The Mongol invasion of Koryo began in 1231 and continued for almost 30 years. The Koryo government, which was dominated by the military at the time, relocated itself to Kang’hwa-do Island right after the first invasion. Nevertheless, soldiers and ordinary peasants continued to fight the Mongol troops on the mainland. Tragic stories of their struggles demonstrated their determined defense of their homeland against this nomadic adversary.1

The Mongol invasions continued until 1259, when Koryo finally surrendered. Yet, after almost three decades of invasion, the Korean peninsula inevitably suffered severe destruction. Every time the Koryo tried to repair damage inflicted from the most recent attack, another wave of enemy troops came and swept through what Koryo had just recently restored. Even after the surrender, although the Mongols never physically assaulted Koryo again, the fear of invasion remained, thus tensions continued for quite some time.2

This experience naturally made the Koryo people hate the Mongols, as from their perspective the attacks were unwarranted, unprovoked and, most of all, unbelievably brutal. Even during the Khitan invasions from the late 10th and early 11th centuries (993, 1010, 1018) Koryo never witnessed killing and destruction of this magnitude. The better portion of the peninsula was destroyed, seemingly beyond repair. Dynastic treasures were destroyed, and government operations ceased in many regions, as it was impossible to levy taxes from lands that were incinerated and people abandoned their homes. To the Koryo population, the Mongols were nothing but enemies, predators and oppressors. However, as time passed, perceptions changed considerably as the Koryo people adapted to the situation and decided to stop being victims.

The Koryo government experienced interference in its politics and diplomacy throughout the 13th and 14th centuries. But since the beginning of the 14th century, Koryo kings and officials managed to prevent imperial tampering by citing the “Old Promise of Qubilai” (“世祖旧制”).3 This concept of the “Old Promise of Qubilai”, first conceptualized by Lee Ik-ju, is based on the notion that Qubilai never intended
to change Koryo conventions. Of course, Qubilai did order several changes to be made, but this notion came to serve as a shield for the Koryo king against Yuan intervention.

Eventually, the Koryo government even devised a narrative arguing that what they were asking was only what had been approved and authorized by past Mongol emperors, as we can see from the case of King Kongmin (恭愍王, r. 1351–1374). In addition, the Koryo kings’ status as sons-in-law (giuregen) of the Chinggisid family and virtual royal princes gave them enough authority to protect Koryo citizens, who were never deemed direct subjects of the Mongol emperor, thus creating a dual and unique relationship between Koryo and the Yuan.

Similar efforts are seen in the area of economy and trade. The Koryo government submitted tribute to the Mongol court in the second half of the 13th century. Koryo households provided the tribute, contributing to their poverty. Yet in the early 14th century, Koryo merchants tapped into the vast global market of the Mongol Yuan Empire. Although the empire’s trade policy shifted quite a bit, the expansion of the empire opened a vast network of markets, providing many opportunities for the merchants in the outlying regions. The Korean peninsula was no exception, as not only Koryo civilian merchants but governmental officials and even the kings, all inspired by waves of foreign merchants visiting the peninsula, engaged in such trade, which shaped the early half of the 14th century as a unique era in the history of foreign trade with the Korean peninsula.

Meanwhile, in response to the need for domestic reforms, the Koryo leaders, forced by the Yuan to drop certain conventional practices and customary habits, also learned how to either graft Yuan administrative elements onto traditional Koryo institutions or merge Mongol/Chinese policy directives with Koryo objectives. Such efforts helped the Koryo cope with its troubles and changed Koryo perspective toward the Yuan in the process. The practices of the Mongol emperors and their imperial institutions were no longer those of an antagonist but were a model that could either be followed or consulted by leaders and elites situated within the Mongol order. This integrated approach is seen in the examples of kings like Ch’ungson-wang (忠宣王, b. 1275, r. 1298; 1307–1313, d. 1325) and politicians such as Yi Kok (李穀, 1298–1351) and Yi Che-hyon (李齊賢, 1287–1367). Ironically, it was under this atmosphere that the Koryo intellectuals’ appreciation of their own culture grew, as we can see from the case of a prominent literary figure named Choi Hae (崔瀣, 1287–1340).

**THE MONGOLS IN KORYO POLITICS**

The Mongols did not exactly oppress the Koryo but instead forced certain rules upon the Koryo government and, by extension, over ordinary people as well. As a result, terms used to describe the Koryo kings’ royal orders or terms related to their authority all had to be changed. Additionally, the Koryo king himself underwent the most profound change in identity as a result of this imposition.

It began when the Koryo king Wonjong (r. 1260–1274) requested a marital relationship between the Koryo and Mongol royal families. Qubilai granted that request after some hesitation and deliberation. Starting with King Ch’ung’ryol (r. 1275–1307) in 1274, it became normal for all subsequent Koryo kings to marry Mongol
princesses. With the Koryo kings’ new status as royal sons-in-law (güregen), their place inside the Yuan political arena improved considerably, and their bargaining power also increased on certain issues.

Although the Koryo people rejoiced at the news of the king’s marriage to a Mongol princess, figuring it ensured peace, it soon became evident to them that these kings were different from previous Koryo kings, as they were now also part of the Mongol royal family. In subsequent periods, this new status proved to be a mixed blessing. When used properly, it helped the kings deal with the Yuan; when it was not managed properly, it caused several problems, as seen by the cases of Ch’ungson or Ch’ungsuk (r. 1314–1330; 1332–1339). Ch’ungson loved his Koryo concubine more than his Mongol wife, and Ch’ungsuk was cold toward his three Mongol wives, causing personal incidents and even diplomatic crises, which led to grave consequences, such as Ch’ungson’s abrupt dethronement in August 1298.

