

Of Myth-Making



During the days after the fall of Goryeo's kings and generals, a new soup began to show up at local inns. The people called it Seonggye-tang, or Seong-gye soup. The pork in the soup was sliced off a pig that the cooks always surreptitiously named "Seong-gye." Butchering Seong-gye for the soup meant that people could cut up and eat a bit of Yi Seong-gye, in their anger at having so many of the Gaegyeong heroes and local families cut down by General Yi.

Yi Seong-gye had cooked the leaders of Gaegyeong in the Year of the Pig, but there were clever ways to slice a up bit of Yi Seong-gye as well.¹



Like any ruler of a new dynasty, King Taejo faced questions of legitimation. The new order had been birthed in violence, but was it the Will of Heaven? In the beginning of all things, the great rulers were gods and children of gods, divine authority transcending even rational thought.² The progenitor of the Korean people (Dangun) was descended from the union of a God and bear. Wang Geon, the founder of Goryeo, was said to be descended from a dragon, and his mother was the divine mountain spirit of Jirisan.³ All the founding rulers of Korea's historic Kingdoms were surrounded by myths of divine origin and heavenly assistance. King Taejo of Joseon was no different—his authority needed legitimation from beyond.

Divine Origins

After Taejo's ascent, the scribes of state took up their mythologizing task. The *Taejo Sillok* tells how the birth of Joseon's King Taejo was foretold in dreams by dragons and gods. Mysterious farmers and old hermits gave prophecies that

if the Yi clan buried their ancestors in certain places, a great destiny would surely come to the family line. The *Sillok* describes how Taejo's face "was as majestic and divine as a dragon" when he was born, his intelligence and wisdom clear for all to see.⁴

The Cantos of *Songs of the Dragons*—produced during the reign of Taejo's grandson, King Sejong—similarly tell story after story of King Taejo's divine origins and heaven-mandated ascent to the throne.⁵ Canto 87 describes Taejo's godlike abilities.

*With one hand he knocked down
A great tiger from the horse's back.
With two hands he pulled apart
The great bulls that were fighting.
He quietly lifted up
The horse suspended from the bridge.
How can one recount
All the divine powers of this Godlike man?*⁶

Heavenly portents followed all the footsteps of this "godlike man." Canto 84 tells how, at the very end of doomed Goryeo, dead trees would spring to life when King Taejo passed by. "The Dynasty was old and the Mandate of Heaven about to be lost. New Leaves appeared on a withered tree."⁷ Children were said to sing about how "the shepherd wins the country," while prophets spoke of how a shepherd would ride from the mountains on a pig's back to save the country (1392 was the Chinese Year of the Pig).⁸ Yi Seong-gye himself had visionary dreams of saving his nation by carrying three rafters out of a burning building, of receiving a golden ruler from a divine spirit, of Dragons requesting his help in their struggles, and flowers falling from fruit trees, interpreted by soothsayers as predicting ripe fruit and a portentous moment.⁹

Such myths and dreams are not just entertainment—they reflect the consciousness of a people and became the emotional footings of Taejo's power. In his study of the political significance of inspiring tales about Yi Seong-gye, Mun Jae Youn argues that especially in pre-literate societies, "the

dreams and wishes of people of the time are concentrated in that narrative...[Legends are] a complex reaction of the people to historical facts and a vestige of growing changes in popular consciousness."¹⁰ Accepting a new ruler is associated with emerging stories about the divine origins of that ruler, the god that shines in his face, the epic achievements that prove his worth.

After Taejo's rule, this legendry appeared in sanctified written sources like the *Taejo Sillok* and *Songs of the Dragons*. During King Taejo's own time, these dreams and stories spread across the peninsula through oral tradition, were engraved on stone steles, and inscribed in memorials of fine calligraphy. Myth was materialized as well in projects to sacralize the remains of the divine Yi family. For example, there was the project of properly enshrining King Taejo's umbilical cord and placental remains. When he was born, his parents had buried baby Seong-gye's umbilical cord in a placental urn (*taesil*) near Hamhung. There it would remain, until it was disinterred decades later upon the accession of King Taejo and moved to the site of the Yi clan's ancestral home in Jeonju.¹¹

Soon after becoming King, Taejo named Jeonju as the ancestral seat of his Yi clan, honoring the southern town from which his Great-Great-Grandfather Yi Ansa originally hailed.¹² Taejo ordered improvements to the tombs of his ancestors in the Jeonju area. He also dispatched a minister there, assigning him to search for a site to bury the umbilical cord of the new King. King Taejo was fond of Jeonju's mount Maisan (where he once had a dream of receiving a golden ruler from a divinity), and had authored a poem describing how the bare double peaks of the mountain were "like a lotus flower in full bloom," while "the water of the valley all flows in one place."¹³ He consulted geomancers to make sure this place truly was an auspicious location of good earth energy. Receiving positive reviews, within a year of ascending to the throne Taejo ordered the removal of his placental *taesil* from Hamhung and directed it relocated to the mountains of Jeonju.¹⁴ Relocating King Taejo's *taesil* to Jeonju—far to the south of Hamhung—united Taejo's "Profound Source" with the deep taproots where the Jeonju Yi clan story began.

