

Empire's Twilight: Northeast Asia under the Mongols

by David M. Robinson
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009)

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I

As its title “Empire’s Twilight” indicates, the book investigates the political situation developing between Gaegyeong (now Gaeseong), Liaodong and Daidu (now Beijing) in the 14th century in the framework of triangular relationship. Studies concerning the Mongol Empire’s growth and expansion have made noticeable progress, and diverse studies have been made of the relations between Goryeo and the Mongol Empire with the focus on war and reconciliation. However, few studies have dealt with the history of the declining Mongol Empire within the context of Northeast Asia. Under such circumstances, this book is significant as a history book that deals with the forewarning signs of the collapse of Goryeo and the Mongol Empire concentrating on international relations in the mid-14th century of Northeast Asia. The author asserts that there can be no generalization about the Mongol Empire without understanding the 14th century. He appears to point to the very complicated and dynamic political situation in the 14th century Northeast Asia, revolving around the Mongol Empire, Ming, and Joseon.

David M. Robinson is a scholar who specializes in the peasant rebellions that occurred in East Asia in the 14th century and thereafter. His most recent treatises, which analyze the impact of the revolt of Red-turbaned Bandits [紅巾賊] on Goryeo and the Mongol Empire, have become the focus of attention. His representative works are *Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven: Rebellion and the Economy of Violence in Ming China* (University of Hawaii, 2001); “The Ming Imperial Family and the Yuan Legacy” (Culture, Courtiers, and Competition); and *The Collapse of the Mongol Empire and the Foreign Policy of King Gongmin of Goryeo: a Study of China’s Diplomacy and Exchanges in Northeast Asia* (in Japanese translation) (University of Tokyo Press, 2007).

As is commonly said, history is written by the victors. A kingdom that falls is likely to receive a harsh appraisal. Concerning the period when China was ruled by non-Han Chinese dynasties (Mongols), in particular, the country’s historians made a harsh appraisal of the kings of the fallen dynasty. Furthermore, the Sino-centric view of the world added some exaggerations. Thus, Togon Temur, the emperor of the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty, was the target of frequent unjust criticisms by the Chinese. Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of Ming China, was accorded the name Shundi (literally meaning “the emperor who followed his destiny”) to him based on the arbitrary view that “he followed the mandate of heaven, and retreated from Daidu and ceded to Ming.”¹ Even now, many Chinese scholars call him Shundi rather than his official title of Huizong, with no criticism of the humiliating name.

The author narrates the political situation in Northeast Asia in the 14th century with the focus on two men and a woman. The “two men” are King Gongmin of Goryeo and Togon Temur. The author stresses that they were both kings with a natural talent for painting and a keen

¹ *Yuanshi* [元史, *The History of the Yuan Dynasty*] Vol. 47. 大明皇帝以帝知順天命, 退避而去, 特加其號曰順帝.

sensibility, and refers to them as unfortunate figures who made a pathetic attempt to extend their reign amid the emergence of local warlords, floods, epidemics and famine, and the rise of the Red-turbaned Bandits [紅巾賊]. The “woman” is Queen Gi [奇皇后], Togon Temur’s second wife, who came to wield enormous influence over the whole of East Asia in the 14th century. The author says that she deserves a different appraisal as a non-Mongol who achieved the great feat of rising to the top of power in the Mongol Empire, although she is generally portrayed as an immoral figure who caused the fall of the empire by Korean and Chinese scholars. The author states that her extraordinary ambition and passion contributed to the formation of a new system of international relations in Northeast Asia.