Meanwhile, the Koryo king’s political status in relation to his own government changed as well. To oversee preparations for the upcoming Japanese campaign (1274, 1280), the Yuan first established a military unit named Chongdong Wonsubu and later enlarged it in the form of “Chongdong Haengsong”, a provincial government that existed alongside the Koryo government. The term “haengsong”, which meant “province” in China under Mongol rule, technically relegated Korea to the status of a Yuan province within the empire’s local administrative structure. Of course, this Haengsong installed in Koryo was a little bit different from its counterparts in China, as the Yuan central government never levied taxes on Koryo households, and the Korean peninsula was still under the administrative jurisdiction of the Koryo government. It was, rather, a military headquarters turned into a form of local administrative embassy, and its influence over the Koryo government varied through different periods. At first, it oversaw the Japanese campaign in the 1270s and ’80s, and then it served as a communicative channel between Koryo and the Yuan at the end of the 13th century and the early years of the 14th. Later, it even transformed into a hotbed of illegal activities for Koryo outlaws in the mid-14th century.

Nonetheless, its presence heavily affected the status of the Koryo king, who became the governor of the Chongdong Haengsong, assuming yet another identity. While retaining his position as leader of an autonomous region, becoming an imperial governor was not exactly a promotion for the king. In theory, his authority should have doubled as it came to be recognized in both realms (Koryo and Yuan), but in reality his attention was split. His negotiations with the Yuan were now to be conducted based upon his new identity as the emperor’s son-in-law and a local governor, instead of as the leader of the Korean peninsula. There were complications caused by that status, which never reflected well on his original authority as the leader of the Koryo people.

For example, the Koryo king was forced to assist in the Japanese campaigns, which proceeded in 1274 and 1280 with disappointing results for the Mongols. As he had no choice but to oversee preparations on Koryo’s part, Ch’ung’ryol became the “bad cop”, urging the Koryo people to do things they did not want to do. The Koryo diverted a significant amount of resources to the task, while countless Koryo people were mobilized for corvée labor and many Koryo soldiers were killed in battle. The Koryo people built hundreds of ships in only a few months and participated in the campaign themselves, as we can see from many records, including that of January
1274, which shows more than 30,000 Koryo workers drafted as ship builders for 300 vessels. For them, being forced to join the campaign was a disaster, and the fact that their king was directing them to do so tarnished him to a degree. Their frustration reached dangerous levels, as we can see from the fact that Ch’ungryol, on the eve of the second invasion six years later, was forced to implore the Yuan imperial government to provide proper compensation to the Koryo people.

Meanwhile, the king was not the only one whose identity and priorities were changing. Koryo officials also experienced something new as they began to receive “rank titles” (Kwan’gye) from not only the Koryo king but the Mongol emperor as well.

Pre-modern Chinese and Korean dynasties all observed this rank titles system, which was composed of two sub-branches, Munsan-gye (文散階) and Musan-gye (武散階), respectively, for the civil officials and military officers. These rank titles are not to be confused with actual posts the officials were assigned to, as they simply indicated the post an official could receive from the king or the emperor. Koryo also had its own rank system with fully functional Munsan-gye and Musan-gye branches, which it used for centuries. For example, titles like Keumja Kwang’rok Taebu (金紫光祿大夫), Chong’eui Taebu (正議大夫) and Cho’eui Taebu (朝議大夫) were used centuries before the Mongol conquest.

Then suddenly, starting in the 1280s, the Koryo officials found themselves receiving such titles from the Mongol emperor as well. They had never received them from other Chinese emperors. But records from this era – particularly the tomb epitaphs – indicate that many Koryo officials held rank titles that belonged to the Mongol imperial system. Prominent officials, such as Chong Ka-shin (鄭可臣, 1224–1298), Cho In-kyu (趙仁規, 1237–1308), Yi Chi-jo (李之氐, d. 1317) and Min Chi (閔漬, 1248–1326) had titles like Chungbong Taebu (中奉大夫), Ka-eui Taebu (嘉議大夫), Cho’yol Taebu (朝列大夫) and Pongjik Taebu (奉直大夫), which were clearly imperial titles that the Koryo king could not bestow to them.

At first, such bestowals were only a symbolic gesture, arranged for prominent Koryo officials as commendations from the emperor. Then, a few years later, the Koryo king requested the emperor to bestow such titles on Koryo officials who joined the Japanese invasion. Eventually, many Koryo officials, including the ones mentioned earlier, came to bear both civil and military titles as an acknowledgement of their service to the empire. Many of the Musan-gye titles, such as Soyong Taejanggun (昭勇大將軍), Chin’guk Sangjanggun (鎮國上將軍), Hwe’won Taejanggun (懷遠大將軍), Sonmu Changgun (宣武將軍) and Mudok Changgun (武德將軍), were hereditary. It was definitely a new situation for the Koryo officials and affected how they viewed themselves, their own country and the empire, as reception of such imperial titles would mean, in theory, that they were entitled to an official post inside the Yuan government. Of course, in most cases, it did not lead to that, but for the recipient, having a Yuan title alongside their Koryo one literally meant another layer of identity added or even imposed upon the existing one as a mere Koryo official.