Relocating his *taesil* was just one way that King Taejo reached beyond his own root of life to also draw on the divine tap roots of his ancestors. Within weeks of ascending to the throne, King Taejo also sent his son Yi Bang-won up north, back to his hometown of Hamhung, to pay a visit to the deceased ancestors buried there. There Yi Bang-won informed the entombed ancestors of the luminous events down in the capital, and of the enthronement of their descendant as the new King. Yi Bang-won made ritual offerings at the ancestral tombs and supervised the erection of a building where family members could partake in purification and fasting rituals before performing their sacrifices at the ancestral tombs. He bestowed tomb titles on the resting grounds and assigned some local families to stand guard and maintain the tombs.¹⁵

The tomb of Yi Seong-gye's father, Yi Jachun, would come to feature a memorial inscription, chiseled on a stone stele, recalling all the great deeds of the family Yi and their descendant Yi Seong-gye.

*A plum tree [the Yi clan] from the kingdom of
immortals
Took its root deeply in the hardened ground.
...In order to make a fresh start for his people,
The King illustriously proclaimed a
government of benevolence.
He said, "Though lacking in ability I ascended
the throne,
And it is only thanks to the virtue of my
ancestors."*

*...As the headwaters were distant
And the current of the waters shined all the
way down,
The royal family was finally able to achieve the
great work
Of founding a new dynasty.
[King Taejo] employed men of ability
And drove out the wicked and avaricious.
Displaying his marital prowess, he repulsed
invaders from the borders.*

*And treating people with benevolence, he
settled their livelihood
And he established law and order and
developed rites and music.
So the people of Korea loved him like their
parent.*¹⁶

Having honored their tombs in Hamhung, King Taejo bestowed royal honors on his nearly divine ancestors, in his very first royal edict. Eleven days after ascending to the throne, King Taejo gathered his court—"all the officials of high and low ranks, the *hallyang* officials, the retired elder statesmen, and the servicemen and civilians who served both in the capital and the provinces."¹⁷ Taejo began by extolling his 52 Meritorious Retainers, giving each of them certificates listing their excellent virtues and achievements.

Then King Taejo explained to the grand assembly that to ensure one thousand years of good fortune for his dynasty, there must be a sincere feeling of common descent among the people, nurtured by extolling the King's own virtuous ancestors—progenitors of a nation.¹⁸ "Turning a family into a nation is due to the contributions made by my ancestors, which they accumulated over many generations," Taejo told his assembled ministers. "I presumptuously assumed a great responsibility and founded a nation thanks to the assistance of my ancestors...inheriting the achievements made over generations."¹⁹

Taejo then gave eulogistic titles to his ancestors, four generations back, elevating them to posthumous Kings and Queens. Speaking first of his Great-Great-Grandfather Yi Ansa (the one who had the courtesan quarrel and fled north into alliance with the Yuan), King Taejo talked for some time about his virtues and achievements. I name him Mokjo (King Mok), and his wife is Hyobi (Queen Hyo), Taejo proclaimed. As for Great-Grandfather Haeng-ri (the one who ended up fighting both the Japanese and a typhoon), he became Ikcho (King Ik) and his wife became Chongbi (Queen Chong). On it went, with King Taejo extolling many dynasty-worthy virtues and achievements of four generations of his distinguished ancestors.

Taejo wrapped it all up with a prostration and words of praise. Through such acts of ancestral veneration, Taejo sought legitimation by calling on the wisdom and virtues of his powerful ancestors, a deep-seated tradition in Korean society.

