

Yiming (0:00):

Welcome to the Chinese History Podcast, I'm Yiming Ha. Joining me today is King Kwong Wong, an independent scholar who graduated from the University of Southern California with a Master's degree in Chinese history, and he is now working as a part-time lecturer at the Hong Kong University's School of Professional and Continuing Education. His research focuses on Koryŏ Korea during the Mongol-Yuan period, and he recently published a paper on how Korean scholars in Koryŏ viewed the concept of sovereignty while under Mongol domination. So King Kwong, welcome to the show.

King Kwong (0:34):

Yeah, thank you very much for your kind introduction.

Yiming (0:38):

So today I want to talk a little bit about your research on the Koryŏ kingdom while it was under Mongol rule. And Koryŏ was a state that was founded in the year 918. It reunified the Korean Peninsula and established a very strong state. It threw back numerous invasions from the Khitan Liao, and it successfully navigated its way through the multipolar world of East Asia during that time, between the Song Dynasty, the Liao Dynasty, and later the Jurchen Jin Dynasty. However, in 1231, the Mongols invaded Korea, and this was part of their broader invasions throughout Eurasia. If I recall correctly, this was one of nine invasions that the Mongols launched against Koryŏ. So to start off, perhaps, can you give us a brief background on the Mongol invasions of Koryŏ?

King Kwong (1:26):

Yeah, sure. I think you rightly point out that the invasions of Koryŏ was part of the Mongols' expansion in the Eurasian continent. And without going too much into details, I will just provide a...just a brief course of events for some points for reference. So in 1206, Chinggis Khan proclaimed himself the universal ruler of the steppe, and then in 1210, he subjugated the Western Xia, and then beginning from 1211, the Mongols continued to put military pressure on the Jurchen Jin empire until its collapse in 1234. So here the story, I think, became more relevant to the Mongol invasions of Koryŏ. The military pressure of the Mongols destabilized the Jurchen Jin empire, and many Khitans revolted in Manchuria, and some of them invaded Koryŏ in the late 1210s. It should be noted that I think the relations between the Mongols and Koryŏ was not at all hostile from the beginning, but at the same time was not without suspicions. The combined forces of the Mongols and Koryŏ suppressed the Khitan rebels in Koryŏ and concluded a treaty in 1219. So this is when the tension between the Mongols and Koryŏ built up. The Mongols began to demand tribute from Koryŏ on roughly seven occasions between 1221 and 1224 - so it's quite an intense demand for seven times within just a short period of three years, and privately Mongol envoys who were responsible for tribute missions also demanded tribute for themselves. Another thing to consider is that as the Jin empire gradually lost control of Manchuria under Mongol military pressure, some former Jin officials surrendered to the Mongols and established a state called Dong [Eastern] Xia that exist [*sic*] between 1215 and 1233. So the Dong Xia state with its own political agenda also created tension between the Mongols and Koryŏ. Eventually, an event in which some Dong Xia soldiers disguised as

Koreans killed a Mongol envoy and led to the Mongols breaking off relations with Koryŏ in 1225. And later from 1231 to 1259, the Mongols launched several invasions to Koryŏ. There were several invasions as you point out, in total nine invasions, but I think they can be roughly divided into two phases. The reign of Ögödei marked the first phase between 1231 and 1238, and during the political chaos after the reign of Ögödei in 1241, we can see a clear break when the Mongols did not attack Koryŏ. And under the reigns of Güyüg and Möngke, the Mongols resumed their campaign between 1247 and 1259. The Koryŏ court and people were able to put up some local resistance and scored some minor victories, but in general, the Mongols still dominated the battlefield. A major strategy of the Koryŏ court was to move its capital to the Kanghwa Island and fortified its defense there. The Kanghwa Island was such an easily defensible position that the Mongols never successfully besieged the island, and the Koryŏ court was able to maintain its supply line along the western seaboard to keep the island supplied. So I think this is, sort of, the dynamics within that period, the thirty-year period of the Mongol invasions.

Yiming (5:45):

So I just have a very quick question. Why was there a gap between the reigns of Ögödei and the reign of Güyüg and Möngke where the Mongols didn't invade Koryŏ?