Many Koryo officials came to receive not only rank titles but also actual posts inside the Yuan imperial government, after successfully passing the Yuan governmental exams launched in 1314. Most of them were appointed to the seat of local prefects, but some served in prominent positions at the central government of Daidu,
as can be seen from the example of the aforementioned Yi Kok, who served in many senior Yuan posts and garnered a positive reputation. Membership in the Mongol Empire presented enterprising Koryo officials with new opportunities, as it became clear that they were no longer confined to the Korean peninsula. If they tried hard and were sufficiently talented, they could pursue a profession as an imperial officer. This new environment definitely changed the Koryo officials’ attitude toward the empire, the Koryo government and their master, the Koryo king himself, who fueled this new situation. King Ch’ungson, who played an instrumental part in launching the Yuan governmental examination system in 1314, wanted to send more Koryo talent to the empire. It was with this hope that he modified the existing Koryo exam system to make it the subordinate level of the three-tiered imperial exam system.21

Most intriguingly, this kind of identity shift in the Koryo officials led to a series of new problems that further complicated the Koryo king’s position. This did not mean that the Koryo turned against their king, but their sentiments changed, and records indicate that they came to feel more proud of those foreign titles than the Koryo titles they originally enjoyed.22 The Koryo king standing was diminished in the eyes of at least some of his vassals.

Accepting the Yuan emperor as their ultimate leader was a stark departure from how the Koryo officials viewed the Mongols in the early 13th century. Although the Koryo officials maintained an extreme level of politeness in their official letters to the Mongols, such as the ones written by the famous author Yi Kyu-bo (1168–1241), in reality they considered the Mongols “jealous, cruel and generally untrustworthy beings”.23 They also condemned the Mongols’ assault on the Jurchen as a “crazed attack launched by a violently savage race”, as we can see from letters sent to Tongjin (東眞), or the Jurchen Jin emperor, the mortal enemy of the Mongols.

We can see that, at that time, the Koryo people had no respect toward the Mongols and, in fact, viewed them as barbaric invaders determined to annihilate the people of China and Koryo altogether. However, such sentiment quickly changed as the Koryo leaders came to view them as the new center of civilization.24 In subsequent periods, especially following Emperor Qubilai’s death, his legacy came to be considered by Yuan officials as “old rulings,” “noble instructions” and “established law”, which gradually turned into an imperial thesis from which no one was supposed to deviate. Such concepts came to be regarded as teachings and lessons to be honored by all imperial citizens, the people on the Korean peninsula apparently came to share the same mentality as well.

The emperor’s seniority over the king was on display in the 1300s, when Koryo officials disobeyed their own king’s explicit instructions to back off after they surrounded the palace and apprehended the king’s corrupt closest aides with the intention of handing them over to imperial authorities. It was an action taken by the officials, who were still the Koryo king’s vassals yet who firmly acknowledged the Mongol emperor’s authority as superior to that of the Koryo king. In a scripted letter that was to be sent to the Mongol Emperor Temür Öljeitü (r. 1294–1307) they wrote that, “We had always endeavored to uphold the ‘Noble instruction’ of the Mongol emperor, and when the king’s aides deviated from that, we had to expel them from the Koryo court.”25

In this kind of environment, whenever the Yuan imperial government (led by the emperor) decided to replace the sitting Koryo king with a new one, the Koryo vassals
had to accept it. That was what happened when Ch’ungson replaced Ch’ung’ryol in January 1298, before Ch’ung’ryol was reinstated in September 1298; or when Ch’ungsuk and Ch’ung’hye (r. 1330–1332; 1339–1343) swapped the throne in 1330 and 1332. With the Koryo king reduced to a secondary figure, the emperor was now the ultimate authority in the eyes of the Koryo vassals, not only because of the empire’s military prowess but because “the empire was always right”.

To make matters worse, some Koryo kings even faced direct challenges to their throne from their own vassals. Some Koryo officials began to consider dethroning the sitting king (in this case, king Ch’ungsuk) for the Koryo prince, who had stronger ties with the Yuan dignitaries. This happened when a faction inside the Koryo government proposed the replacement to the Yuan emperor and later even attacked the king with slander and brute force in order to replace Ch’ungsuk and Ch’ung’hye with Wang Go (d. 1345), in the 1320s and ’30s. Wang Go, who was the nephew of Ch’ungson and cousin of Ch’ungsuk, was politically insignificant before being named as the heir to Ch’ungson’s Shim lordship (Shim-wang, 潘王). With this new position, he emerged as a political threat to Ch’ungsuk. Conspirators in both Koryo and Yuan tried to replace Ch’ungsuk with Wang Go, for no other reason than Wang Go had better connections with important Yuan figures as the husband of the niece of Ch’ungson’s Mongol wife, who was from a much more dignified background than all of Ch’ungsuk’s three wives. Fortunately for Koryo, all such attempts failed, despite doing considerable damage to Ch’ungsuk’s leadership.

Meanwhile, conspirators attempted to replace the Chongdong Haengsong with a new provincial government that would enable the Yuan leadership to have more direct control over Koryo. They made a total of seven separate attempts of this kind in the first half of the 14th century. Sometimes it was officials of the Liaoyang Haengsong provincial government. These originated from the northern regions of the Korean peninsula but left their homeland in the early 13th century and blamed the Koryo government for failing to protect them from the Mongol invasion. Thus, they carried a longstanding grudge against the Koryo leadership; also Koryo officials, who simply disliked Ch’ungsuk and wanted another figure in office. Additionally, there were Chinese or Mongol figures allied with Koryo officials, who had something to gain from the fall of Chongdong Haengsong and the establishment of a brand new provincial government on Koryo soil, conspired for change. In the end, all these attempts failed, yet they cost the Koryo government a substantial amount of political capital.

