Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire: Alliance, Upheaval, and the Rise of a New East Asian Order

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Aaron Molnar

Department of History, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada
Email: border84@student.ubc.ca

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Collapsing Chinggisid hegemons, rebellious regional warlords, menacing Ming aspirants, and deceitful domestic factionalists – these were some of the craggy outcrops a Goryeo ruler had to navigate in the tempestuous waters of the Mongols' long decline in the mid-14th century. This unenviable duty fell upon Wang Gi, King Gongmin (1330–1374), whose life David Robinson maps in *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire* to provide the first substantial treatment in English of Korea's iteration of the global transition between the Mongol Empire and its successor regimes. In contrast to *Empire's Twilight* that used wider regional and temporal lenses, here Robinson squarely focuses on Goryeo and Wang Gi's life.[1] That focus takes aim at unreflective treatments of Mongol decline and Goryeo's collapse as predetermined by corruption, poor governance, or the individual flaws of rulers perpetuated by literati-dominated official histories. Robinson moves to clear such obfuscation by mobilizing a unique array of stele inscriptions, poetry, and other private writings to reconstruct the contingency, uncertainty, and complexity inherent in the transition from Mongol-Yuan alliance to a Ming-dominated world. Therein, Wang Gi's political aptitude and adaptability shine forth after having been long eclipsed by the uncharitable image of negligence and even immorality in the official histories. Robinson ultimately argues that Wang Gi's struggle, though experienced in a regional Yuan context, was a Eurasian one faced by many rulers at the end(s) of empire.

The book's structure generally follows the chronology of Wang Gi's life. Chapters one to three describe Goryeo's integration in the Mongol Yuan regime centered on the tripartite dynamic of the Mongol-Yuan elite, royal Wang line and expatriate Goryeoans. Chapter four explores the inherent tension and tumult between being a Chinggisid ally and Goryeo king through Wang Gi's first year as king and the failed 1352 coup by a close adviser. Chapter five and six examine Goryeo's involvement in suppressing Yuan domestic uprisings during the 1350s as a watershed for Wang Gi's subsequent renegotiation of the Goryeo-Chinggisid alliance in 1356 following surgical strikes on Yuan postal relay stations and the purge of Gi Cheol and others tied to the Yuan. Chapter seven traces the erosion of Yuan authority and the diversification of Goryeo's regional relationships through the Red Turban invasions, the Yuan's abortive dethronement of Wang Gi, and rise of Yuan regional potentates. Chapter eight and nine then treat the Goryeo attempt to learn the steps of the new hegemonic dance set by Zhu Yuanzhang's Ming state while juggling connections with the Northern Yuan court and its regional affiliates. The book concludes with Wang Gi's 1374 assassination as way to highlight the Goryeo elite's intense division caused by the transition to a Ming alliance.

The core strength of this work is Robinson's treatment of Goryeo as part of a Eurasian story of the transition from the Mongol geopolitical order to successor regimes. The study unites two branches of Robinson's scholarship: to first treat the transition from Mongol geopolitical order as a Eurasian phenomenon, but simultaneously to understand it in its specific East Asian incarnation; and second to parse the appropriation of the Mongol legacy in that process.[2] The current work is the Korean iteration

[1]Robinson (2009).
[2]Robinson (2019, 2020).

of that project. It provides a thick description of the Korean experience at the end of empire that mobilizes a wealth of Korean primary sources beyond the official histories, such as the Yuan-Goryeo official Yi Gok's collected writings (23–31). A noteworthy inclusion is Goryeo documents from Japan, such as memoranda/letters from Wang Gi to the imperial court that represent himself alternately as a Yuan official and the Goryeo king, while other documents demonstrate the abiding concern over coastal piracy that adds a further level of complexity to Goryeo's diplomatic relations (163, 173).

In centering Korea, it joins the English scholarship of Remco Breuker, Park Hyunhee, Yi Kanghan, Yi Myeongmi and others and their contributions to understanding Goryeo as part of the Mongol world: ranging from bloody invasion, buoyant commerce, and the global transfer of distillation technology to the idiosyncrasies of political practice and royal succession under Mongol auspices. A further fundamental contribution is the access rendered to Korean-language historiography from Jeong Donghun, Kim Hodong, Min Hyeongu and Yi Ikju and others that allows for a dense description of Wang Gi's reign in the Yuan imperial context, an effort unprecedented in English. Jeong's work on the Goryeo-Ming relationship, for instance, is used in part to build a sophisticated picture of how Wang Gi's engagement with Zhu Yuanzhang through investiture and the adoption of the Ming calendar was part of a contingent strategy to diversify foreign policy in response to emerging loci of authority in the post-1368 world, not the acquiescence to the *fait accompli* of a new Ming world order (183–200).[3]

