

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

**By David M. Robinson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 296p [ISBN: 9781009098960]**

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### **Introduction**

Professor Robinson is an expert on Yuan and Ming studies, and a wonderful human being whom I'm happy and honored to consider as a friend. Our friendship that I would dare claim began about 10 years ago. Unfortunately, in the very beginning that friendship got off to a wrong start.

15 years ago, he published a very enlightening book entitled *Empire's Twilight-Northeast Asia under the Mongols* (Harvard Univ. Asia Center, 2009). It was a fascinating book based on macroscopic perspectives and continent-scale narratives. Then IJKH happened to call on this reviewer, who was fresh out of the post-graduate school and just got his Ph.D., with a chip on his shoulder and a lot to prove, to write a review on that book. To make a long story short, I ended up publishing a very harsh review on that book. The book was filled with wonderful observations that other scholars would not be able to present much less conceive to begin with, but somehow I got to criticize them a lot.

In my defense, some points in the review I gather why I thought it

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would be worth mentioning, but as a matter of fact, I truly regret that I was too close-minded to recognize the book's amazing grace and acknowledge the undeniable contributions made to the field by the book. I also neglected the fact that he was from a background which did not necessarily involve the Korean peninsula as a central theme all the time. Simply speaking, I was channeling my own perspective into the review too much, which should've never been allowed in any given situation, especially when it comes to a book review.

Fortunately, in 2013 I was able to meet him in person at a Koryŏ-themed conference hosted by Professor Edward Shultz of the University of Hawaii at Manoa, the very next year my so-called review was out no less. The first thing I did on meeting him was naturally an attempt to make amend (I think I was trying to convey an apology), and the reaction from him that I remember was initially a perplexed look, signaling (at least that's how I interpreted it) that he was okay, as long as it was an academic attempt to analyze another scholar's work. And then is when I think our friendship began.

So for the last decade I've been following his works, and recently heard the news that he published another book, which was surprisingly dedicated to history of the Koryŏ dynasty, and the era of King Kongmin (Gongmin 恭愍王, Wang Gi 王祺, b.1330-d.1374; r.1351- 1374) in particular.<sup>1</sup> I was thrilled beyond words, and after reading it I find myself in a state of mind rather envious and even jealous a little bit. The book is so well structured and full of important data. It really is a huge achievement, which would surely become a creative drive force that would inspire other works currently in progress in and out of Korea.

And here I am, writing yet another review on Prof. Robinson's

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1 Although the author spelled Koryŏ names and titles according to the system developed by the Korean government, they will be spelled here by the MR system according to the guidelines of the journal. For example, Wang Gi will be spelled 'Wang Ki,' and King Gongmin will be spelled King 'Kongmin.'

book, but with more respect for his work, more love for the author, and most importantly much more training and less baggage on my part. I asked IJKH for the chance to write this review (which they graciously granted), and with the review I intend to highlight what kind of things Prof. Robinson got so right, and what aspects I would love to see more in his future projects. In the process I hope to share with the readers my own take on the subject matter as well, as long as it does not unnecessarily contradict the author's points, and only when they would serve to supplement or compliment the author's intentions.

### **Major points<sup>2</sup>**

In the Preface, the author first acknowledges that there are many ways to tell the story of Wang Ki (King Kongmin). He makes it clear that among all those angles, he intends to view Wang Ki's life through the geopolitical transformation of the 14th century, collapse of the Mongol Yuan Empire, and the emergence of the new Ming dynasty. Next, the Introduction, which is structured very interestingly in the form of a 'job search announcement,' the author highlights several attitudes and qualities Wang Ki displayed over the years. Then follows is the main body of the book, composed of total of nine chapters which show their respective themes and time frames in their titles.