*Assisted by my ancestors, I was able to establish a shining foundation for a new dynasty...Since I was fortunate to establish a new dynasty, inheriting the achievements made over generations...I express my gratitude to the root of my being. So, choosing an auspicious day, I praise your resplendent virtues...look down on us and grant us end-less prosperity.*²⁰

After all this solemn proclamation and elevation of his ancestors to royal status, someone had to grumble. It seems a local minister of works felt he wasn't quite feted enough when receiving his meritorious retainer certificate, considering all the nice things that had been said about others. My royal decree only says that I am "good at divination and medicine," the minister sulked. But the document doesn't mention all the other things I'm also good at, "which I believe to be no less than disrespect for me." We can imagine that on this most auspicious day of ancestral veneration and the highest royal decrees, the King may well have raised his eyebrows at the minister's trivial complaint, but Taejo was patient. He ordered the minister's document embellished.²¹

Auspicious Places

The legends of Taejo and his ancestors draped the new order with legitimating symbolism and Taejo wished to keep these virtuous ancestors always in Joseon's heart. So just three weeks after ascending to the throne, King Taejo ordered the Court of Royal Sacrifices to fashion new spirit tablets (*sinju*) for his ancestors.²² Though they appear as only a small block of lacquered chestnut, with the names of the deceased inscribed on them, properly sanctified tablets are infused with the spirit of the dead and can help to call the deceased back into the

world of the living. While it is normal after death for the spirit to wander the incorporeal world, whether lonely or in repose, proper rituals before a spirit tablet can call the spirit of the ancestor back to the tablet itself, to receive sacrificial foods and hear both veneration and requests.²³

These tablets could not be stored in the bodily tombs of Taejo's ancestors up in Hamhung, for these tombs were only for physical remains. Instead, the tablets needed a shrine for housing the *spirit* of the ancestors. So Taejo directed officials of the Astronomical and Meteorological Observatory to quickly find a site for a new Royal Ancestral Shrine to house the spirits of his ancestors. Some officials recommended that he should use the same Royal Ancestral Shrine site that the Goryeo kings had used, but the new king was non-plussed. "What can we make out of the old site of the ruined dynasty?" Taejo asked.²⁴ Find a new site, with new and promising energy to draw from, he ordered. He called on his geomancers to survey sites and read the signs of the land. He established Directorates for Constructing the Royal Ancestral Shrine and for Geomancy to be established and ordered them to research a proper site and begin planning the layout.²⁵

It wasn't just a site for a new ancestral shrine that he was seeking—Taejo actually was seeking somewhere to build an entirely new capital. The energy of Goryeo's old capital (Gaegyeong) was all wrong and worn out, Taejo believed. The old kingdom fell, so why build a new dynasty on those ruins? Furthermore, many of the local families in Gaegyeong were connected to the old regime and were bitter with Taejo's rise. It seemed propitious to establish a new capital and leave the cold eyes of Gaegyeong behind.²⁶

Taejo sought an auspicious location to build a new capital, palace and ancestral shrine. He ordered the secret records of

* The last King of Goryeo, Gongyang, had himself pondered the idea of leaving declining Gaegyeong behind and starting afresh with a new capital city. Pondering his precarious situation as the previous two kings had been executed, Gongyang ruminated in 1390 that "if the capital is not transferred, the king and his subjects will be put to ruin" (*Koryosa*, v. 34, 7.1390).

http://db.history.go.kr/id/kj_034r_0010_0030_0080_0040.

Goryeo studied to determine where the good earth energy (*ki*) had run out and where it still flowed. He ordered his Hall of Heavenly Records to record astronomical and astrological prophecies, and he dispatched geomancers across the land.²⁷

Like the Daoists and shamans, Taejo believed in the *pungsu* art of geomancy—the ability to read and engineer the energy of physical places so as best to secure good fortune.²⁸ According to the geomancers, particular places either did or didn't have good energy ("ki"). As one Joseon geomancer described it, "the energy of the mountains and rivers is concentrated in places, and it is scattered in other places."²⁹ The physical landscape is a living thing, with a cosmic energy flowing through it. The energy follows paths, like capillaries and veins, pulsing through the landscape in waterways of *ki*. These channels of *ki* leave some areas as barren and desolate energy deserts—sites of calamity and woe to all who linger there—but they manifest also in benevolent wellsprings where positive energy pools up and flows out to benefit the people who inhabit that place. Good energy can shift over time and part of the reason for Goryeo's collapse was thought to be because its once-auspicious capital city location (Gaegyeong) had run dry of good *ki*.³⁰

So King Taejo dispatched the geomancers. Just as an acupuncturist searches the body, probing sites of positive and blocked energy flows, so did Taejo's geomancers probe the landscape for the right place to put down dynastic roots in a new capital. For the geomancers, the arrangement of mountains was particularly important. Mountain ranges are like powerful earthen dragons—wellsprings of *ki* flow from them, in mappable blood vessels or energy watersheds where the positive energy pools and can be tapped for beneficial results. To find such a location, it was good to have tall mountains to the rear (or north), smaller hills to the right and left, and a river or lake in the front (or south), to act as a watery dam holding the *ki* inside the bowl formed by the surrounding mountains and hills.³¹

Taejo's geomancers identified several possible locations with promising formations, but they constantly debated which site was best. King Taejo would sometimes grow angry with the geomancers' constantly shifting opinions; he once had a

geomancer beaten for not being clear and consistent. Taejo's Privy Council complained that the whole subject was murky. "The secret records handed down from the previous dynasty are also at variance, making it difficult to distinguish right from wrong."³² New sites for the capital were identified near Mt. Muak, then near Mt. Kyeryong, then at Mt. Dora near Gaegyeong, then at Hanyang (today's Seoul). Opinions were constantly reversing and changing.