King Kwong (5:55):

Yeah, yeah. So after the death of Ögödei, the Mongol court was under the regency of Ögödei's widow. And before the enthronement of Güyüg, I think it's in 1245, something like that. So the regent, the female regency, controlled court politics of the Mongol Empire for several years. And in general, the politics there was, according to official sources, was quite chaotic. And so I think this is one of the reason that the Mongols did not attack Koryŏ, because of the chaos.

Yiming (6:34):

I see. So the political situation within the Mongol Empire put a halt to the invasions temporarily.

King Kwong (6:41):

Yes, yes. You can understand it in that way. Yeah.

Yiming (6:44):

So as you said, the Koryŏ court retreated to this island where it put up a very strong resistance. In fact, it resisted for almost three decades. Why did the Koryŏ court ultimately surrender in the end despite putting up such a strong resistance?

King Kwong (7:00):

Yeah, I think there are several points that we can consider about the eventual surrender of [the] Koryŏ court. So economically speaking, the long years of warfare destroyed the farmlands and displaced people, especially peasants. Records in the *Koryŏsa*, the official history of Koryŏ, shows that the Koryŏ government actively encouraged people to reclaim abandoned fields after the invasion, and this suggests the large-scale destruction of [the] economy and that many people who were supposed to farm those fields escaped to other places or perished in the war.

The Mongol [sic] also kidnapped Koryŏ people as part of their loot, right, in their military campaigns. And many of them settled in Manchuria around the regions of Shenyang. So I think there was an economic dimension to Koryŏ's surrender in the end. And in terms of the military, it is true that the Koryŏ military was able to put up defenses and especially some elite troops called *Sambyeolcho* were able to win some battles, but on the whole these were not enough. With hindsight, we know that the Mongols stopped their invasion in the 1250s, but from the perspective of Koryŏ, the Mongols invaded for around 30 years and came and went at their will and did not show any signs [of] stopping the invasions in the foreseeable future. So it seems to be a strong reason to consider surrendering to the Mongols. And I think there was also a very strong political reason for [the] Koryŏ kings, if not the whole Koryŏ court, to decide to surrender to the Mongols. And here we need to consider the political scene of Koryŏ at that time and going back a little bit in time. Beginning from 1170, military dictators controlled Koryŏ politics, and after that Koryŏ kings were mere figureheads of the state. When the war broke out, the military dictators were hardliners in resisting the invasions, while a lot of the civil officials proposed to sue for peace and establish tributary relations with the Mongols, like what they had done with the Khitans and Jurchens previously. The military dictators were very adamant in insisting the relocations of the court and continuing its resistance, but opportunity for the Koryŏ King came in 1258 when the Choe clan, the most powerful military dictator, was purged from the Koryŏ court. Although some military leaders still controlled Koryŏ politics, the purge suggests that the military dictatorship was much weaker. The year of 1258 was also the death of Möngke and the beginning of the civil war between Arigh Böke and Khubilai. Koryŏ kings eventually side [sic] with Khubilai and gained the goodwill of the future emperor. So the Koryŏ kings were able to oust the military dictators once and for all with the help of the Mongols. So these course of events, I think, led to the eventual surrender of the Koryŏ court to the Mongols.

Yiming (10:40):

So in addition to the Mongols' overwhelming military superiority, there were also economic considerations and practical political benefits for the Koryŏ king in surrendering to the Mongols.

King Kwong (10:53):

Mhmm, yeah.

Yiming (10:54):

So now that Koryŏ has surrendered, how did Khubilai integrate Koryŏ into his empire?

King Kwong (11:00):

So in current scholarship, it's still debatable whether the Mongols integrated Koryŏ into their empire or not, or at least some scholar [sic] maintain that Koryŏ was an independent kingdom. So I think a discussion of how the Mongols integrated Koryŏ into their empires [sic] depends on how one defines the meaning of integration. Perhaps we can look at how scholars understand the situation of Koryŏ at that time, and here I will try to provide two sides of the same coin here. First, look at those who highlight the autonomy of Koryŏ. Scholars understand the relations between the Mongols and Koryŏ through the lens of tributary relations. The basic framework of tributary practice is that when a tributary state recognized the overlordship of another state, then