Chapter 1 is entitled "Child of the Empire." As signified in the chapter's name, it deals with the time period from 1330 through 1341. 1330 was the year Wang Ki was born, and 1341 was the year when he left Koryŏ and headed for Daidu, where he would begin to serve as part of the Emperor (Great Khan)'s guard. The author first talks

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2 The points he made will be listed according to the very structure he laid out. But first, a disclaimer: In this review, if I make any observation that misunderstood, misinterpreted and misrepresented what the author said in the book, the fault is all mine and mine alone.

about the history of marriages between Koryŏ and Yuan, how Wang Ki's older brother Wang Chŏng (王禎, later King Ch'ung'hye 忠惠王, r.1330-1332; 1339-1343) was enthroned, what kind of views the Koryŏ officials had toward Yuan, and how such view was so different from what other officials who came before them usually had. Also mentioned here are Yuan's extraction of Koryŏ resources, Imperial emissaries' frequent visits to Koryŏ, what kind of role Koryŏ played in the Empire's military campaigns, and why Koryŏ kept referring to such contributions made on its part. According to the author, this chapter serves as an overview of the Koryŏ royal family's diplomatic, military, and cultural ties with the Chinggisids. He concludes that the relationship between the Koryŏ royal family and the Mongol Chinggisid family was tight, but Wang Ki himself might not necessarily have been that much well aware of such old relationship, or how things were unfolding on the Eurasian stage.

Chapter 2 is entitled "A Decade at the Yuan Court." Documented here are things that occurred in Yuan between 1341 and 1351. The reason for the choice of this end point is obvious, as it was the year he was finally enthroned as the Koryŏ king, but the chapter itself is all about Yuan, and the Koryŏ people physically living in it. First, the author imagines that Wang Ki would have grown a lot, not only physically but also in terms of knowledge, wisdom, perspective and information, witnessing both the glory and problems of the Empire, which would have undoubtedly shaped his point of view regarding it. Then the author examines all the buzzing in the Imperial capital of Daidu, like all sorts of rebellion and in-fighting that were plaguing the Empire, as well as major publication projects undertaken and overseen by the Imperial government. The author also observes the Koryŏ people who lived in the Daidu city, which included royal family members, scholars/officials, monks, women married into Yuan houses, who all together composed the overall Koryŏ community formed inside the city. The author concludes that the Empire, despite exhibiting symptoms of deterioration, was still a massive entity, and in the eyes of

Wang Ki would have seemed huge and formidable.

Chapter 3's title is pretty straightforward, and says "The Koryŏ Dynasty on the Eve of Wang Ki's Enthronement." Here the author turns his attention to the inside of Koryŏ, and examines the events that have been unfolding since 1341 when Wang Ki's older brother was on the reign, and up until 1351, the year Wang Ki was enthroned. The author lets the readers expect what kind of hardship Wang Ki would have faced upon his enthronement, such as disrespectful factions and incidents challenging his authority, by following what Wang Ki actually had to go through during all those years prior to his enthronement waiting for his big break, including the death of his own brother, and the ascendance of his nephews who did not last long on the throne. The author concludes that Wang Ki would have also observed certain problems that were haunting the Koryŏ government, and came to understand the importance of maintaining ties with the Empire, and securing the Empire's trust and support, if he was to sustain his throne once he got it.

So, through the first three chapters the author examines what kind of things were going on in Koryŏ and the Empire, and how they would have affected Wang Ki. Then in the next three chapters, the author examines what kind of things Wang Ki actually faced upon his enthronement, as well as what he did in the first five years. From now on this reviewer will refer to Wang Ki as King Kongmin or simply Kongmin, despite the fact that he would only get to be called that after he died.

In Chapter 4, entitled "Becoming the Koryŏ King," the author follows how Kongmin became the Koryŏ king, and what entailed that enthronement. The author also discusses the issue within a time frame shorter than Chapters 2 and 3. This chapter is only about two years (1351-1353), but they were jam-packed (in terms of events and situations) nonetheless. Chapter 4 also sets the style for subsequent chapters as well, examining a limited number of years to deliver a more detailed and focused analysis of several aspects of Kongmin's reign (with the exception of Chapter 7 of course, which needed to employ

another long-term standpoint).