I think that the author’s view makes a great deal of sense. Many historians say that Togon Temur’s prodigal life and inattention to his duties as a ruler caused great misery among his people and led to the fall of the dynasty, but what they say is not true in many respects. The decline of Yuan was really attributable to the continued power struggle for the throne caused by their limitations as a nomadic people, and the dire situation of the people due to the frequent inundation of the Yellow River, rather than to the personal life of its leader. It is also not right to view King Gongmin as a figure who adopted a simplistic pro-Ming, anti-Yuan policy. He sought Goryeo’s advantage by carrying out an equidistant diplomatic policy during the difficult process of transition from Yuan to Ming. Any attempt to view the international relations of that time as pro-Ming/anti-Yuan or pro-Yuan/anti-Ming only serves to tarnish the prestige of Goryeo as an independent state.

II

The book, which casts a new perspective on the Mongol Empire in the 14th century following a century of imperial expansion, comprises an introduction, eight chapters, and an epilogue as follows:

Introduction
Chapter 1 Northeast Asia and the Mongol Empire
Chapter 2 A Precarious Restoration
Chapter 3 Koryŏ (Goryeo) in the Great Yuan *Ulus*
Chapter 4 The Red Turban Wars
Chapter 5 Buffeted in the Storm
Chapter 6 In the Wake of the Invasions
Chapter 7 A New King of Koryŏ (Goryeo)
Chapter 8 Wider Perspectives
Epilogue

Chapter 1 (Northeast Asia and the Mongol Empire) explains the overall situation of the Mongol Empire in the 13th and 14th centuries with the focus on Northeast Asia. It says that the expansion of the three eastern dynasties in Liaodong put the central government of China on the alert and led it to establish a Liaodong-related policy with the three dynasties noticeably kept in mind. It sheds light on the role of political factions from Goryeo who were engaged in activities in Liaoyang, and explains the cultural, religious, economic and military integration that extended from Gaegyeong to Liaodong and Daidu. It adds that in the 14th century the solidarity between the various dynasties in Northeast Asia became stronger than in the preceding century and that Goryeo and the Mongol Empire were bound together by a common destiny through Liaodong. It concludes that this sense of bonding led to political, social and military integration, if not complete uniformity, in the region.

Chapter 2 (A Precarious Restoration) appraises Toqto's efforts for reform towards the end of Yuan as relatively successful, but states that Yuan's limitations as a nomadic people, which manifested themselves in the form of a constant power struggle, reduced the effect of the reforms. It points out that climate change, famine, epidemics and the dire situation of the people due to frequent inundations of the Yellow River drove the Mongol Empire to crisis in the mid-14th century. The chapter goes on to

explain that the Red-turbaned Bandits, who rose as a clandestine organization in Hebei, using the country name Song, occupied Shandong and began expanding their influence to Shangdu and Liaodong, thus accelerating the fall of the Mongol Empire.

Chapter 3 [Koryō (Goryeo) in the Great Yuan *Ulus*] offers an overall analysis of the characteristics of intermarriage between Koreans and Mongols and Queen Gi [奇皇后]'s activities. In particular, it raises an objection to the view held by some scholars that Goryeo ceased according political significance to intermarriage with the Mongols any longer due to the political confusion in the Mongol Empire. The author says that, at least until the reign of King Gongmin, Goryeo maintained its regime through intermarriage with the Mongol Empire's ruling family. He denies that Princess Botashiri of the Mongols, who married King Gongmin, had no political power in her home country. As an elder brother of the Great Khans Qaisan and Ayurbarwada, her grandfather Amuga had considerable political influence in the empire. The author also points to the fact that Amuga's daughter married King Chung Suk, King Gongmin's father. That is to say, the rulers of Goryeo stayed in power through their extensive intermarriage with the Kublai family, although they were not great Khans, and King Gongmin was no exception to this.

The author attaches considerable importance to Queen Gi. He views her as one of the most influential women in Eurasia in the 14th century, stating that her exceptional artistic sensibility and cultured ways helped her to gradually bring the royal court under her control and adapt to the sensitive personality of Togon Temur, who during a miserable childhood had developed a passionate interest in painting, the composition of poems, and astronomy. The author says that the queen's rise to power helped her family to expand its influence to Liaodong and even Daidu, not to speak of within Gaegyeong. Due to her family members' arbitrary exercise of power in a way beyond the control of King Gongmin, a reform-minded ruler, he saw an absolute need to be rid

of them so as to protect his position as the ruler of the country. The series of steps taken by King Gongmin angered Queen Gi and she made an attempt to dethrone him, thus opening a breach in the relations between the two countries, according to the author.