the overlord state would in turn recognize the autonomy of the tributary state. Such a relationship was often confirmed by the practice of rituals and was often nominal. And some understand the integration of Koryŏ through the Mongol worldview. Generally speaking, the Mongols categorized people into two kinds - those who accept Mongol rule and those who did not. Even the acceptance of Mongol rule was often nominal, submitted state [*sic*] were still required to perform certain obligation [*sic*] to signify their political, military and economic submission to the Mongols. Specific to the context of Koryŏ, there were several elements that indicate the integration was more than just nominal. First, is the marriage tie with the Mongol court. Such a marriage tie turned Koryŏ kings into imperial sons-in-law, and the two courts maintained marriage ties for almost a century from the first marriage in 1274 to the last one in 1365. Being imperial sons-in-law, Koryŏ kings were part of the imperial family. And [the] second element is that Koryŏ kings needed to serve in the imperial bodyguard - it's called *keshig*. Before Koryŏ kings' ascension, they were often sent to serve in the imperial bodyguard. The institutions of sending [a] hostage son to serve in the imperial bodyguard had a long history among nomadic peoples, and was considered an avenue to foster political ties, especially between the emperors and his subjects. And the third element is that the Mongols set up a Branch Secretariat in Koryŏ. It was originally a military establishment to facilitate campaigns to Japan and gradually transformed into a local administrative unit. Although there were subtle differences with the Branch Secretariats in China proper, the Branch Secretariat in Koryŏ came with actual offices and duties and administered the Yuan civil service examination after it was reopened in 1315. So I think these were some of the elements that indicate the more than nominal integrations of Koryŏ.

Yiming (14:36):

It's also my understanding that before the Mongol invasions, the Koryŏ rulers styled themselves as emperors and they had imperial titles, imperial regalia, and practiced imperial ceremonies, but after the Mongol conquest, they were downgraded into kings. Is that correct?

King Kwong (14:52):

Yeah, yeah, that's correct.

Yiming (14:54):

So as you said, the Koryŏ rulers intermarried into the Mongol imperial family - they were imperial son-in-laws, they served in the *keshig*, the imperial bodyguard at the Mongol court in Dadu and Shangdu, so they must have absorbed a lot of Mongol culture and Mongol influence. What were some of these Mongol cultural influences on Koryŏ?

King Kwong (15:15):

Yeah, that's a good question. I think when the Koryŏ kings traveled to the Mongol capital in Dadu and stayed there and served in the imperial bodyguard, [the] *keshig*, they also adopted some of the Mongol customs. For example, I think the Koryŏ kings adopted Mongol names alongside with a Sinitic one. Another thing is that the Koryŏ kings also adopted Mongol attires. So their attires - their clothing, their hairstyle would turn to the Mongol ones. Their lifestyle also adopt [*sic*] some of the Mongol elements, such as they were now favored hunting, much like

nomadic people. They also adopted some foreign furnitures in the lifestyle too, such as the foreign chairs, I think in the *Koryŏsa* it's named the *hosang* [note: 胡床 in Chinese characters]. Another thing, we can also look at the noblewomen of the Koryŏ court as well. One of the more fashionable items that exist in the late Koryŏ period was the Mongol hat that the Mongol noblewomen wore, which is named the *gugu* hat, and it become [sic] very fashionable, that noblewomen of the Koryŏ court often request [sic] these hat to be made for them or to be granted to them. So I think these are the several elements that indicating [sic] the spread of Mongol culture to Koryŏ.

Yiming (16:56):

Yeah, and I think you see the same thing happening in China where a lot of Chinese people took on Mongol names, they wore Mongol clothing and the Mongol hairstyle because they were under Mongol rule.

King Kwong (17:08):

Yeah, definitely. So the experience between China and Korea was not much different under the same Mongol emperors, right?

Yiming (17:20):

Yeah, yeah, I agree. So in a normal tributary relationship, and I know the tributary system is a very hotly debated topic and it's very complex, but for the sake of simplicity, in a normal tributary relationship, like the one we see much later with the Ming and the Chosŏn, the superior state China, that is to say the Ming, invests the tributary state, that is to say Chosŏn, but aside from this investiture of the Chosŏn king, the Ming state, China, doesn't really interfere with the affairs of Korea or the other tributary states. Yet the dynamic between Koryŏ and the Yuan was different, I mean, the Koryŏ rulers were imperial son-in-laws, and so their proximity to the Mongol ruler was much closer, and therefore they would invite more scrutiny. So were there any examples where the Mongol emperor interfered in the internal affairs of Koryŏ?