Highlighted here is the political incident caused by a person named Cho Il-sin (Jo Il-sin, 趙日新, b.?-d.1352), a close aide who had served Kongmin well during the would-be-king's stay in Yuan. The abuse of power Cho was displaying at the time is vividly depicted here. According to records, Kongmin's devastation by the betrayal of his friend and the eventual elimination of him by his own hand is palpable, and here in the book the accident is rightly presented as one of the initial plights that plagued the infant state of Kongmin's reign. As mentioned by the author, Kongmin had been away from the country for a long time, so jumpstarting his reign was never going to be easy. The author also notes that the Yuan Emperor chose to observe how Kongmin would deal with the situation, instead of directly intervening in it. Unfortunately though, that was about to change real fast.

Chapter 5, under the title "Ally in Collapse," deals with the years 1354 and 1355. One may assume that this chapter, following its predecessor, would examine things that were going on in Koryŏ and led to the most heavily discussed incident -and turning point- of Kongmin's reign, the purge of his enemies in 1356. Yet, as suggested in the title, first taking the center stage in this chapter is Imperial official Toqto'a (脫脫, b.1314-d.1355)'s campaign in the *Gaoyou* prefecture, which was launched in 1354 to deal with the Jiangnan forces challenging the Empire's authority and disrupting stability in the region.

This chapter also reveals the author's most crucial arguments, that Koryŏ was one of the Empire's more important military allies, as can be seen in Kongmin's decision to contribute troops to aid Yuan. (In fact, Kongmin sent away so many troops, to the point of sacrificing his own safety and security.) According to the author, Koryŏ's involvement in the military conflicts throughout the Empire at this very time would not have been that hard for Koryŏ if we consider how things had been so ugly half a century ago, like being forcibly mobilized for Yuan's campaigns on Japan, but it was still an important experience for Kongmin anyway as he would have witnessed the

Emperor's plight, his efforts to restore control, and how imperial situation could affect Koryō directly. The author even argues that such experience would have "inspired the King to envision a new Koryō-Yuan relationship," which is another crucial observation the author would get back to in the following chapters.

Chapter 6, is tellingly entitled "Redefining Allegiance: The Summer of 1356." From the title itself we can see from miles away that this chapter is all about Kongmin's killing off Ki Chōl (奇轍, b.?-d.1356) while accomplishing many rectifications (of things that had gone wrong in the past), which led future scholars to define Kongmin's efforts of this year as a spree of "Anti-Yuan" reforms. The author describes Kongmin's actions as 'dramatic,' as they did involve executing the Yuan Empress's brother, attacking Yuan border regions, and abolishing the current Emperor's reign code.

In discussing the situation, the author poses important questions, such as what was Kongmin's real intention, and what were the results of his attempts. Here it is suggested that Kongmin may have wanted to 'renegotiate' terms that had defined the Koryō-Yuan relationship, and secure more autonomy from the Empire. This valid -and not to mention accurate- observation by the author shows us that 're-imagining the Koryō-Yuan relationship' was actually one of two major objectives of Kongmin, the other being 'finding new friends' (which is the theme for the last 1/3 of the book).

However, instead of focusing on the actual negotiations, the author rather chose to evaluate the Emperor's stance toward Kongmin's provocation and subsequent demands. The idea suggested here is that the Emperor may have been surprised and offended by Kongmin's initiatives, but ultimately chose to accept the situation and maintain the alliance with Koryō for the sake of the Empire. (In the following chapters the author also comments on such 'challenging and then forgiven' as sort of a common practice that took place in many areas throughout Eurasia.) And for Kongmin, the author observes that all the insurgencies and rebellions going on in Southeast China that kept the

Empire busy may have helped Kongmin in getting what he wanted. The author also adds that it was not a big victory for Kongmin, considering some of those rebellious elements in China came back to haunt Koryŏ, in the form of the “Red Turban” bandits’ incursion into Koryŏ, which forced Kongmin to temporarily leave the capital.

After examining the first five years of Kongmin’s reign in the middle part of the book, the author finally dedicates the last three chapters to examining the deterioration of the Koryŏ-Yuan relationship, a new encounter between Koryŏ and Ming, and the final years that led to the demise of Kongmin himself.

Chapter 7 is entitled “A Tipping Point.” This chapter deviates from the last couple of chapters, by covering a time period longer than a decade. To examine the era that followed the events of 1356, the author apparently felt the need to find a long-term trend that would have culminated in 1367, which marked the end of the Mongol Yuan Empire as it had been for the past century.