As King Taejo travelled the peninsula seeking a new site for his capital, some areas received him warmly. In Chongju, "the elders of the villages bowed down to the ground before the royal carriage, singing songs."³³ But in Chungcheong, many people didn't seem enthused with Taejo as the new king, so that possible site for a new capital was quickly abandoned.³⁴ At the same time, many of the old Gaegyeong establishment didn't want to move the capital at all, and constantly undermined the search.³⁵ When the King prepared an excursion, many officials would report illnesses or other problems so that they didn't have to leave their homes or promote the relocation project.

On one occasion, resistive members of the Privy Council asked King Taejo to turn his royal carriage back to Gaegyeong in the middle of a trip to scout new sites. Councilors said they *had* to turn around because the King's wife was ill. Also, bandits were appearing in the countryside, making the trip dangerous. But Taejo saw through the subterfuge. "Did you say bandits??" He asked with angry suspicion. "Was the report made by the provincial military officer? Who brought that report?!!" The Security Council officer was flustered and couldn't answer at all.

The king then angrily addressed all his ministers. "Moving the nation's capital is what powerful and flourishing families dislike, so I know they are trying to find excuses to stop it. Grand councilors and high officials have lived in [Gaegyeong] for a long time, and therefore they do not want to relocate...I am sure you also dislike moving the capital." However, Taejo barked, there will be no stopping this move. He angrily vowed that he wouldn't put up with continued sabotage. "Throughout history, whenever dynasties changed and kings newly received the Mandate of Heaven, they always moved the capital." The

angry King then ordered the carriage to return to Gaegyeong so he could attend to his “sick” wife. Ministers were now scared to return to the capital with the angry King, so they rushed to stop him, promising the trip could go on after all. “Consort Hyeon will certainly recover from her illness, and the bandits are not worth worrying about, either,” they admitted. The search went on.³⁶

In the midst of these paralyzing geomantic debates and dithering resistance by ministers, the scholar Jeong Do-jeon stepped up and offered his insights. “I have not learned the art of geomancy,” he admitted. “Since everyone’s opinion is preoccupied with geomancy, I do not know what to say.” But he noted that he could speak to what was rational and practical. Sites too far south and too far north are not good for ruling an entire country, he said. Taejo should find a site in the middle of the peninsula. It must be close to the ocean for practical matters of trade, diplomacy, and national defense. It should have room to grow and accommodate shrines, palaces, and markets. Jeong pointed out that sites like Hanyang (today’s Seoul) met all these conditions. Jeong admitted he was basing his ideas on practical rationality, and not on the geomancy of the ancients. But he asked Taejo: “how can you trust the words of those who practice geomancy and distrust the words of a scholar?” In the end, the success of the state depends on the quality of its leaders, “not on the strength of the sites.” Jeong requested King Taejo to consult his practical and common-sense knowledge about the best place for a capital: “after that you can try fortune-telling.”³⁷

Within a few weeks of Jeong Do-jeon’s observations, during the 8th lunar month of 1394, King Taejo gave his decision. He ordered his Privy Council to begin moving the nation’s capital from Gaegyeong (Kaesong) to Hanyang (Seoul), and to begin immediate construction of the Jongmyo Royal Shrine for his ancestors’ spirit tablets.³⁸ Just as Jeong Do-jeon had argued, the King liked that Hanyang was centrally located, with access to rivers and an ocean—but he also believed Hanyang adhered to important geomantic principles. It was surrounded by four auspicious mountains: Bukhansan (the Black Tortoise) to the north, Naksan (the Blue Dragon) to the east, Namsan (the Vermilion Bird) to the south, and

Inwangsan (the White Tiger) to the west.³⁹ The Han River ran before it, and through the city center ran the east-west Cheongygcheon stream. It was elegant and fortuitous, "A Hill of Five Virtues."⁴⁰

The fortune-tellers were now unanimous in speaking highly of the King's chosen location. Festive parties on riverboat rides provided entertainment during the long search for a new capital. Everyone would get drunk and dance about to loud music, celebrating their achievement. Watching festivities, King Taejo once burst out into tears, recalling how sad it was that his parents had died early and could not see the new capital and their son's rise to glory.⁴¹

A groundbreaking ceremony for the new capital occurred on December 3, 1394. Purifying himself the night before, the King offered prayers to the Deities of Heaven and Earth.