King Kwong (18:15):

Yeah, there's several instances that the Mongol emperors interfered in Koryŏ politics. In general, I think the political dynamics between the Mongols and Koryŏ was that the Mongols practiced indirect rule to their subjugated states, but when the political situation demanded, then the Mongols were still able to exert influence to their subordinate state. The primary aim is to preserve stabilities [sic] within the empire. So there are several actual examples that the Mongols influenced in the politics of the Koryŏ court, because the political environment at that period was very unstable that the Mongol emperors deemed it necessary to interfere and to stabilize the situation. One actual example was the enthronement and dethronement of King Ch'ungsŏn in 1298. So Ch'ungsŏn was enthroned and dethroned in the same year, so his reign was only eight months. So the primary reason for his short reign was that his political and institutional reforms that he launched upon his enthronement encroached the political interests of some of the Koryŏ ministers that served to court from the reign of his father, King Ch'unghyŏl. The reforms of Ch'ungsŏn created a power struggle within the Koryŏ court and the situation at that time was not very stable. Another thing to consider [in] the dethronement of King Ch'ungsŏn

was that he was not able to maintain a harmonious relationship with his Mongol princess-consort. After he married a Mongol princess in 1296, Ch'ungsŏn favored another Korean consort and this caused, according to the official records, jealousy from the Mongol princess. So the Mongol princess enlist [sic] help from the Mongol court and tried to investigate some of the accusations against the Korean consort. The accusation was that the Korean consort placed a curse on the Mongol princess and that's the reason Ch'ungsŏn did not favor the Mongol princess but the Korean consort. So the Mongol princess enlisted help from the Mongol court and the Mongol court responded with dispatching Mongol envoys to investigate and interrogated the Korean consort, and according to the records, the investigation mission was a hundred men strong. So the Mongol court sent a lot of people to investigate this dispute between the royal couple. It also caused a lot of trouble within the Koryŏ court. So I think these two, first Ch'ungsŏn's political reform caused instability within the Koryŏ court, and Ch'ungsŏn's failure to maintain a good relationship with the Mongol princess also caused trouble. So as a result, the Mongol Emperor at that time, Chengzong, dethroned Ch'ungsŏn and reinstated his father Ch'ungnyŏl to the Koryŏ throne. So I think we can see this as an very lively example of how the Mongol emperors interfered with Koryŏ politics because of the Koryŏ's kings inability to govern the Koryŏ state.

Yiming (22:27):

So it seems to me that these Mongol princesses who married the Koryŏ kings really wielded tremendous power through virtue of their relationship to the Mongol rulers back home, and they can invite a lot of scrutiny to the Koryŏ court. But intermarriage went both ways, and we have cases of Korean women marrying into the Mongol imperial family - the most famous example was Empress Ki, who married the last Yuan emperor, Emperor Shun, Toghon Temür, and she was the subject of a very popular Korean drama many years back. What was her influence on Koryŏ?

King Kwong (23:01)

Right. To understand the situation, or the dynamics between the Mongol court and Koryŏ court, I think we need to consider that during the Mongol period, not only the Koryŏ kings had direct access to the Mongol court, Koryŏ ministers or other Koryŏ people also had direct access to the Mongol court as well. So this created a situation where Koryŏ ministers was [sic] able to leverage the Mongol court to their advantage in the Koryŏ court. So as you said Empress Ki married Emperor Shun and this marriage between Empress Ki and the Mongol Emperor gave Empress Ki's family, the Ki family, a very powerful position in the Koryŏ court. With Empress Ki's marriage and the tie with the Mongol Emperor, the Ki family was able to benefit themselves. I think the most significant influence of this marriage was that now the Koryŏ minister was not only a subject of the Koryŏ kings but also had ties with the Mongol emperors or the Mongol court, that they can use their ties with the Mongol court to their own advantage within the Koryŏ court. And the Ki family was not the only family who had the marriage tie[s] with the Mongol court. Other Koryŏ ministers also sent their daughters to serve in the imperial palace in Dadu, which now termed them as the *kungnyŏl*, meaning "tribute women." So these tribute women had the possibility to be like Empress Ki, to become imperial consorts of the Mongol emperors, so we can see that the tribute women, the marriage tie with the Mongol emperor became a very

influential avenue for the Koryŏ ministers to have a direct access to the Mongol court and to leverage the Mongols against perhaps some of the elements that were not favorable to them.