Placed front and center first in this chapter is the Red Turban bandits’ incursion into Koryŏ, but it is only one of several aspects from this decade that are discussed in the chapter, as the other one that immediately follows is the Empire’s ill-conceived attempt to depose(de-throne) Kongmin, which ironically came right after Koryŏ’s active efforts to repel the Red Turban bandits ‘to help the Empire as well (to some degree at least),’ as later mentioned by Kongmin himself. And then the other shoe is dropped, as the author presents us with the second important argument of this book, that after going through such humiliating series of events, Kongmin began his efforts to ‘diversify his allies.’ According to the author, Kongmin would have felt certain that Koryŏ would no longer be able to depend or rely on the Empire as it had done in the past.

Kongmin’s consideration of a relationship between Koryŏ and Ming would have been a product of that realization of course. So in Chapter 8, entitled “Choosing a New Lord,” discussed are the early encounters made between Koryŏ and Ming, in the wake of Yuan’s abandoning of



Beijing in 1368. This ‘new lord’ is of course referring to the Ming Founder Zhu Yuanzhang (朱元璋, b.1328-d.1399, r.1368-1399). And the reason he chose the end point as 1370 is apparently to take a closer look into Kongmin’s military actions in the Liaodung region, which was a crucial region for Koryŏ to at least try to retrieve. In this chapter the author’s observation proceeds on three fronts. The first one features Kongmin’s dialogue with the Ming founder, who scolded and criticized Kongmin but also needed Koryŏ’s support and a good relationship with it just to sustain his newborn authority established in January 1368. Then the second front reveals Kongmin’s ongoing contacts with the Mongols who withdrew to the Northern steppe regions, while the third is about Kongmin’s military actions in the Liaodung region and on the Tamna island, which may helped or hurt –according to the author–Kongmin’s footings in Koryŏ and his overall reputation. The author’s observation that penetrates all these three fronts is Kongmin keeping an open eye on international situations, as he remained strategically cautious in his navigation through tides of the era and dynamics of the region.

And finally, the author’s examination culminates in Chapter 9, aptly entitled “A New Age.” The chapter essentially continues its prior observation, discussing how things that unfolded in the late 1360s continued to permeate into the early 1370s, until the very end of Kongmin himself, whose reign –and life– was cut short with the assassination. Many events are discussed here, but the most essential one is the author’s suggestion that Kongmin was trying to project royal power by staging military actions in both Liaodung and Tamna, which effectively insinuates what Kongmin’s mindset would have actually been at this juncture. Also noteworthy is the author’s argument that Kongmin have not sought to replace Yuan with Ming, at least not as much as he tried to just strengthen Koryŏ’s own footing, which leads to certain arguments he specified in the Conclusion.

In the Conclusion, the author first delivers a rather graphic account of Kongmin’s murder, and then he talks about Ming founder’s immedi-

ate reaction to Kongmin's death, as well as his later evaluation on Kongmin's reign. The author also reiterates the hierarchical, unequal nature of the Koryō-Yuan relationship, while acknowledging that the Koryō-Ming relationship was severely limited compared to it. Then he raises the ultimate question, which would be, "What new things can we learn about the history of this period, through Kongmin's actions and intentions?"

The author ultimately labels Kongmin and the preceding kings as "members of a Eurasian elite." This reviewer considers this definition to be extremely important in determining and understanding their sentimentality and stance correctly. The author suggests that their sentiments and stances were never simply –or merely– "anti-Yuan." The author also points out that Kongmin's "repeated attempts to renegotiate the terms of his family's alliance with the Chinggisids" should be evaluated as yet another instance of a "broader Eurasian pattern in the 14th and 15th centuries." For me this is an excellent observation, and a strong theory which would solve many mysteries of this era that have intrigued the scholars in the field for decades.

The author also tries to put Kongmin's attempts to secure and cultivate new allies in the context of Eurasian situations, which was according to the author filled with "Conflicting demands of family allegiance, a sense of diminishing Chinggisid control, a proliferation of increasingly autonomous regional leaders, and a search for new (or renewed) sources of legitimacy and power." Although the author is cautious in presenting Kongmin as the most representative or typical case in Eurasia, I think the author did a great job in not only situating Kongmin in that historical context, but letting us understand Kongmin's views and actions on a much wider scale.