One might say that Koryo was in a disadvantageous position in its dealing with the Yuan empire. Yet that observation is not entirely true. Even when the Koryo was seriously threatened, it was able to deflect some of the Mongols’ demands and stand its ground. This resilience was evident when Gorgis (sometimes called “Giwargis” or “Körgüz”), a Yuan official who was appointed as second-in-command of the Chongdong Haengsong provincial government in 1299, tried to change many things in Koryo. First, he pointed out that Koryo collected too much tax from regions with populations no longer sufficient to sustain such levels and that Koryo’s penal system was too harsh. The Koryo leaders accommodated his demands by changing several old Koryo practices, but they did not abandon the centuries-old Koryo tradition that governed cross-class marriages, in which offspring of a marriage between a commoner and a low-born would automatically be declared low-born. Over centuries,
many Koryo people appealed their cases to the government hoping to be classified as commoner, only to fail repeatedly. After the arrival of the Mongols, children of cross-class marriages went to imperial dignitaries to have their stories heard, but in the end, the Koryo government, which had the final say on the matter, blocked these requests. Then Gorgis came along in 1299. Apparently, he ruled some children of cross-class marriages should be recognized as commoners and not as slaves. Witnessing such rulings, the Koryo government believed Gorgis was trying to reverse the Koryo’s age-old principle and rule all offspring from cross-class marriages as commoners. The Koryo government not only refused to comply but even lobbied to have Gorgis recalled to the Yuan. This clearly demonstrates that the Koryo leaders could occasionally defy the Chongdong Haengsong.

In the first half of the 14th century, Koryo went even further. In an attempt to bring reforms to Koryo society and subdue certain pro-Yuan Koryo factions, the Koryo kings tried to turn the tables by making requests of the Yuan government that could not possibly be denied.

In the 1330s and ’40s, the Ki family (the house of Empress Ki of Yuan, Öljei Qutugh) gained prominence, and its members continuously abused their power. Their political machinations and infringements on the public interest could not be tolerated, and King Ch’ung’hye, his son Ch’ungmok (r. 1344–1348) and, later, king Kongmin (r. 1351–1374), as well as their closest aides and officials, all wanted the Ki house gone. Additionally, the Koryo commoners, who suffered abuses by the Ki, also wanted them to be punished as well.

The first opportunity came in 1343, when the Yuan Emperor Toghan Temür deposed King Ch’ung’hye. As his very young son Ch’ungmok was enthroned, the Yuan emperor urged the Koryo officials to clean house. Embracing this order, in 1347 they set up a new office named Chongchi Togam (整治都監, The Office of Decent Governance), and began to investigate and incarcerate public offenders alongside corrupted dignitaries. Ironically, the commission prosecuted members of the Ki house. In other words, the new reform office set up by the Koryo government at the insistence of the Yuan empire interrogated and punished members of a household with direct links to the emperor and the empress.

Strangely, his Koryo wife, Emperor Toghan Temur (r. 1333–1367) actually supported what this new office was doing. With his backing, the power of the Ki house was at least temporarily diminished. This is an example of reform-minded Koryo officials cooperating with the Yuan to subdue certain Koryo factions, which were allied with other factions in the Yuan, in this case the one led by Empress Ki, that had hurt Koryo’s interests. While this new office was eventually shut down by Empress Ki, as it damaged her and her family’s private interests, this attack on Ki figures made possible the eventual purge of most of the Ki from the Koryo court later in 1356.

After successfully subverting the Chongchi Togam office, the atrocious behavior of the Ki house members resumed. The late father of Empress Ki received a new title (Kyong-wang, 敬王) from the emperor, which even surpassed that of King Kongmin. The Ki house was on the verge of replacing the Wang House as the Koryo dynasty’s new royal family. Kongmin could not let that happen, so in June 1356 he invited Ki Chol, the brother of Empress Ki and the most prominent Ki member, and his associates to the palace and eliminated most of them in a surprise military assault.
More was to come as King Kongmin not only eliminated the Ki faction but used the opportunity to initiate the reforms he had not been able to pursue earlier because of the Ki interference. To succeed, he had to reinforce his position inside Koryo, and for that he sought to use the right that had earlier been promised to King Ch’ung’ryol by Qubilai to recommend officials to serve the governor/Koryo king at Chongdong Haengsong. He also tried to suppress certain Koryo figures who had been abusing their connections with the Yuan, most notably those stationed at the Military “Manhobu” headquarters.

It occurred to Kongmin that the things he wanted most could never be secured without the Yuan imperial government’s approval. Thus, to secure them, Kongmin stressed that the “right of recommendation” had earlier been given to the Koryo king by Qubilai Qa’an, while also arguing that many of the Manhobu units in Koryo were actually installed very late in Qubilai’s reign and thus were not part of Qubilai’s original plans for the Koryo.35 The strategy worked, the Yuan acknowledged Kongmin’s rights and allowed the Manhobu units’ dismantlement, enabling Kongmin to commence his reforms. If Kongmin did not draw attention to Qubilai’s earlier order, his demands would have undoubtedly gone unanswered, and his reform efforts in the post-Ki environment would have died in their infancy. By using “Qubilai’s promise”, Kongmin secured precious momentum for countless reforms during the rest of his reign.36 Of course, this was not a victory at the expense of the empire37; it was a noteworthy achievement enabled by the Koryo king’s strategic calculations.

THE MONGOLS IN THE KORYO ECONOMY

In the early days, the Koryo regarded the Mongols as nothing but predators. During 30 years of war, they killed thousands of people and took away Koryo grain and assets. The Mongol commanders demanded many items, including silver, gold, textiles, insam (ginseng), paper and even young males and females. The imperial government ordered all sorts of items in the 1260s, ’70s and ’80s.38 Two clear examples are the falcon-breeding ranges and the garrison farms.

The falcon-breeding ranges, named “Ungbang” (鷹坊), which the Mongol authorities installed in Koryo since the 1270s,39 were for raising falcons and other animals required in royal hunts. These units absorbed precious Koryo goods, like silver and ramie products, from adjacent Koryo households in the name of securing food for the falcons.40 The value of silver needs no explaining, but the extraction of ramie was also painful. Ramie, along with hemp, was one of the most popularly grown plants in Koryo, as its fiber was used to produce fine quality clothes. Clothes created with ramie and hemp fibers were not only light but also delicate and highly suitable for hot summer days. These products had been famous for centuries, even inside the Chinese market, during Song and Yuan rule.