Yiming (25:40):

Yeah, and I think you see some of this play out in the later Chosŏn Dynasty as well, because the Ming, much like the Mongols, also demanded women from Chosŏn to serve in the Ming harem and the Chosŏn kings were able to leverage their relationship with these Korean women in the Ming court to gain information on the Ming or to help with their appeals to the Ming court. So from my reading of Koryŏ, it seems that the Mongol emperors appointed a branch of the Koryŏ royal family to serve as the Prince of Shenyang, based in Shenyang in the Manchuria region. Why did this title exist?

King Kwong (26:16):

So to understand the Prince of Shenyang, we also need to look at the establishment of this princely title in the first place. So perhaps we need to go back a little bit, back to Ch'ungsŏn, who was dethroned by the Mongols and after that he returned to Dadu with the Mongol princess and then stayed there for around 10 years before he was enthroned again in 1308. So as I had mentioned earlier that before Koryŏ kings' enthronement, they were required to serve in the imperial *keshig*. So this gave them very powerful political ties with the Mongol imperial clan and specifically to King Ch'ungsŏn, he foster [sic] a very strong tie when he was in Dadu with the future emperor Wuzong and Renzong. So when Chengzong died, there was a succession dispute between one branch of the imperial family against the branch of Wuzong and Renzong. So Ch'ungsŏn supported Wuzong and Renzong. After that, and because of his support, he was able to be re-enthroned as Koryŏ King. At the same time, he was also, because of his contribution to the enthronement of Wuzong and Renzong, he was enfeoffed also as the Prince of Shenyang, and later the title was promote [sic] to Prince of Shen. So now, the Koryŏ kings held two titles, one was the King of Koryŏ and the other was the Prince of Shen. At the same time, as I mentioned, there were Koryŏ people settled around the area of Shenyang and during the Mongol invasions, some of the Koryŏ minister [sic] also surrendered and attained official titles in Shenyang, which gave them authority to govern Koryŏ people in Manchuria around the Shenyang area. So this title of Prince Shen of the Koryŏ kings and the former Koryŏ officials who surrendered and served the Mongols had a power struggle between them. So the former Koryŏ official become very entrenched in Shenyang in the name of that family was Hong. So the Hong clan complained that one prince should not be enfeoffed with two princely titles. So Ch'ungsŏn at the time, as I explained, held the title of the King of Koryŏ and the title of the Prince Shen. The complaint of the Hong clan was target [sic] at the Koryŏ kings because of their power struggle in Shenyang, so to solve this problem, Ch'ungsŏn enfeoffed a nephew named Wang Ko to the title of Prince Shenyang or Prince Shen, and then he himself maintained the title and then later he retired and gave the title, passed down the title of Koryŏ King to his son, who became Ch'ungsuk. At the same time, Wang Ko also was named the heir apparent of the Koryŏ King, but he was later revoked [of] this title because Ch'ungsuk had a son. So this created another political struggle between the two lines, one the Prince Shen and the other, the Koryŏ King of Ch'ungsuk. So because of his previous ownership of the title of heir apparent or the crown prince of Koryŏ, Wang Ko, or the Prince Shen, pressed his claim and created a power

struggle with Ch'ungsuk. To summarize perhaps, the title of Prince Shen was created for the contributions of Ch'ungsŏn's support for the enthronement of Wuzong and Renzong, but it later was also a source of conflict between the two lines within the Koryŏ family.

Yiming (30:33):

I see. So there is quite a bit of politics and history behind the creation of this princely title.

King Kwong (30:39):

Right that is a very... the whole history of Koryŏ during the Mongol period was very complex.