### **Merits of the Author's Endeavor**

So, it would be safe to say that I am completely sold on this book.

There are a lot of things I agree with, plenty of points that I was not previously aware of, and crucial perspectives I have never considered. ‘Hooked’ would be an understatement. And added to that, there are two more virtues that this book really championed, at least from my perspective. Let me elaborate on them.

Viewing the Kings as individuals: One of the most distinctive aspects of this book is that it may be the first ever work to view Kongmin as truly an individual. To my knowledge a comprehensive review of King Kongmin himself has been yet to be conducted, and this book is the closest version that we would probably ever get in a very long time. Koryŏ Kings in the last one-third of the Koryŏ dynasty period generally do not garner that much attention, as they have been considered to be individuals with agendas, behaviors, sentimentality and priorities so different from the kings in previous periods, due primarily to Mongol influences. Such image did make scholars hesitate to focus on them, as they were not at all motivated to pay a deeper look into the mindsets, psyches, aspirations, and value sets of this period’s Koryŏ kings. But by reading this book you can feel how Wang Ki, or King Kongmin, would have thought, felt, and strategized in certain situations. And with that process, this book provides an even bigger lesson, by serving as a reminder that historical figures were also living and breathing human beings, whose ideas, actions and hopes may have been not that different from ordinary people like us.

Korean works duly acknowledged: I was also astonished by this book, not only because it is based on hard data and previous studies, but also because it is so much aware of -and accurate about- the academic landscape of the Korean community of historical scholars. Oftentimes Korean scholars’ works are neglected, overlooked, or even disregarded by foreign scholars, but unlike them, the author went a long way to mention every piece of prior Korean studies done on the subjects he discussed. I’ve never seen a foreign study that contains this many references to Korean studies. It is a testament to the author’s sincere recognition of and genuine respect for prior Korean studies,

which makes all of his arguments and suggestions even more convincing, as the sheer amount of studies he quoted show us that his opinions are formed after considering all the opinions of others who engaged the same subject but treaded different paths or chartered other avenues. This is a true triumph of communication, as this book could serve as a bridge between academic communities of Korea and others around the world. Such attitude should be encouraged in the future, and makes me wonder if we (Korean scholars) are doing the best we can to do the same.

### **Things to be Recommended**

It seems that I have nothing bad to say about this book. Although I set out to write a critical review of a publication, I find it very hard to pick up some problems of this book that I could criticize. But there are some things that -in my view- would have helped even more strengthening the author's case: things I would be thrilled to see incorporated in the author's future works. For the sake of the review, I would like to share them with the readers, and of course with the author as well.

In Chapter 1, the author uses the term 'alliance' to refer to the military cooperations that continued between Koryō and Yuan. The author did recognize the unequal and hierarchal nature of it, and only used the term in the confines of joint operations or military aids. I do concur that such cooperation could be considered as part of the nature of the Koryō-Yuan relationship. I just think that, considering the occurrence of such instances were rather scarce, from the joint operation in 1218-1219 to the Japanese campaign in the mid-1270s and early 1280s, and then to the dispatchment of Koryō troops to Gaoyou region in the early 1350s, it should be (in my perspective) acknowledged as a lesser part of the Koryō-Yuan relationship, while other aspects and elements (institutional ones, systemic ones) of the relationship get

some spotlight as they deserve. I will talk more about this later. (I'm not sure about counting either the Kadaan invasion nor the Red Turban bandits' invasion as examples of the 'alliance,' as they were cases of the Korean peninsula victimized by a foreign invasion force which originated in China, rather than cases of joining a coordinated effort.)

