torture began, and the highest ranking officials like Yi In-im weren't tortured at all, but others were subject to leg-bending, knee-presses, and flogging, in pursuit of confessions and the names of conspirators.⁵²

Not everyone believed Jo Ban's charges that so many of Goryeo's luminaries had conspired with Ming to bring down Yi Seong-gye. Several people argued that it was all a fabricated conspiracy so as to eliminate the opponents of the Yi Seong-gye faction. Many of the alleged conspirators (like Jo Min-soo, Park Wi and Shim Deok-bu) had previously been close allies of Yi Seong-gye after all, so why would they now conspire in this way? One accused conspirator (Kim Jin-yang) argued that “even a three-year-old child thinks that the incident of Yoon I and I Cho was a false charge by Jo Ban.” For such comments,

this official was impeached and dismissed from office.⁵³ The accusations and torture sessions continued.

But then, in the midst of the late May torture sessions, heavy rain poured down upon Chongju where many of the accused were incarcerated. The rains were followed by a great flood. Prisoners barely escaped with their lives by fleeing cells and climbing into nearby trees.⁵⁴

In the wake of this dramatic flood, the court moderates pushed to stop all torture sessions. They said the flood had upended things, so let's just acquit or exile anyone who hadn't already confessed and end the whole affair without more drama and torture.⁵⁵ King Gongyang told Yi Seong-gye that the accused had already suffered enough. One has starved to death, he said, and a few have already confessed and will be executed. As for the rest (including important persons like Yi Saek, Saek's son Jeonghak, Jo Min-soo, and some security council ministers), let's just forgive some and exile some.⁵⁶ The Confucian scholar Jeong Mong-ju also spoke up in support of wholesale amnesty for all these anti-Yi conspirators, as a gesture of good will.⁵⁷

Such appeals to amnesty after a nasty weather event were somewhat common in Goryeo, as court dignitaries would often argue that heaven itself seemed to be angry at the excessive disharmony caused by torture and executions down on earth. The *Koryosa* recounts hundreds of cases of people released from custody after a natural disaster. So it was in this Yoon I/I Cho case. Court officials implied that Heaven itself was upset at the ongoing conflict between the Yi Seong-gye radicals and the Jeong Mong-ju faction of moderates, so King Gongmin agreed to drop remaining cases against all accused conspirators.⁵⁸

Yi Seong-gye was grievously wounded by it all, especially the lack of support by those like Jeong Mong-ju and Shim Deok-bun, who were both members of the Nine Meritorious Retainers of Heungguksa. The whole fellowship of the nine was falling apart. And then there was the involvement of Yi Saek and Jo Min-soo as well. It seemed people were allowed to attack General Yi at will.⁵⁹ In fact, within a few months after closing this case and after all the accused had been released, *another* case of conspiracy was discovered with some of these

same characters again trying to raise an army against Yi Seong-gye.⁶⁰

King Gongyang again proposed forgiving and releasing all those involved with the case, but Yi Seong-gye's supporters in the Office of Investigations would not allow it this time. A leading conspirator (Cho Yu) was hanged, and the King ordered a number of other military commanders to surrender their official seals.⁶¹ Dark whispers continued that Yi Seong-gye was power-hungry and was manipulating the King. Whenever the Office of the Censorate called for stricter investigations or punishments of Yi's opponents, many would say Yi Seong-gye was behind things, pulling all the strings.⁶²

It all drove Yi Seong-gye to nostalgic despair. At least that's how the *Taejo Sillok* reports it, though of course these later records had motivation to present Yi Seong-gye as retiring and virtuous, rather than rapaciously power-hungry. At the end of 1390, the records say that General Yi made several appeals to be allowed to retire. He was 55 by now, exceedingly weary of war and palace intrigue, and spoke constantly of resigning his position and returning to his Hamhung home. He sent numerous requests to King Gongyang, requesting that he be allowed to resign from all his posts and return north. Yi said he wished to emulate the examples of Zhang Liang and Yan Ziling: influential officials and intellectuals of Chinese dynasties who had turned away from public position. Zhang Liang refused to join the emperor's royal court, left state affairs, and retired to his private fishing platform deep in the shady mountains to pass his remaining days. Like Zhang, “I would be grateful if Your Majesty would let me live out my days at home,” Yi requested, time and again.⁶³

Fearful of letting Yi Seong-gye escape to the northeast, King Gongyang always refused. Instead, he tried to win Yi's favor by giving him new authority (or perhaps was pressured to do so by the Yi faction). In November of 1390, Yi was promoted to Chief of the State Finance Commission. Then in December, after another of Yi's threats to resign, Gongyang promoted him to Chancellor and General of all the armies of Goryeo.

Yi tried to resist. “I entreat Your Majesty to accept my sincerity and release me from the heavy burden of respon-

sibility,” he repeated. “No,” said King Gongyang. Remain in your post. “Your will is stronger than the wind or frost, and your personality more splendid than the Three Lights (*samgwang*), or the Five Sacred Mountains (*Wuyue*)...A man of talent is needed to subdue disturbances and straighten out the affairs of state.”⁶⁴ The *Koryosa* reports that these back-and-forth sessions between the King and his general sometimes ended in both of them weeping over the fragile political situation.⁶⁵

Yi bemoaned the King’s constant refusals. “Whenever Your Servant received your replies rejecting his request, his fear and shame deepened,” Yi lamented. Furthermore “[Your Servant’s] health has been poor for years and occupying a high position has caused his condition to worsen severely...I earnestly beseech you to generously take pity on my difficult situation and grant my resignation. Then I will be able to recuperate in a quiet place.”⁶⁶

But Gongyang simply wouldn’t allow the General to leave the capital and return to his northeastern military base. Instead, the King sought to tie Yi ever closer to his throne and promised that he would severely punish any future conspiracies against the General. “I want you to hold onto your post and carry out your duties according to my wishes,” the King noted. “If anyone criticizes you, explain your actions. If you are sick, get medical treatment. It is not really necessary for you to resign and live in seclusion in order to have the life that you want. Since you already declined [your promotion] three times, I want you to calm down a little.”⁶⁷