Meanwhile, the garrison farms the Yuan government opened in the Korean peninsula also sapped the grain and rice produced by the Koryo people.41 The garrison farms were intended to feed the Mongol troops stationed in Koryo, but as the farms failed to produce enough grain, the Koryo government ended up providing grain to the Mongol troops as well as the Koryo peasants who staffed the farms.42

The Koryo tried to rebuild its destroyed economy but made limited progress due to Mongol pillaging. Government revenue suffered due to depopulation, so the
Koryo government resorted to requisitioning things from its own marketplace to make tribute payments to the Yuan. Peasants were also forced to make up the shortfall for other villagers who had deserted their villages.

An unexpected break came when the Yuan finally defeated the Song and annexed the Jiangnan region of southern China. The obtainment of such a huge resource rendered further extraction from relatively smaller markets like Koryo unnecessary and impractical. In the late 1280s and early 1290s, with the exception of some very popular Koryo-specific items, such as porcelain or ramie products, tribute demands literally stopped, providing the Koryo households with a welcome respite to start stockpiling financial assets and increasing agricultural production.

Most importantly, this turn of events allowed the Koryo to revive external trade as well. According to Koryosa, our main source for events in Korea, Koryo merchants’ trade expeditions to China resumed during the mid-1290s, if not earlier. Trade missions are also vividly described in the 1340s in Nogoldae, a linguistic manual published by the Koryo government to teach the Koryo merchants either Chinese or Mongolian. In this book, Koryo merchants are described exporting ramie and insam to Chinese consumers while purchasing expensive silks, along with other valuable materials, to bring back to Koryo. The overall amount of trade should have been huge, as Koryo produced not only ordinary ramie products but also ramie products with decorated patterns applied with gold and silver threads, resembling the acclaimed nasij products, which usually used silk as the background fabric. The Koryo people also produced “mixed fabrics” (Kyojik, 交織) using ramie fiber and silk, which were also new and exotic in the eyes of imperial customers.

Meanwhile, Koryo porcelain was also popular in Mongol-ruled China, just as it had been in earlier periods. Although a new generation of Koryo porcelain products that resembled Yuan ceramics, particularly Jiangnan porcelain, was produced in Koryo in the late 13th and early 14th centuries for domestic consumption, all the Koryo porcelain that has been excavated so far from Yuan China, especially in regions above the Huanghe River, display traditional Koryo-specific patterns, forms and shapes. It appears the Koryo porcelain producers looked to sell mostly traditional Koryo items that would have been embraced as “different” by Chinese consumers instead of the “new Yuan-styled porcelain”, which could have been considered mere copies.

As we can see, the grim situation of the mid-13th century was replaced with a more upbeat atmosphere at the end of the century, as Koryo merchants resumed their outward activities and conducted vibrant business with their Yuan counterparts well into the middle of the next century. It should also be noted that the Koryo kings played a large role in pushing these exchanges.

For example, King Ch’ung’ryol negotiated with the Yuan harbor control so that lower tariffs would be collected from incoming Koryo ships and cargo. His son, Ch’ungson, opened a new Yuan-inspired office (Chig’yom-guk, 織染局: Office of Weaving and Dyeing) to facilitate efficient production of exportable ramie fabric and clothes, with gold and silver thread patterns, as mentioned earlier. King Ch’ungsuk befriended many Chinese and foreign merchants during his five-year detention in Daidu, and upon his return to Koryo he invited many of them to accompany him and appointed them to governmental seats or bestowed special titles, probably to recruit them as trade operatives who would represent Koryo interests in overseas
trade activities. Finally, King Ch’ungs’hye built an entire palace and then converted it into a fabric production facility, which very much reminds us of the royal tiraz facilities of West Asia, where he mass produced ramie fabric developed by his grandfather, Ch’ungs’on. He exported such materials not only to Chinese merchants but also to West Asian “Huibui” Muslim merchants, with whom he had more than amicable relationships his entire life.

There was, therefore, a stark shift between the late 13th and early 14th centuries. In the former period, Koryo people suffered the extortion of their property and resources, whereas during the latter they managed to escape the situation and once again trade with their foreign counterparts on a more balanced footing. Koryo civilian merchants were enchanted with the prospect of doing business beyond China, and the Koryo kings were eager to assist them as they hoped to earn profits from their own business with foreign governments. The Koryo leaders’ new relationship with the Mongol court also helped, as such relationships made it possible for them to tap into the grand trade network, which connected the eastern and western parts of the globe under imperial leadership.

**THE MONGOLS IN KORYO’S INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS**

At the turn of the 14th century, Koryo was in need of serious political reform. The integrity of the appointment process for civil and military officials, which had been significantly compromised during the military regime period (1170–1270), was yet to be restored. Mongol interference in Koryo affairs in the 1270s and ’80s also left the Koryo government in disarray, as high-ranking ministers were demoted, disrupting the chain of command. Meanwhile, financial problems, such as securing revenue to pay salaries for superfluous offices, which had been newly commissioned in the late 13th century to deal with Yuan demands, threatened the government’s solvency. With the tax system recovering slowly and the government still short on resources, Koryo leaders had to devise unconventional ways to increase revenue.

King Ch’ungs’on was well aware of the gravity of the situation. Despite his long-term stay in the Yuan court (since the year 1290), Ch’ungs’on was armed with detailed knowledge regarding everything in Koryo, as he received reports on his homeland from Koryo scholars who visited him in China. He also received undisclosed historical records, which were shipped to him in China at his request to the dismay of officials back in Koryo, as those records had previously never left the country. Meticulous study allowed him to ascertain the challenges Koryo was facing and even realize the merits of some old Koryo traditions.