In Chapter 2, the author refers to *Zhizheng tiaoge*(至正條格) from the 1340s, which is the last Grand Legal Code ever compiled and declared by the Mongol Yuan Empire (at least by the Chinggisid Family that ruled China for a century). Reflecting the core characteristic of the Imperial Legal codes of this era, this Grand Legal Code as well contains all kinds of details that shed great light on some of the most minute aspects of Imperial governing not only unfolding in the Capital but also in the local regions. It is essentially a depot of historical information that just awaits to be explored by scholars. And because of that, I think the author's narrative would have benefited greatly from discussing the contents of some of the legal clauses within the Law code, as some of them do contain Imperial initiatives that would have either affected Koryō or not, in many areas such as politics, economy, legal affairs and art, and even the very issue the author examined at great length, the military.

For an economic example, the clauses that refer to the drop in Imperial paper currency's value and initial problems that led to such downfall insinuate the Imperial government's inability to stabilize the currency, and lets us understand why Koryō, which has been using Yuan currency primarily in their dealings off shores and dispensed it accordingly to its drop in value, was able to protect their interests and not be hurt by an unstable imperial currency. Then as another example, clauses related to trade regulations and issued in the early 1330s, which indicate that there were large-scale bans placed on illegal transactions on the sea taking place on maritime traffic routes, can be useful in understanding why Koryō kings who were very much interested and also active in trade (like King Ch'ung'hye) sometimes only used land routes instead of seaways in their export projects. Meanwhile,

clauses of artistic nature that show the high quality of *Nasij* items (silk fabric with patterns sewn on them with gold and silver threads), its massive production in China, and certain illegal activities that subsequently led to some unfortunate substandard items, do provide some answers to the question of why Koryŏ was so enamored by Imperial *Nasij*, and later decided to manufacture it (in different forms) themselves. And finally, clauses that contain information on Myriarchies (*Manhobu* 萬戶府 units) do show that they were not only military units but also economic and local ones that were involved in all kinds of fiscal and monetary activities, which ended up siphoning local resources in both the Empire and then Koryŏ. They clearly let us know why king Kongmin was so adamant in getting rid of them in the mid-1350s, while voluntarily reviving them on his own accord only two years later to supplement local governance and defense.

In Chapter 3, the author examines the internal situation of Koryŏ during the 1340s mainly with the rise and fall of King Ch'ung'hye. But as the author is also well aware, there were many more aspects to the era. Depiction of Ch'ung'hye as a terrible king may not be that far from the truth, but his four years on the throne featured many events and trends that deserve more attention, such as his fiscal policy and trade projects. I also think that the author could have had found more narratives at his disposal if the scope of the examination was expanded to include not only the 1340s and '50s but the time that preceded it, for example the 1320s and '30s. After all, the 1340s and '50s were the product of the economic foundation and political atmosphere, as well as policy initiatives and cultural agendas that have come before. The author does discuss the aftermath of Ch'ung'hye's stint on the throne, through examination of *Chŏngchi Togam* (*Jeong-chi dogam*, 整治都監), the Directorate for Revitalization of Governance, from King Ch'ungmok(忠穆王, r.1344-1348)'s time. The author also took note that the Emperor supported the office's leaders. But reforms the office actually intended, and the meaning of its operation in the long term, could have been discussed more, considering the office was a culmination of re-

form debates that had been floating around inside the Koryŏ government for decades, and did affect Kongmin's governance to some degree.

In Chapter 6, the author discusses King Kongmin's reforms in 1356. There are still some debates going on about the nature of things that happened that year. Some say they were 'Anti-Yuan' in nature, while some say they were actually not. In recent years the debate grew a bit more complex, as some scholars (or rather, this reviewer) argued the latter but not in the context of deprecating or denouncing what Kongmin did. Unlike some arguments in the latter camp that were raised in the past and labeled his efforts in 1356 as lacking, incomplete and not Anti-Yuan enough, I do believe there is a way to appreciate what he did, while not designating it as anti-anything.

This reviewer wholeheartedly agrees with the author's assessment that Kongmin was trying to renegotiate the terms of the Koryŏ-Yuan relationship. I also find his opinion on Kongmin's abolishment of the *Zhizheng* era code as an act similar to what has been attempted by other factions in the vicinity quite fascinating as well. The author is irrefutably well versed in the dynamics of this period and the region, and commands more knowledge than any other foreign scholar I know.