Chapter 4 (The Red Turban Wars) and Chapter 5 (Buffeted in the Storm) are the central parts of the book. They deal with the rise of the Red-turbaned Bandits, including their attack on Liaodong and Goryeo. The author says that the bandits' attack on Liaodong was a natural course of action taken to besiege Daidu, as it was the gateway to Goryeo and Ruzhen, the center of activities of kings, including those of the three eastern dynasties, and an important area that supplied food to Yuan. The author explains that the wars waged by the Mongol Empire in the 13th and 14th centuries were world wars, as they had an impact on the whole of Eurasia. He adds that the five-year-long war between the Red-turbaned Bandits (who were like militias centered on Chinese) and the Mongol Empire, including the bandits' attack on Shangdu, which contained the summer palace of the leader of Yuan, and the areas south of Liaoyangxingsheng [遼陽行省], finally led to the fall of Yuan and the establishment of Ming. He says that it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that certain military leaders — such as Naghachu or Gaojianu, who drove away the Red-turbaned Bandits — emerged as the leaders of core military factions in Liaodong and came to play a leading role in Northeast Asia. In 1359, the Red-turbaned Bandits' first invasion of Goryeo was repelled by the military leaders Yi Bang-sil, An U, and Kim Deuk-bae. With the bandits' second invasion in 1362, King Gongmin fled to Bokju and organized a counterattack force led by Jeong Se-un. It is said that Goryeo's successful suppression of the Red-turbaned Bandits and the wokou (Japanese pirates) around this time displayed the dynasty's military strength to neighboring countries and helped military leaders like Choe Yeong and Yi Seong-gye (later King Taejo of the Joseon Dynasty) to rise to power.

Chapter 6 (In the Wake of the Invasions), Chapter 7 (A New King

of Koryŏ/Goryeo), and Chapter 8 (Wider Perspectives) contain the author's central ideas on the impact of the Red-turbaned Bandits' attacks on Goryeo, Liaodong and Daidu. The author thinks that the Red-turbaned Bandits even caused a change in the relations between Goryeo and Yuan, in addition to having a considerable impact on the power structure of Goryeo. The author also thinks that Yuan attempted to replace King Gongmin with Prince Deokheung (or Tas Temur) in 1356 as a result of the tense relations between the two countries, but gave up the idea due to the need to form a joint defense against the Red-turbaned Bandits.

The author strongly criticizes the view adopted by Wada Sei that "Yuan hated King Gongmin due to his anti-Yuan policy and tried to dethrone him." The author thinks that such a view of Wada Sei underestimates Goryeo's military strength, as Togon Temur knew of Goryeo's military strength and asked for King Gongmin's aid rather than attempting to threaten him. The author also criticizes Wada Sei both for overlooking the complicated problems that the Mongol royal court had internally, and for underestimating Queen Gi's political influence and ambition. He also appears to think that there is a problem with the stance of Korean scholars who overstress Goyeo's anti-Yuan policy.

The author says that King Gongmin improved his view of the international situation of his time, while prosecuting the war against the Red-turbaned Bandits and played a leading role in the changes in East Asia amid exchanges with Naghachu of Liaodong, Kōke Temur of Henan, Zhang Sicheng or Zhu Yuanzhang in the late 14th century.