As a half-Mongol prince, King Ch’ungs’on was uniquely situated to mobilize the Mongol court on his behalf. Moreover, thanks to his residence at the Yuan court, which began in 1290, he had the opportunity to learn all the issues being discussed inside the Yuan government for nearly a decade. In the process, he became well versed in Yuan policy and their methods of reform, more so than any other official in Koryo. Those methods were certainly different from the Koryo experience, so he had to modify them to fit Koryo-specific situations or complement existing Koryo institutions. Simply speaking, Ch’ungs’on adapted Yuan or Chinese policies to resolve Koryo problems.
Ch’ung’son’s determination to put his insight to action can be seen from the similarity of his orders to imperial counterparts. For example, there was Ch’ungson’s decision to shut down the Chongbang office (in both 1298 and 1308). Under the authority of the notorious military regime, Chongbang had usurped the power to appoint both civil and military officials and committed all kinds of fraud and illegal personnel transfers. Ch’ungson’s decision to abolish this office resembles the Yuan government’s efforts (since the mid-1290s) to ban the emperor’s closest aides from making unauthorized and unsanctioned orders. His economic orders also shared commonalities with current Yuan policies. Ch’ungson achieved a radical reduction of the government’s size in 1298 and 1308 by abolishing several ministerial seats as well as merging offices with similar and overlapping jurisdictions. The imperial government had likewise abolished all superfluous taxation offices. Moreover, Ch’ungson’s decision to launch a new government salt monopoly in 1309 coincided with a similar imperial salt distribution policy by Emperor Qaishan, with whom he lived for many years. The details were not exactly the same, but the fact that they differed from their respective predecessors in terms of method is worth noting. Simply speaking, Yuan reform policies inspired Ch’ungson to employ similar measures in Koryo.

The Koryo was an ancient dynasty at this point, on the verge of entering its fifth (and final) century, and things that had been problematic even before the 13th century continued to deteriorate. Koryo local governance and the military drafting system were prime examples. A shortage of local prefects and provincial magistrates caused inefficiency in communication between the capital and local offices. Koryo’s age-old tradition of mobilizing only commoners for military duties was threatened by a decrease in the number of commoners the government could draft. Oddly enough, both problems had never been properly addressed before the beginning of the 14th century, probably due to budgetary concerns and lack of attention to potential alternatives. Without any substantive reform, neither system would survive.

Ch’ungson drew comparisons between the situation in Yuan-ruled China and Koryo. After examining the Yuan’s method of overhauling the local network (e.g., by promoting over-populated Ch’ung [州] areas to higher units helmed by higher-ranking overseers), he identified possible solutions to repair the weak spots in Koryo’s local governance and tripled the number of senior units. He also approved of employing “low-born figures” as soldiers or support personnel, as the Mongols had been doing for quite some time in China.

Ch’ungson also incorporated institutional elements that the Yuan had employed earlier in Yuan imperial reforms, such as the Chinese provincial system or the Mongol law of military conscription, to revamp Koryo’s local governance and renew soldier-drafting protocols. His efforts resulted in two noteworthy outcomes: (1) a tighter, more closely knit local administrative network, with more regions serving as middle managers between the capital and junior areas, and (2) a more flexible military-personnel recruitment plan, which was designed to deploy commoners and low-born figures alike as the government saw fit. This sort of an institutional coupling turned out to be just what the Koryo system needed: a shake-up of the status quo with innovative solutions. Once again, the Yuan’s methods and authority enhanced Koryo systems.

With the Koryo king leading the way, dialogue over cultural matters and exchange of institutional ideas between Koryo and Yuan only continued to expand.
Government officials on both sides forged personal ties, which led to the formation of a web of relations that eventually engulfed a better portion of intellectual elites in Koryo and Yuan.

Certain Koryo elites became high-profile figures in Yuan. The prime example was Yi Kok (1298–1351), who successfully passed the Yuan Imperial Civil Examination in 1333. He was assigned to a prestigious academic post inside the Yuan government, as his performance on the test was deemed exceptional. He received government posts from both Koryo and Yuan and enjoyed a unique status between the two countries. His status inside the Koryo and Yuan communities of academicians and poets is vividly demonstrated by the many poems written by Yuan and Koryo figures in Yi’s honor, which are collected in Yi Kok’s personal anthology *Kajongjib*. The deep bond conveyed through all these poems show how human networks served as a conduit for institutional ideas and administrative expertise.65

What is most impressive is how Yi Kok utilized his dual standing in his performance as an administrator. Appreciated by both sides, and armed with knowledge of both Yuan and Koryo state affairs, he protected Koryo interests while demanding further domestic reforms from the Koryo officials as if he were a foreign overseer. He effectively represented the Koryo government in an official appeal to the Yuan imperial court asking for the discontinuation of the tribute of female concubines.66 Yet in his letter to high-ranking Koryo officials, he urged them to restore the integrity of the Koryo government and enhance the overall profile of the dynasty, literally acting in the capacity of a Yuan imperial official superior to Koryo officials.67

Meanwhile, there was a reformer named Yi Che-hyon (1287–1367), who was also a skilled diplomat and an accomplished scholar/historian. He served virtually every Koryo king in the first half of the 14th century. He also probably traveled the farthest in his generation. In 1316, he visited the far reaches of China when King Ch’ungson was sent to the Emeishan (峨眉山) mountain of the Xi Shu (西蜀) area, and in 1319 he accompanied Ch’ungson on his journey to the Baotuo-si (寶陀寺) monastery in the Zhejiang (浙江) region. In 1323, he paid a visit to Ch’ungson, who was exiled in the Gansuheng (甘肅省) province’s Duosima (朶思麻) region. Considering the sheer range of land he covered in his journeys, there is no doubt that he came to realize how vast the world was and what Koryo meant on such a magnificent canvas.