That narrower focus on Wang Gi's reign (1351–1374) belies another essential objective of the book: seeing the long night of Mongol decline through the eyes of the "little guy" or small polity and its pivotal leader (3). Not only does this rebalance narratives of Mongol decline and collapse centered on the four great *qanates* (China, Persia, Russia and Central Asia), but it deftly charts a *via media* between Koreanist and Mongolianist scholarly approaches to Goryeo's role in the empire's twilight whose emphasis on Korean or Mongol historical agency have often left interpretations lopsided: either focused on anti-Yuan sentiment and independence under royal auspices, or the continuity of the Mongol-Goryeo relationship respectively (136). For instance, Robinson's revision of Goryeo's 1356 seizure of Yuan postal relay stations, former Goryeo territory and execution of Empress Gi's brother is particularly laudable. He contextualizes Wang Gi's foray and the muted imperial response with the renewal of royal authority and softening of Yuan central power, but draws parallels with Yuan regional magnates like Zhang Shicheng and Fang Guozhen, showing that Wang Gi was seeking a renegotiated relationship with the Chinggisid center (134–152). Robinson is in effect reproducing the fuller political calculus of Wang Gi and his court who were informed of wider imperial conditions. That analytical sensitivity carries on in the adroit reconstruction of the Goryeo court's evolving diplomatic activities with regional magnates, the nascent Ming state and the Northern Yuan court (CH7–9). This joins other efforts like Bayarsaikhan Dashdondog on the Armenians in understanding geopolitical change wrought by the Mongols from the perspective of smaller allies and regimes.[4] Such an approach is pregnant with possibility for future comparative work, such as Byzantium which also had marriage ties to the Il-Qans.[5]

Though the reader can walk miles in Wang Gi's shoes, one stumbles ever so briefly over the promise of the Eurasian comparison laid down in the introduction. The introduction and conclusion make brief but insightful points about the nature of Chinggisid alliances with local elites in Anatolia, Persia, and Russia, but they are not woven into the main narrative (13–17, 254–257). The book is primarily a history of the Mongol Yuan-Goryeo relationship, a natural reflection of the substantial Korean scholarship upon which it is based. More pointed integration of comparative material would have enriched the project. For instance, a brief comparison of *güregen* in Chinggisid alliances across Eurasia could have better texturized how Wang Gi's experience was or was not representative across the continent in the long imperial denouement (255). As Robinson shows, *güregen* status and Chinggisid bloodlines were important in both maintaining and renegotiating the Goryeo-Mongol alliance, but were less

[3]Jeong (2013, 2017).
[4]Dashondog (2016).
[5]Cabrera Ramos (2017).

useful vis-à-vis the Zhu imperial line which had no Chinggisid connection (192). In contrast, Tamerlane most famously mobilized his *güregen* status to consolidate his own polity.[6] Moreover, Danilovich princes in the Golden Horde, such as Iurii, could use *güregen* status as a tool to outmaneuver rivals, while the Kiyad noble Mamai leveraged it in his control of the Horde itself as Lithuanians and Russians sought to renegotiate their relationship with the Horde in the 14th century.[7] Thus, a more specific comparison could have further drawn Goryeo into a Eurasian dialogue.

Another minor drawback is the omission of climate as a factor in the complicated dynamic of decline. Timothy Brook has already highlighted for the Yuan how climatic downturns in the late 13th and 14th centuries were a key challenge for the Yuan state.[8] Goryeo too was not immune from climate stress: evidence from both paleoclimatic research and documentary proxies suggests late Goryeo was experiencing the confluence of agroecological dislocation and natural disasters as the climate transitioned from the Medieval Warm Period to the Little Ice Age.[9] Including climate variation as a compounding factor for imperial decline and political transition could firmly add a global element to that Eurasian story.

Unquestionably, Robinson has produced another landmark study that builds on his earlier work regarding the history of Mongol-Yuan imperial decline in East Asia and its successor state, the Ming. Meticulously researched and carefully argued, *Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire* achieves the difficult task of merging both pan-imperial and localized Korean perspectives in one richly detailed work. The story of the "little guy" under the imperial umbrella in the winds of decline would be of interest to any scholar of the Mongol Empire, premodern Korea, or of empire more broadly. Though it does not provide an intensive pan-Eurasian comparison, it invites scholars to pursue larger, in-depth analyses of how Goryeo was entangled in the larger globalisms of the Mongol era. That invitation is a further clarion to integrate Korea itself more fully into premodern global histories.

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[6]Manz (1988).
[7]Favereau (2021).
[8]Brook (2017).
[9]Molnar (2023).