III

The author analyzes the degree of solidarity or confrontation between the key political players in Gaegyeong, Liaodong and Daidu, paying attention to the fact that the Red-turbaned Bandits' attacks on Liaodong and Goryeo had a decisive impact on Goryeo-Mongol relations in the 14th century, in an attempt to determine the value and significance of

Liaodong in the relations between Goryeo and the Mongol Empire. The author asserts the following four points as the main ideas of the book: First, it is necessary to reappraise the value of Northeast Asia in the history of the Mongol Empire; second, the emergence of the Mongol Empire helped open a new chapter in the integration of the world; third, the loose, Mongol-led political integration promoted cooperation and solidarity between regions beyond their borders or language barriers, while the fall of the Mongol Empire brought problems of such integration to light; fourth, Goryeo should be viewed as part of the Mongol Empire.

Basically, I share the author's view that it was necessary to reestablish relations between Gaegyeong, Liaodong, and Daidu in the changing international order of East Asia in the 14th century. I also agree with many of the assertions that the author makes in the book based on diverse historical materials and a collection of research results kept in many countries. Meantime, I would like to express a few opinions on the author's position as a student of Mongol history of the 14th century.

First of all, the author thinks that the value of Northeast Asia should be reappraised from the perspective of the history of the Mongol Empire. Compared to previous studies of Mongol history conducted mostly from the perspective of Eurasian history, this book is thoroughly centered on Northeast Asia, with the focus on the relations between the Mongol Empire, Liaodong, and Goryeo. The author stresses the spatial dynamism of Northeast Asia and pays attention to the impact on Goryeo and the Mongol Empire of the Red-turbaned Bandits' attack on Liaodong. After all, the core view of the author is that King Gongmin of Goryeo attempted to turn the tense relations with Yuan into friendly relations by taking advantage of the Red-turbaned Bandits' attack on Liaodong and Goryeo. In 1361, Yuan attempted to dethrone King Gongmin in connection with the assassination of Gi Cheol, the elder brother of Queen Gi of the Mongols, in 1356, but King Gongmin managed to stay in power by taking advantage of the situation caused by the need to form a

joint defensive position against the Red-turbaned Bandits. As the author says, the Red-turbaned Bandits' attack on Liaodong and Goryeo was a significant event in the 14th century. However, concerning King Gongmin's dethronement and subsequent return to the throne, what is more important than anything else is the political situation in Yuan towards its end.

At that time, those loyal to King Togon Temur and those who followed the Crown Prince, including Ayusiridara, were locked into an acute confrontation with each other.² Driven into a corner, Togon Temur offered Bolor Temur the position of Prime Minister and tried to regain the advantageous position taken by the followers of the Crown Prince. After rising to power, Bolror Temur put a stop to all policies initiated by Queen Gi and Ayusiridara. In the process, the court eunuchs, such as Bak Buqa, were removed. The plan to crown Prince Deokheung as the new king was withdrawn. Restoration of King Gongmin was decided upon.³ That is to say, although the Red-turbaned Bandits' invasion of Northeast Asia was a significant event, the most decisive factor related to King Gongmin's restoration resided in the internal situation of Yuan.

Also, the fact should not be overlooked that certain portions of historical materials written in classical Chinese made exaggerated claims about the activities of the Red-turbaned Bandits. The bandits were nomadic marauders who lacked a well-organized political or administrative structure or a well-planned strategy. They simply wandered from one place to another without being able to set up the areas they occupied through surprise attacks as their solid bases. Thus, their units in the east, west and middle could not link up with each other

² *Gengshen waishi* [庚申外史], Vol. 1, published in the 24th year of Zhiyuan [至元24年條].

³ *Yuanshi* [元史, *The History of the Yuan Dynasty*], Vol. 46. *Goryeosa* [고려사, *The History of Goryeo*], Vol. 40, published in the 13th year of King Gongmin's reign. А.Пунсаг, Тэнгэрийн их Юань улсын түүхэнгэмдэглэл, Монгол улсын шинжлэх ухааны академитүүхийн хрээлэн улаанб аатар.

effectively. In the initial stage, they caused damage to Goryeo through pillaging, but the disorderly groups of bandits were no match for the well-organized military of Goryeo.⁴ It is also necessary to look at their attack on Shangdu and Liaodong from a different perspective. Their attack on Shangdu was made in December 1358. Shangdu was the location of the summer palace of the leader of the Yuan Dynasty. In December, the crack troops of Yuan stayed in Daidu. Thus, their successful attack on Shangdu was not a great accomplishment. It is necessary to note that Naghachu, Esen Buqa, Gao Jianu, Hong Bao-bao, etc. in Liaodong succeeded in suppressing the bandits.