Yiming (30:47):

So as many people know, the Yuan dynasty was a very short-lived dynasty - it was among the shorter dynasties in Chinese history. In 1351, the Red Turban Revolt breaks out and very quickly it spirals out of control. By 1368, the newly established Ming Dynasty managed to drive the last Yuan emperor away from Dadu and soon after that managed to drive him away from China proper all together. So how did Koryŏ, given its extensive marriage ties with the Mongol-Yuan, deal with the fall of the Yuan and the rise of the Ming?

King Kwong (31:19):

So the relationship between [the] Koryŏ court and the Mongol court was quite complex. When the Mongol emperors reigned, the Koryŏ kings had three ties with the Mongol emperors. As I previously mentioned, they were imperial sons-in-law, they were vassals of the Mongol emperors as they were invested as the King of Koryŏ, and they were also administrative officials, as they were the heads of the Branch Secretariat of Koryŏ. As we have discussed earlier that the Koryŏ people also had multiple ties with the Mongol court through the marriage with the Mongol court, Mongol ministers, and the Mongol emperors, and some of the Koryŏ families also sent their sons to serve as imperial eunuchs in the Mongol court as well. So the Koryŏ people also had multiple ties with the Mongol court and Yuan China. Even so, Koryŏ was still a state with its own distinct people, culture and society, so it would be understandable that the priority of the Koryŏ kings and ministers was to survive the political turmoil during the transitional period between the Yuan and Ming. The Ming took the Yuan capital Dadu, which is nowadays Beijing, in 1368, but the conquest of the Ming was yet to be finished because the retreated Mongols still controlled Manchuria, and I believe southwest China was still under Mongol control until the late 1380s. So to Koryŏ people, it was unclear of who would win the race eventually and what Koryŏ did during this power struggle was to adopt two-pronged diplomacy and maintained diplomatic relations with both the Ming and Yuan. It was only after the late 1380s, when the Ming incorporated Manchuria within its empire that Koryŏ diplomacy leaned toward the Ming, but Ming control of Manchuria also caused tension between Ming and Koryŏ. Without Mongols to keep the Ming in check, the Ming began to press territorial claim on former Yuan territory in Koryŏ. So some of the background of the Yuan territory in Koryŏ was that the Mongols controlled the northeast region of Koryŏ since 1258, when some of the Koryŏ ministers and Koryŏ people surrendered to the Mongols and defected to the Mongols. It was later recovered by King Kongmin in 1356, and what the Ming court wanted to achieve was to restore the border before 1356 as a successor state of the Mongol Yuan. The territorial claim of



the Ming did not sit well with the Koryŏ court, so the Koryŏ king at that time decided to launch a preemptive strike towards Manchuria. The expedition forces mutinied right before it crossed the Amrok River or the Yalu River. The leader of the coup was Yi Seong-gye, who controlled the court after the mutiny and later founded the Chosŏn dynasty in 1392. So this is a brief course of events of how the Koryŏ court deal [sic] with the fall of the Mongols and the rise of the Ming during this transitional period. So we can see that the Koryŏ court was quite pragmatic in its diplomacy during this period.

Yiming (35:11):

Yeah, and I think this Yuan-Ming transitional period is just such a fascinating period, because you have Koryŏ struggling on the one hand with their extensive Mongol ties and on the other hand with how to deal with this very powerful, newly established Ming Dynasty, and at the same time, it also has [sic] to deal with its internal politics and internal dissent as well. But thank you so much, King Kwong for coming to the show, and sharing so much wonderful information about Koryŏ under Mongol rule. It's just such a fascinating period both for China and for Korea, because you have the Koryŏ King intermarrying with the Mongols and then wearing all these different identities and you have all these politics and relationships, complicating the dynamic between Koryŏ and the Yuan. All of this makes their relationship so interesting, and I hope in the future, you can come back and join us to talk a little bit more about Koryŏ under Mongol rule.

King Kwong (36:06):

No, I think I should thank you for inviting me to this very interesting podcast as well to share some of my thoughts with the complex relations between the Mongols and Koryŏ, and I think it's good to have such an avenue where both the history of Koryŏ and the history of the Mongols, with still so many things that we can discuss and discovered with our conversations here and to let the others know about it, too.

Yiming (36:36):

Yeah, I absolutely agree. So thank you again, that concludes our interview today. Thank you so much for listening to the Chinese History podcast and we'll see you next time.

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