Unfortunately, that makes it a little bit conspicuous that he did not analyze Kongmin's requests made of Yuan in more details. He only lists them here, while his request to reinstate the Koryŏ kings' rights to recommend officers for the Chŏngdong Branch Secretariat office (征東行省) is oddly missing. And then the author jumps to the discussion of how Kongmin's attempts were successful, and suggests the situation in China may have helped him. The author essentially argues that Yuan was in the corner, harassed by all kinds of factions in the Jiangnan region, and in the wake of all that Kongmin gambled to secure more autonomy, which was why Kongmin was able to accomplish what he ultimately set out to do.

That is to be sure a valid observation, but there could have been other variables that played in Kongmin's favor. This reviewer once

evaluated Kongmin's efforts as a rather genius ploy that was successful ultimately because Kongmin was able to devise a narrative that would prevent Yuan from either blocking Kongmin's efforts or flat out denying them. How Kongmin used Emperor Qubilai's legacy as an advantage for Koryō, and created a working discourse that Yuan could never refuse, could have been incorporated into the author's argument, theorizing the existence of a political capital which Kongmin was able to tap into to get what he wanted.

And on a side note, I also think there is room to expand the author's explanation to the question of why the Emperor eventually forgave Kongmin. The author cited Eurasian situations, as well as (the paramount nature of) the Emperor's goal to keep the Empire intact. But such notion somehow rejects the possibility that Togon Temur may not have been that offended by Koryō's offensive to begin with. Some of the buttons Kongmin pushed did risk antagonizing the Empire, but the issues seem to have been carefully selected, and many of them were not even targeting the Yuan government directly, but actually his wife (Dowager Empress) Queen Gi, who was not even in a good relationship with the Emperor, as she was the biggest supporter of the Crown prince (her own son), whom the author also recognized as a clear and present danger for the Emperor's throne, as a direct contender.

This leads to another point I would like to raise, regarding the author's point presented in Chapter 7. The author discusses Yuan court's abortive effort in 1362-1363 to depose Kongmin. It was a noteworthy incident, as the author also mentioned that it was indeed the first ever example of a Mongol Emperor failing to depose a Koryō king. The reviewer is not against such observation, but I'd also like to point out that while the deposition was apparently authorized and certainly green-lit by the Emperor, the real villain behind the curtain may have been Empress Ki. Such possibility is suggested also by the author, but I wish there was more follow-up to that particular point, as Empress Ki was who really split the Koryō people in half, and caused not only clashes of ideas but allegiances to diverge, which became a major -and



probably the biggest- problem for Kongmin himself.

Meanwhile, the author's another ongoing observation is that Kongmin wanted to diversify allies. The range of factions he tried to have a dialogue with was indeed wide, so it can and should be said that Kongmin was trying to make more new friends, just as the author has said. But according to *Koryōsa* (高麗史), sometimes Kongmin did not look that eager to engage in diplomatic talks with representatives from the Chinese Jiangnan region. Sometimes he even seemed a little bit bored, and quite reserved in further cultivating relationships with them. Of course he may have been trying not to provoke Yuan unnecessarily, but certain limits he may have had in his mind may as well be considered altogether.

And there is the book's Conclusion, where the author suggests that Kongmin's efforts to modify Koryō's relationship with Yuan may have led to his assassination. Personally, I find this assessment a little bit puzzling. He also suggests that Kongmin's campaigns in the Liaodung and Tamna regions weakened his position in Koryō and caused the frustration of people who were directly involved in his murder, which I think is rather pushing it.

However, the author's narrative raises one last question that is both haunting and provocative as it is also a duly required one. According to the author, "Wang Ki and his dynasty indeed did not survive the end of Mongol rule and the rise of a new East Asian order." The sentence itself of course contains historical truth. Koryō did not live to see the next era on the Eurasian stage. So the question this observation may spawn should be, "why was Koryō not able to (survive)?" Was Koryō too weak to survive the fall of the Empire? Or was the relationship Koryō cultivated with Yuan made Koryō too interrelated with it that the dismantling of the Empire was such a striking blow to Koryō? Let me also rephrase the question a little bit: If there was no Empire, would Koryō have gone on indefinitely, or at least lasted longer than it did?