The author thinks that Goryeo should be viewed as part of the Mongol Empire. He strongly criticizes the view adopted by Korean scholars specializing in the history of Goryeo that the relations between the Mongol Empire and Goryeo were very exceptional and irregular, that Goryeo's struggle against the Mongols was an effort to secure its independence, and that the independence of Goryeo's culture shows the status of Goryeo as an independent country. The author develops this view as follows: the Mongols did not show any particular interest in having the areas occupied by them adopt their culture or customs. It is not true that Goryeo maintained a unique status among the countries under the sphere of influence of the Mongol Empire. Goryeo was quite similar to other political entities its size, such as the Sa Skya regime of Tibet, Uigur, Armenia, the Princes of Rus, Qutlugh Khanid, with the exception of those that disappeared, such as Song or the Jurchen Jin. The Wang family's rule over Goryeo was the work of a Eurasian elite under the control of the Mongol Empire. The kings of Goryeo became part of the 'Golden Family' (or Altan urug) by marrying their daughters. Thus, Goryeo in the 13th and 14th centuries should be viewed as part of the

⁴ Cong Peiyuan (1998). *Zhongguo dongbei shi* [中國東北史, *The History of the Northeast China*], Vol.3. Jilin: Jilin Science Literature Press, p.429.

Mongol Empire. Although Koreans' held deep and wide scholastic knowledge, Goryeo was under the control of the Mongol Empire and the country sent a diplomatic emissary to Daidu on a regular basis to pay homage to the ruler of the Mongol Empire, and the knowledge of the people of Goryeo was exchanged and circulated within a Eurasian network centered on the Mongol Empire.

I partly agree with the author's view on this, but there is no disregarding the exceptional portions in the relations between Goryeo and the Mongol Empire. Goryeo held political duality within the sphere under the control of the Mongol Empire. During the 13th and the 14th centuries, only the kings of Goryeo continued to hold their own people and state, and Goryeo was the only country that continued to use its actual name among all the countries under the influence of the Mongol Empire.⁵ I think that this unique political status enjoyed by Goryeo was attributable to the role of the three eastern dynasties that carried out activities in Liaodong. Kublai and his successors did their best to block the advance into Goryeo of the three eastern dynasties, which were expanding their sphere of influence after establishing their independent courses of action in Liaodong. Intermarriage between the Mongol Empire and Goryeo can also be viewed from such a perspective. They must have expected that acceptance of Goryeo's Crown Prince as their daughter's husband (as a way of including him in the Golden Family) would check the Otchigin Family's eastward expansion to a certain extent. Such was clearly revealed by Nayan of the Otchigin Family when he made an effort to link more closely with the royal family of Goryeo after his revolt in 1287.

With the exception of a few points concerning which I advanced opinions different from those of the author, I basically agree with the way

⁵ Kim Ho-dong (2007). [몽골제국과 고려, *The Mongol Empire and Goryeo*]. Seoul National University Press, pp.124-125.

the author attempts to view the political situation in the 14th century with the focus on Northeast Asia. I would say that the book has taken a step forward in the attempt to understand the complicated international order in this part of the world in the 14th century. And I hope that the book will serve as a turning point in the adoption of a balanced perspective concerning the transition from Yuan to Ming in China and that from Goryeo to Joseon in Korea in the 14th century. Finally, I would ask those concerned to understand with generosity if there appears to be something I did not properly understand in this book, which the author wrote with such painstaking effort.