These physical encounters with the empire coincided with his engagement with the Yuan philosophical community as well. He was one of the few scholars who was granted a firsthand opportunity to learn Neo-Confucianism from gifted Yuan scholars directly,68 as he was appointed by king Ch’ungson in 1314 to study at Man’gwon-dang (萬卷堂). The Man’gwon-dang was a facility established by Ch’ungson as a hall of academic and religious activities, where the brightest minds of the Yuan Neo-Confucian community convened.69 Through such acquaintances, Yi was able to shape his mind as a scholar and a reformer.

These two experiences provided Yi Che-hyon with new perspectives, which other ordinary Koryo individuals would not have been able to cultivate. He witnessed the vastness of the empire and understood Koryo’s real position within the sphere of Yuan influence. We can see that most notably from his official request that the Koryo people should be granted the same status with the “Colored-Eyes people” (*Semu* 色...
目，Huihui 回回). Being a realist, he recognized the importance of acknowledging one's true status and position.

As a historian who also dearly loved the Koryo culture, he regularly expounded the exceptional legacy of Koryo history. He collected Koryo folktales and helped document the official Koryo history. While being a truly global citizen, he did not forget his roots.

Another official, Choi Hae (崔瀣, 1287–1340), who passed the imperial exam in 1320 like Yi Kok, received a local post in China but retired shortly after (in 1321) and never resumed active duties in bureaucracy. He believed that only after Koryo threw itself into the arms of the Mongol Yuan empire in the mid-13th century were “vulgar and uncivilized” Koryo things rightfully abolished and the Koryo government was adequately reformed and enlightened. Choi Hae’s observation almost borders on revised history, yet he apparently could not imagine things to have been any different.

At the same time, he was also an individual proud of his people’s literary achievements. Indeed, he was frustrated by the fact that the intellectuals of the empire were ignorant of Koryo, and that inspired him to compile Tong’in-jimun (東人之文, Writings of the Eastern [Koryo] people), a collection of Korean traditional and classical writings containing the finest Korean writings since the Silla days.

Even Koryo law began to incorporate Yuan influences after the empire was dismantled. We can see that the first step was taken in 1377 by Koryo king Wu-wang (禑王, r. 1374–1388), who issued a fascinating order instructing all local offices to consult the Zhizheng Tiaoge (至正條格, 1346, Law code of Yuan) in their dealings with criminal cases and when supervising legal procedures.

CONCLUSION

Examined in this chapter is how the Koryo people viewed the Mongol conquerors. At the beginning, the Koryo people were only victims. They saw the Mongols as an invincible adversary, intent upon torturing the Koryo population. However, the Koryo kings, the government, professional officials and even the most ordinary people definitely did not stay that way. They stood up and began to deal with the Yuan in many different ways. As time passed, they became more prepared and willing to embrace new challenges and, most of all, more determined to do whatever it took to help them. Accordingly, the image of the Mongols in the eyes of the Koryo people continued to change, and this process testifies to how much the Koryo people evolved in the two centuries they spent with their Mongol neighbors.

Of course, I am not saying that the Koryo people were heroic in achieving all these things or did so against all odds. I am simply suggesting that we should go beyond viewing any group of people in a particular region that was under Mongol authority as simply victims or eventual overcomers of Mongol oppression. The interaction between the Mongols and the people of Koryo is an important part of Korean history and deserves to be studied as part of the larger global history. Koryo’s experience with the Mongols provides a distinctive example of how a region dealt with the so-called Mongol shock. The Mongol imperial legacy may, therefore, be better explored with cases like Koryo.
NOTES

