



BIOGRAPHY

Lady Ki, Consort of the Mongol Emperor

During the period of Mongol domination, not only did Mongol princesses become Korean queens, but Korean young women were recruited for the harems of the Mongol emperors. The young woman who rose highest came from the *yangban* Ki family and was literate in Chinese. Her personal name is preserved in Mongolian only—Oljei Quduc.

From Lady Ki's early years in the palace, she allied herself with another Korean—a boy who had been taken to serve as a court eunuch. In his case, not even his Korean surname has been preserved—only the Mongol name transcribed into Chinese as either Pubuhua or Baobuha.

The Mongol emperor Toghun Temür came to the throne in 1332 at age thirteen. He was under the domination of the Mongol grandee Bayan, who had his daughter made empress. Toghun Temür did not particularly like her, much preferring the Korean woman who brought his food and tea, Lady Ki. She also bore him his first and only son in 1339. His first empress was killed when her father fell from power, and another Mongol woman was appointed empress to replace her, but the emperor was so attached to Lady Ki that he had her promoted to secondary empress.

Both Lady Ki and her eunuch ally Pubuhua are given credit in their dynastic history biographies for organizing the response to the great famine and epidemic of 1358–1360, when starving people streamed into the capital and corpses were piled on top of each other in the streets. Lady Ki asked Pubuhua to collect funds from the imperial family and others to pay for relief and burial. She must have given him many gifts, or encouraged the emperor to do so, because his personal contributions are said to have included a jade belt, a gold belt, and two silver ingots, as well as 34 bushels of rice and 6 of wheat. When all was done, they had arranged for

the purchase of burial grounds and Buddhist funeral services for two hundred thousand victims.

Toghun Temür may have been very fond of Lady Ki, but he was not a particularly good emperor, and he was certainly not up to stemming the rapid decline of the dynasty after 1350. Lady Ki gradually shifted her allegiance to her son. In 1356, the Goryeo king Gongmin had the temerity to slaughter Lady Ki's relatives, who had gained power at court because of their connection to her. She clearly saw this as a personal affront and asked her son to avenge their deaths. He had an army of ten thousand soldiers sent across the Yalu to try to install a brother of Gongmin as king, but the army was badly defeated. By this time, the Yuan armies had lost control of much of the country to rebels and independent strongmen, so sending an army to Korea seemed perverse to leading generals, who forced the emperor to send Lady Ki out of the capital on the grounds that she was interfering in politics.

As the situation became more desperate, Lady Ki twice made use of Pubuhua to try to carry messages to leading officials, asking them to help her force Toghun Temür to abdicate in favor of her son. By that point, power was held mostly by two rival Mongol warlords. In 1364, the warlord Bolod Temür marched into the capital. The crown prince fled, Pubuhua was executed, and Lady Ki was impeached and confined to her quarters. The emperor did not turn against her, however, and when the fall of the dynasty was imminent, he took her with him on the retreat to Kharokotum in Mongolia. He died two years later; how long she lived is not recorded.

Questions for Analysis

1. What did the Mongols gain by taking consorts from the Korean royal family?
2. Are any of Lady Ki's actions difficult to understand?

recruited was Yi Chehyeon (E CHAE-hyon) (1287–1367), who had been traveling back and forth from Beijing for several decades in the service of earlier Goryeo kings and was a staunch supporter of Zhu Xi's thought. With his help, Gongmin set up new schools to train officials in *Confucianism*, increased

the number of lower degree graduates in the civil service examinations, and appointed more degree holders to office, especially to posts in the censorate.

Gongmin also sought the help of Buddhist monks, notably Sin Don (SHIN-don), who was given charge of the monk registers, the office of yin yang and

geomancy, the Royal Guards, and the personnel bureau. Because Sin Don had no landed estates and no independent economic base, he was totally dependent on the king's favor. In 1366, Sin Don was appointed director of the General Directorate for the Investigation of Land and Slaves to register everyone who had illegally been made a slave during the period of turmoil and all the land that the landlords had been hiding from the central government. These measures infuriated wealthy *yangban*.

When the Chinese rebel Zhu Yuanzhang founded the Ming Dynasty in China in 1368, the Mongols fled north to Mongolia. King Gongmin abandoned the Yuan year period and in 1370 accepted a patent of investiture as king of Goryeo from the Ming founder. Meanwhile, the political tide in Goryeo had turned against Sin Don. When trumped-up charges were leveled against him in 1371, Gongmin withdrew his support, executed him, and purged about fifty officials. Sin Don had been placed in the impossible situation of leading a frontal attack against the interests of the most powerful families without a political base of his own. Three years later, King Gongmin himself was assassinated.

SUMMARY

During the Goryeo dynasty Korea evolved more independently of China than it had for the past several centuries, in part, because it had to placate powerful non-Chinese neighbors. The commercial economy declined, and an increasing portion of the population was unfree; slaves worked much of the agricultural land in the hands of aristocrats and local magnates, and the government compelled others to work for it in mines or factories. Buddhism, however, continued to flourish. Military strongmen dominated the government, but the armies were no match for the much larger empires to their north and had to accede to often-onerous demands, especially during the period of Mongol domination.

The Goryeo Dynasty lasted four and a half centuries. During the first several reigns, the kings made efforts to strengthen central control. The aristocracy remained strong, however, their economic power enhanced by a system of land grants (prebends). After 1020, Goryeo politics was dominated by an oligarchy of aristocratic clans who treated their land grants as private property and acquired large numbers of serf-like slaves.

Direct land access to China was cut off with the founding of the Khitan state of Liao, a situation that continued when the Khitans were supplanted by the Jurchens and then the Mongols. The sea route, however, allowed considerable trade between Song China and Goryeo Korea. Buddhism and Confucianism both continued to flourish. Books came into wider use with the adoption of printing. Goryeo Confucian scholars took an interest in new developments in Song China, such as the growing influence of Zhu Xi and the emphasis he put on the Four Books. The Korean family system, however, retained many of its earlier features, including tracing descent through both male and female lines.

Goryeo rulers had to contend not only with *yangban* aristocrats but also with the military, which took control over the government in 1170. From 1196 on, power was in the hands of generals of the Choe family, who deposed and appointed kings at will. The Choes, however, could not cope with the emergence of the Mongols. By the 1250s, Goryeo was under firm Mongol control. The Goryeo royal family spent much time in Beijing. Crown princes were required to reside there, and Goryeo princesses were often taken into the Mongol imperial harem. In the late Goryeo period, after the rapid decline of Mongol power in the 1250s, the king Gongmin was able to restore Goryeo political institutions and promote Confucianism.

How different was Korea in the late fourteenth century than in the early tenth century, four and a half centuries earlier? After a period of extensive, active contact with Tang China, Korea had found itself separated from China by powerful Inner Asian states. During this period of close contact with Inner Asian powers, the more Inner Asian side of Korea seems to have been allowed room to flourish, as seen in the ascendance of the military, violent succession struggles, and the pervasive practice of slavery. China remained very important but it was no longer the great power of the region. What we tend to think of as the great achievements of Song China, such as the burgeoning economy and high level of urbanization, seem to have had little impact on contemporary Goryeo. China became the source of books and ideas, of Confucian culture and such associated arts as printing and history-writing. Perhaps this encouraged Koreans to be more selective in what they adopted from China and more willing to develop in new directions ideas that had been borrowed from China.