Your servant, the king of Joseon, dares to announce to Heaven and Earth with all sincerity...Prostrating myself before you, I acknowledge that all things are created and grow because heaven covers and earth carries them. Following the laws of nature, I desire to renew what is old and create a capital that extends in all directions...If you allow us to build a great capital here, uphold the Mandate of Heaven, and look after the people in the days to come, I will offer you sacrifices with more gratitude and sincerity. I will also work harder to discharge my duty, mindful of seasonal changes and opportunities, and enjoy peace with my officials and people.⁴²

Having supplicated the Gods of Heaven and Earth, the King prayed to all the mountains and rivers spirits of Hanyang, offering them food and wine.

The king speaks as follows! You the spirits of Mt. Paegak (Bukhansan), Mt. Mongmyok (Namsan), and all other mountains, and the spirits of the Han River, Yangjin Ferry, and all

other rivers!...The reason that I decided to undertake this project is not to seek my personal interest but to bring benefits to the people by offering sacrifices and ruling them in accordance with the will of Heaven. If you spirits truly understand my sincere heart and help me finish this great task safely, preventing things such as bad weather, disease, and accidents, I will never forget to offer sacrifices to you. Let me assure you that I will not indulge in a life of ease even though I am a wretched person, and you will enjoy food forever.⁴³

The divine aspirations of Taejo's rule echoed in these prayers as the massive construction project began. A period of geomantic migration then followed, with the entire Joseon court and thousands of commoners moving towards the Hanyang area which had been discovered to be overflowing with auspicious geomantic energy and the blessing of the gods.⁴⁴

Capital Construction

The construction of the new Ancestral Shrine and Royal Palace in Hanyang* would take three years of Taejo's newly opened Joseon dynasty. Tens of thousands of laborers were conscripted to work in the vast capital construction project, working in fifty-day shifts scheduled just before and just after the peak of harvest.⁴⁵ The Sajik Shrine to Earth and Grain had to be created, together with the Jongmyo Ancestral Shrine. The new palace, with dozens of fine residential, ceremonial, and administration buildings, had to be constructed. New buildings for every government bureau had to be built: from the tiny Bureau of Bamboo Crafts, to the Royal Salt Repository, to the stately Office of the Censorate. Schools and residential centers had to be constructed. The small city of Hanyang had to be built out to accommodate about 100,000 residents.⁴⁶

* Upon being named the new capital of Joseon, the city changed names, becoming known as Hanseong as well as Hanyang.

Though the scale of the project was immense, King Taejo's Confucian architect, Jeong Do-jeon, took care that the palace and government buildings remained rather simple and frugal, as compared to the grandeur of China's Forbidden City. "If the palace is luxurious, it will make people suffer and will damage national finances," Jeong Do-jeon said. "However, if it is too shabby it cannot show the dignity of the Dynasty. It is beautiful that it is frugal, not shabby, and not extravagant while maintaining dignity."⁴⁷

Around the entire city, strong granite walls were planned, 12 meters high in places. King Taejo travelled the city borders to plan the course of the wall with Jeong Do-jeon and the Buddhist Monk Muhak (who Taejo had named the Royal Preceptor). As they toured Mount Ingwansan on the western edge of the city, the party came upon the sublime rock formation known as the *Seonbawi* (the Zen Rocks). These are two large, black lava formations, about fifteen feet tall and looking out of place as they rise among the granite boulders all around. The lava formations have anthropomorphic characteristics and look a bit like hooded monks sitting side-by-side in prayer. They are pocked with dark holes and recesses, giving the formation a powerful, mysterious energy.⁴⁸

King Taejo had a big decision to make regarding how to handle these mystic rocks on the slopes of Ingwansan. While he surveyed the area with his Buddhist and Confucian advisors, they discussed what route the new city walls should take as they crossed over the Ingwansan ridges to the west of the palace. Specifically, the question was whether the mystic *Seonbawi* rocks should be included *inside* the city walls, or whether the city walls should be strategically designed so as to *exclude* the mysterious lava formations.

Both of Taejo's advisors recognized the unique energy of the *Seonbawi* area of Ingwansan. The Buddhist monks prayed here, and shamans conducted rituals all around this portentous site. For these reasons, Monk Muhak argued vigorously that the city walls should be designed to include the *Seonbawi* *inside* the walls, so as to ensure the health of Buddhism going forward. The rocks were a promising source of energy and spiritual inspiration and should be embraced by the new dynasty, so that the dynasty could last 1000 years.⁴⁹

But Jeong Do-jeon, the austere scholar, argued that the state should be Confucian at its core, and that the energy of the Seonbawi must be exiled *outside* the city walls, so as to keep the inevitable pilgrimages of Buddhists and shamans from polluting the city. The site will inevitably become “a focal point for the practice of certain shamanistic rites” Jeong argued. The rocks must remain beyond the city walls.⁵⁰ Monk Muhak replied that placing the Seonbawi outside of the city walls would result in the prosecution of Buddhism in Joseon and doom the dynasty to only lasting 500 years.