1 Yun 1991.
2 Discussions between Koryo and Yuan around the time of surrender can be seen in entries of the Kabo (甲午) day of April, Kyongjin (庚辰) day of June, and Shinsa (辛巳) day of August in 1259 from Koryosa’s 24th volume (卷), which is also the 24th chapter of the Chronicles (世家) section and the 3rd volume to document the reign of King Kojong (高宗). Koryosa (高麗史, 1451) is the most prominent and extensive source of information regarding Koryo history. Although published in the early Choson era, it was based upon individual records created during the Koryo period. Along with its sister text Koryosa-jolyo (高麗史節要, 1452, “A concise version of Koryosa”), Koryosa is considered the most reliable and legitimate source of information. Also see Roh 2019.
3 Lee Ik-ju 1996.
4 Lee Kae-sok 2013; Morihira 2013.
5 Kim Ho-dong 2007.
6 Wi 1997.
7 Lee Kang-hahn 2013a.
9 Koryosa, Vol. 26, Chronicles XXVI, Reign of King Wonjong, Vol. 2. 11th year (1270), February, Kabsul day.
10 Lee Myong-mi 2003.
11 Koryosa, Vol. 28, Chronicles Chapter 28, Reign of King Ch’ung’ryol-wang, Vol. 1. Enthronement year (1274), November, Chongchuk day.
12 Lee Myong-mi 2016.
13 These terms appear in Koryosa in 1280 for the first time, as we can see from Vol. 29, Chronicles, Chapter 29, Ch’ung’ryol-wang, Vol. 2. 6th year (1280), September, Pyongjin day, and October, Chong’yu day.
14 Chang Tong-ik 1994.
15 Koryosa, Vol. 29, Chronicles, Chapter 29, Reign of King Ch’ung’ryol-wang, Vol. 2. 7th year (1281), March, Eulmyo day.
16 Koryosa, Vol. 27, Chronicles, Chapter 27, Reign of King Wonjong, Vol. 3. 15th year, 1274, January, Kabsul day.
17 Koryosa, Vol. 29, Chronicles, Chapter 29, Reign of King Ch’ung’ryol-wang, Vol. 2. 6th year, 1280, August, Eulmi乙未 day.
19 Lee Kang-hahn 2013b.
22 Lee Kang-hahn 2015.
23 Tongguk Yi-Sangguk-jib 1241, Vol. 28.
24 Ch’e 2003.
25 Koryosa, Vol. 125, Biographies, Chapter 38, Disloyal subjects 1, Oh Cham.
29 See Koryosa, Vol. 32, Chronicles, Chapter 32, Reign of King Ch’ung’ryol-wang, Vol. 5. 27th year (1301), April, Kichuk day.
30 Lee Kang Hahn 2010b.
31 Koryosa, Vol. 36, Chronicles, Chapter 36, Reign of King Ch’ung’hye-wang, 2nd term, 4th year (1343), August, Kyongja day; Koryosa Vol. 125, Biographies Chapter 38, Disloyal subjects 1, Shin Ye.
32 Koryosa, Vol. 37, Chronicles, Chapter 37, Reign of King Ch’ungmok-wang, 3rd year (1347), February, Kichuk day.
33 Lee Kang-hahn 2008c; Min 1980.
34 Koryosa, Vol. 37, Chronicles, Chapter 37, Reign of King Ch’ungmok-wang, 3rd year (1347), March, Mujin day.
35 Koryosa, Vol. 39, Chronicles, Chapter 39, Reign of King Kongmin-wang, 5th year (1356), October, Mu’o day.
36 Lee Kang-hahn 2009b.
37 Robinson 2009.
38 Koryosa, Vols. 25 and 26, Chronicles, Chapters 25 and 26, Reign of King Wonjong, 3rd year (1262), December, Chongmyo day and 5th year (1264), May, Kichuk day.
39 Koryosa, Vol. 28, Chronicles, Chapter 28, Reign of King Ch’ung’ryol-wang, 2nd year (1276), March, Kimyo day; Koryosa, Vol. 124, Biographies, Chapter 37, Closest yet Corrupt Aides 2, Yun Su.
40 Lee Kang-hahn 2009a.
41 Koryosa, Vol. 27, Chronicles, Chapter 27, Reign of King Wonjong, 13th year (1272), January, Shinsa (辛巳) day.
42 Lee Kang-hahn 2007b.
44 Wi 1997; Chong 2004.
45 Lee Kang-hahn 2018b.
46 Kim Yun-jong 2006.
47 Chang Nam-won 2007; Lee, Chong-min 2012.
48 Lee Kang-hahn 2016c.
49 Lee Kang-hahn 2016b.
50 Chang Tong-ik 1997.
51 Koryosa, Vol. 89, Biographies, Chapter 2, Queens and Concubines (后妃) 2, Ch’ung’hye’s wife Rim.
52 Koryosa, Vol. 109, Biographies, Chapter 22, Yi Cho-nyon; Koryosa, Vol. 36, Chronicles, Chapter 36, Reign of King Ch’ung’hye, 2nd term, 5th year (1344); Lee Kang-hahn 2018a.
53 Lee Ik-ju 1996.
54 Park Chong-jin 1983.
56 Koryosa, Vol. 33, Chronicles, Chapter 33, Reign of King Ch’unghson.
57 Koryosa, Vol. 76, Areas of Governance (志), Chapter 30, Governmental Offices and Officials (百官) 1, Yemun-gwan.
58 Lee Kang-hahn 2008b.
59 Koryosa, Vol. 79, Areas of Governance (志), Chapter 33, Economy (食貨) 2, Salt Institution (塩法).
60 Lee Kang-hahn 2008d.
62 Kwon Yong-guk 2020.
63 Lee Kang-hahn 2012.
64 Lee Kang-hahn 2011.
65 Kajongjib (1365), Vol. 20, Jabrok (Collection of miscellaneous writings from others) under titles such as “送李中父使征東行省序” [陳旅, 1334] and “送奉使李中父還朝序” [崔瀣, 1335].
66 Kajongjib, Vol. 8, Correspondence (So).
67 Kajongjib, Vol. 8, Correspondence (So).
68 Toh 2002.
69 Koryosa, Vol. 110, Biographies, Chapter 23, Yi Che-hyon.
— Mongols in the eyes of the Koryo people —

70 Ikjejib (1432), Vol. 8, Official Request (P’yo).
71 Ikjejib, Vol. 6, Correspondence (So).
72 We can see his documentation of Koryo history in the form of Sega (世家) and Sachan (史贊) presented in Ikjejib’s Chapter 9 and all the interesting stories he collected in his Yogong P’aesol at the end of Ikjejib.
73 Cholgo Ch’onbek, Vol. 2, Preface to Tong’in-jimun (Tong’in-jimun-so).
74 Kim In-ho 2003.
75 Koryosa Vol. 84, Areas of Governance, Chapter 38, Penal administration 1, Official regulations, Governmental posts, King Wu-wang’s reign, 3rd year (1377), February.
76 Park Chong-gi 2003; Wi 1993.
77 Lee Kang-hahn 2010a.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cholgo Ch’onbek [Hundreds and Thousands of Useless Words from Ch’oi Hae]. (1972) Seoul.


— Mongols in the eyes of the Koryo people —


Lee, Kang-hahn. (2017) 'Koryo and the Mongol Yuan Empire, While Separated also Fused.' In Roh Myong-ho et al. (eds.) Search for the Historical Reality of Koryo. Seoul: Chibmundayng, 45-61.


Yi-Sangguk-jib/Tong’an Kosajib. (1973) Seoul: Taedong Munhwa Yon’guwon, Songkyungwan University.