These are questions that cannot be responded with simple answers,

and I am really curious what the author ultimately thinks. Personally, I don't believe Koryŏ was too weak to survive the Empire's fall, and I refuse to believe that Koryŏ was too entangled with Yuan to break away from the Empire when it was falling apart. But the Yuan-Ming transfer on China and reconfiguration of the Eurasian sphere was apparently a sheer force that was creating new disruptions, and changes engineered by such forces on individual regions may have been too strong for Koryŏ to bear. According to the author, the rise of Yi Sŏng-gye (李成桂, b.1335-d.1402, r.1392-1398), founder of the Chosŏn dynasty(朝鮮, 1392-1910), was yet another result of things that were happening Eurasia-wide. And while Koryŏ was replaced by Chosŏn founded by Yi, the peninsula as a whole was still run by a centralized leadership. So did Koryŏ survive or not? Or did the Korean peninsula itself survive or not? In a manner of speaking, "yes and no," I think.

The author's observation reveals Kongmin as a being who was at first not privy to the context, details, traps and pitfalls of the 14th century Eurasian dynamic, but later on gradually got used to it, then tried to modify Koryŏ's relationship with Yuan that had been based on marital relationships and military cooperation, while endeavoring to secure new friends beyond the Empire. Judging from that, maybe Kongmin was the one who was best suited for the era, to deal with the unique situation Koryŏ was put in at the time. Whether his reign faced or even invited the inevitable, or delayed it on the contrary, is yet to be determined. But no one would be able to deny the fact that we are closer than ever to the answer, thanks to the author's insights delivered in this book.

## **Conclusion**

It was an honor and joy to read and review this fascinating book. I almost feel jealous, and am compelled to someday publish my works in English as well, to share my thoughts with scholars around the

world, just like the author did with this book. But for the time being I'm just impressed, again. Just how many times a person can be inspired by another? The author is breaking records with every one of his books.

But before wrapping up this review, I would like to add my two cents, just in case the author would publish another book on King Kongmin. I understand it was his intentions to pay a closer look to Kongmin as a person, and that was why the author referred to him primarily as Wang Ki. But over the years in my studies of King Kongmin's period, I do believe that several aspects of his reign should be discussed more. King Kongmin's era was to be sure when international dynamics were shifting on a continental scale, and Koryŏ's interests were hanging in the balance. Things Koryŏ had taken for granted in the past were going through a metamorphosis, while situations and tides were turning in an almost irrevocable fashion. So, prioritizing the observation of diplomatic initiatives launched by a Koryŏ leader at this juncture was more than a valid choice on the author's part. I am not in any way criticizing the author's that choice in this book, but just making suggestions for his consideration in the future.

It should be remembered that there were diplomatic issues that affected King Kongmin's choice in domestic governance, as some domestic policies could never be detached from international situations. Some of the international variables did affect Kongmin's domestic ruling, and some of his diplomatic agendas were to support his domestic priorities. So, in order to paint a whole picture of Kongmin's governance that lasted for 23 years, domestic maneuvers he displayed are also crucial. For example, there were his political reforms such as his modifications to the governmental structure, which took place total of four times during his reign and were designed to counteract international situations to ensure that Koryŏ's diplomatic needs are met, while domestic necessities could be fulfilled as well. There were also his economic reforms which did continue till the very end, including his plans to increase revenue, and his efforts to revamp the currency

system. The author's general stance on this is that Kongmin was not able to fix certain social and economic problems, but I think we should pay attention to what he tried to do, and what his intentions were.

Then there were his military reforms. Kongmin abolished the military installations -namely the myriarchies- that had been established on Koryŏ soil, but he accepted them more as an institutional entity, and happily employed them (after the Yuan-installed ones were gone) and operated them as he deemed fit. And there were also his cultural policies, which employed music in his dealings with Yuan and Ming. In addressing the Mongol Empire he promoted traditional music, and when Ming came around he asked the Ming founder to provide them with musicians and musical instruments in classic Chinese style.

All these efforts of king Kongmin could be included in the author's future endeavors. I wish all the luck for his next achievement, and hope he continues to inspire readers and scholars with his studies involving the Korean peninsula.