The fierce debate continued for days, until a heavy snowfall settled the matter. According to the *Joseon Bulgyo-Tongsa* [*Comprehensive History of Joseon Buddhism*], on the morrow after a serious snowfall, it was found that snow had melted away in some inner areas of the surrounding mountains facing the city core and remained frozen in outer areas of the mountains. This melting snowline was chosen as the course for the city walls, in hopes that areas inside the walls would be favored by sun and rapidly melting snow in the future. The Seonbawi rocks, unfortunately for Monk Muhak, remained in the snowy area.⁵¹ King Taejo therefore planned his city walls to exclude the Seonbawi, exiling their unorthodox energy which so threatened Confucian sensitivities. A disappointed Monk Muhak lamented that this decision meant that “monks will from now on have to follow scholars around carrying their books.”⁵²

As construction on the Jongmyo Shrine and Royal Palace wrapped up, construction on the Hanyang city walls began in the dead of winter—January 9th, 1396. Tens of thousands of workers had been conscripted to build the palace and shrines; one thousand alone worked on a guest house for Chinese envoys.⁵³ On the city walls, 18,000 people labored in 50-day shifts, over several years. Each province of Joseon had to supply work crews. People were taken off their farms for corvée labor without pay. While building the capital city, hundreds died and thousands were crippled or injured in construction accidents, epidemic illnesses, or from a freezing workplace environment.⁵⁴ Facing such conditions, many workers scattered and fled whenever they could.⁵⁵ But authorities were merciless when such workers were caught.

Six runaway workers were beheaded on one occasion.⁵⁶ At another time, one monk was apprehended for sluggish work as a stone mason. He was executed and his head was hung from the top of the gate that workers were laboring on.⁵⁷

Jeong Do-jeon composed a peppy song (“the New Spirit”) to comfort workers as they toiled, but the laborers probably appreciated the efforts of one sympathetic *Dodang* Chancellor even more. On one occasion, this Chancellor informed King Taejo that the weather was turning too cold for workers’ health. He also noted that many of the King’s escorts were seizing the houses of commoners in order to stay warm during the work project, so people had nowhere to shelter. He urged the King to give workers a break and to slow down construction. For a time, Taejo agreed.⁵⁸

Enshrined Ancestors

In September of 1395, the Jongmyo Royal Ancestral Shrine was ready to receive the spirits of Taejo’s ancestors. The King was delighted to finally give his ancestors a proper home. As the scholar Yi Saek taught, “if the domestic shrine becomes dilapidated, the spirit wanders, has nowhere to go, and does not attach itself to the descendants.”⁵⁹ It didn’t take special training in divination to know that such lonely, wandering spirits could never be good. But if built well, and with proper attention to ritual, an ancestral shrine would call back the ancestral *ki* and bring great fortune upon a people.⁶⁰

Taejo crafted a lovely ancestral resting place: “the manifestation of a filial heart.”⁶¹ In consultation with the geomancers, the Jongmyo shrine was nestled close to the royal palace and just below the positive earth energy of Mt. Bukhan to the north and between the protecting ridges of Ingwansan to the west (the Great White Tiger guardian) and Naksan to the east (the Blue Dragon guardian). It was a strategically chosen site of auspicious geomantic energy at very center of the geomancy cave (*hyeol*), where *ki* flowed down from the cradling mountains.⁶² While the mountain ridge to the rear could be considered a great dragon’s spine, the new palace and Jongmyo shrine were located at the very head of the dragon, where all the good *ki* energy pooled.

Careful siting of ancestral tombs at this promising geomantic site helped naturalize the authority of the Joseon dynasty, aligning it with the energy of the earth, and helping Taejo's descendants to draw forever upon the energy of their ancestors.⁶³ "The energy of the ancestors becomes the energy of the descendants," the Joseon geomancer Yi Yuwon argued, "A well-buried corpse and pleased spirits of the ancestors can ease people's minds, while also ensuring their good fortune, good health, and compensation for all their troubles."⁶⁴

The Royal Ancestral Shrine was located right next to the new palace and separated from the surrounding city amid a parklike serenity of locust, oak, ginkgo, pine, willow, and maple trees. There were no flowering plants—just an atmosphere of sublime dignity and quiet rest. The shrine complex included a collection of buildings to help in honoring the spirits (ritual preparation buildings, spaces to store sacred utensils, pavilions for musicians), while the central building was a long, elegant line of royal spirit chambers, closed behind thick cinnabar red doors. A slightly elevated black stone path was built throughout the Jongmyo complex, connecting one building to another, and meant only for the spirits of the ancestors to walk upon (called a *shinro*, or "spirit path").

King Taejo even authorized a small shine to King Gongmin, the reformist Goryeo ruler who had once ordered a young Yi Seong-gye and his father to drive the Yuan out of Goryeo lands. It is said that a loose painting of King Gongmin blew into the area one windy day while the Ancestral shrine was being built and landed upon the Jongmyo grounds. Officials took it as a portent and decided to enshrine Goryeo's King Gongmin at Jongmyo, together with the Joseon royals.⁶⁵

At this shrine, Taejo ordered the commencement of annual ancestral veneration rites. Taejo ordered rites five times a year, marking the four seasons and one formal sacrificial day. Each occasion was a lengthy and grand affair and involved hundreds of ritual specialists, attendants, dancers, singers, musicians, food preparers and royal family members. These Jongmyo rituals were meant to unite the hearts and minds of Joseon, focusing all the officials and even commoners outside the shrine on consciousness of a common ancestry.⁶⁶

The rituals first began on the 28th day of the 9th lunar month of 1395, when the Jongmyo Shrine was ready to receive its first residents: the spirits of four generations of King Taejo's ancestors. This inaugural enshrinement was no mere artistic festival for casual public display—it was a sacred process, transferring the still-sentient soul and essence of the venerable ancestors to their new home. The process began by sending a delegation of ritual specialists from Hanyang to the old capital of Gaegyeong, to escort the royal ancestral tablets to the new capital city. The tablets were placed in an ivory carriage and escorted with a musical procession. While the tablets were in transit, the King began his purification rituals. Together with other members of his court, the King refrained from meat, sex, alcohol, music, and festivities of any sort for seven days. For three days prior to enshrinement, the King would fast completely. Several officials who didn't begin these rituals on time were impeached and dismissed from office.⁶⁷

Several days after the spirit tablets were taken to their new chambers in Jongmyo, on the 4th day of the 10th month, the King arrived in a red royal robe, wearing a jade crown and riding an ivory carriage, to begin his final day of purification before enshrinement. Officials lined up in straight rows and full finery to greet the King at the shrine. Taejo prostrated four times before entering the side gate of Jongmyo, as the central gate was only for the spirits. The King spent the evening at the shrine in a special room, praying and fasting.

On the 5th day of the 10th month, Taejo dressed in a royal dragon robe and a mortarboard crown, with strings of hanging beads front and back, and prepared to perform the enshrinement rituals. In the courtyard were hundreds of attendants, members of the court, and scholar-officials in their finest ritual garb.⁶⁸ They had all come together in a national manifestation of filial piety, uniting hearts and minds with the common root of Joseon.⁶⁹ The King and his attendants followed the dictates of Confucian classics such as the *Li-ji* (Book of Rites) and *Zhou Li* (Rites of Zhou).⁷⁰ The *Taejo Sillok* approvingly records that King Taejo always honored Confucius' advice: "he sacrificed to the dead, as if they were present. He sacrificed to the spirits, as if the spirits were present."⁷¹

Food offerings were carefully laid out, with vertical rows of bamboo and wooden plates and ritually prepared foods from earth and sea. Tidy rows of square and round vessels were artfully arranged. Small stands presented the meat of three sacrificial animals—ox, lamb, and pig. On the left, boiled animal meat. On the right, livers, and lumps of animal fat. In the center, on three small stands, was the raw meat of each animal. In front of all these stands, a plate of the animals' hair and blood was presented to the ancestors. In front of all this, immediately before the door of each spirit chamber, was the ritual wine. The King welcomed the spirits to their new home, and they were offered three cups of wine. King Taejo offered the first wine, spilling it ritually on the ground. Then the Crown Prince, fourteen-year-old Bang-seok, offered the second tribute. The official ritualist poured the third offering of wine onto the ground. Taejo concluded by burning the ritual prayer and committing the smoke to the heavens.⁷²

Having completed these ceremonies, King Taejo then left the shrine and travelled to the south gate of the city, where tents of celebration had been erected. Hundreds of officials from provinces across the land, as well as thousands of city residents, lined the streets to congratulate the King. Erudite Confucian scholars of the National Academy performed songs all along the route, written by Jeong Do-jeon just for the occasion. First, they performed the "Song of the Heavenly Mandate," then the "Song of the Royal Capital." Finally, they performed "Song of the New Royal Ancestral Shrine."⁷³ Taejo was often humbled after hearing Sambong's wonderful songs of celebration. "No matter how many songs you sing, you praise my virtue too excessively. Whenever I listen to these songs, I feel very ashamed of myself."⁷⁴

Upon arriving at the celebration tent, before the gathered well-wishers, King Taejo thanked the "accumulated virtues of his ancestors" for helping him found the new dynasty, and solemnly proclaimed a royal decree. "If one wants to keep the heart of the nation beating, one must foster mutual respect and good custom," Taejo declared. "From this day forward, the members of the literati shall exercise self-discipline to control their conduct and show diligence in carrying out their duties."

The King decreed that the common people should also behave well and avoid reckless deeds and selfishness. It would all be in accord with the wishes of the ancestors.⁷⁵

As for the quality of the Shrine itself, the King was pleased. "Since I believe that the Royal Ancestral Shrine is the great foundation of the state, it should have an impressive appearance and the sacrifices offered to the spirits should be clean and appropriate. My ancestors have prepared a way for me, and in my generation, my family turned into a kingdom. Looking at the great ceremony at this time, I find myself deeply moved and gratified. Hence, I intend to do the people a generous favor..."

The King then proclaimed a reduction of corvée labor in the capital, a reduction in taxation of those with few assets, reduced military obligations for the elderly, and new welfare provisions for orphans, widows, widowers, and the elderly. He declared general amnesty for criminals, forgiving all crimes that occurred before the enshrinement ceremony, "regardless of whether they are known or have been adjudicated." The only crimes not forgiven were those "subject to capital punishment by either beheading or hanging."⁷⁶

It was a new beginning on the Korean peninsula. The spiritual foundations of the Joseon dynasty had been laid in the bedrock of ancestral virtue, taxes on the people were reduced, welfare programs were expanded, general amnesty had been declared, and the celebration in the capital must have been immense.

The palace was completed soon thereafter. On October 7th, 1395, Sambong kowtowed before King Taejo and then bestowed the palace and nearby roads and public squares with virtuous names, as the king requested. Sambong called the new palace "Gyeongbokgung," meaning "Palace Greatly Blessed by Heaven."⁷⁷ Looking at all that was being readied for the King, Jeong Do-jeon was pleased. Regarding Gwanghwamun Plaza in front of the Palace gate, Sambong later described its grandeur.

THE KING OF JOSEON

*The high-rise office buildings that face one another
Are like the countless stars surrounding Polaris.
The moonlit official streets in the dawn look like a river.
A carriage runs with its jade decorations ringing,
but hardly a speck of dust rises.
...The grand mansions stand tall above the clouds,
And the villages, closely connected, fully occupy the land.
Since they are covered with smoke every morning and evening,
One sees the peace and prosperity of an age.⁷⁸*

Back at Gaegyeong, the old Goryeo capital, things were different. One Goryeo diplomat to Ming described that “a tragic and desolate wall is all that remains” in Gaegyeong. The whole area was simply “tall trees wrapped in a cold mist.”⁷⁹ The Ming Emperor himself imagined Gaegyeong’s abandon.

*The capital moved away, and the streets turned desolate.
Passing travelers are saddened to look at the desolation.
Only the flowers are left in the palace garden crowded with bees.
But the empty palace became the home of wild rabbits.
The peddlers take a roundabout way to get to the new city,
And the merchants newly relocated miss their old marketplace.⁸⁰*

But in Hanyang, a hopeful, fresh dynasty was opening in a glorious new palace. The King moved into the grand palace and organized a celebratory feast on October 28th, 1365: the occasion of his 60th birthday. All the ministers and servants

were there and raised their glasses and bowed to the king. A colorful painting was unveiled of a king riding a dragon, with 1000 scholars following him, debating among the clouds. The whole crowd sang "*Mundeokgak*" to the King, another of Sambong's compositions.⁸¹

Jeong Do-jeon received a gold-gilt belt from the king and praised all they had achieved together. "The palace is high like the stars of the Big Dipper," Jeong swooned. "[Mt.] Muhak is surrounded by clouds. Every season the flowers and birds find the palace. Every day the commoners play happily."⁸² As described in the *Taejo Sillok*, everyone was giddy, with glittering eyes. The King drank several rounds of wine,⁸³ and ordered Jeong Do-jeon to dance as he sang. As the great scholar danced, the king stood up, took off his ceremonial armor, and joined in. All the officials and scholars danced the night away in the new palace.

Jeong Do-jeon could hardly believe all that had come to pass. "We are already drunk with wine," he said. "We are sated with virtue and power."⁸⁴