

Foreigners in Korea during the Period of Mongol Interference

Peter Yun

Korea University

Abstract

The period of Mongol Interference in Korea in the 13th and 14th centuries was the time of unprecedented opportunities for upward social mobility to those who had traditionally been excluded from the ruling stratum. Composition of the Koryo ruling stratum was further complicated by arrival of foreigners. As Korea was incorporated into the vast Yuan empire, many foreigners came and settled in Koryo. Some were retainers of Mongol princesses, and others were looking for better opportunities or an escape from chaotic situations in the continent. A few even rose to very high official posts in the Koryo officialdom and became the newest members of the Koryo ruling stratum. In both quantitative and qualitative terms, the presence of foreigners in the Koryo ruling stratum during the period of Mongol interference was unprecedented in Korean history. Through an examination of the political and social characteristics of these foreigners, this paper hopes to shed some light on the attitudes of Koryo aristocrats toward their own social system, ethnicity, and culture.

Introduction

The political situation of East Asia under the Mongol Yuan (1271–1368) empire was unique in many aspects. The Mongol conquests were not limited to East Asia but reached far outside of the sphere of traditional Chinese influence and provided the necessary conditions for unprecedented large-scale movements of people and ideas. Moreover, interstate relations between Koryo Korea and Mongol Yuan also differed greatly from the traditional pattern of Korean-Chinese relations. The Mongol period in Korea offered great opportunities for upward social mobility to those who had traditionally been excluded from the ruling stratum. Composition of Koryo ruling stratum was further complicated by arrival of foreigners. The presence of politically successful foreigners in the

late Koryo period was a product of peculiar political situations of the time as Koryo was fully incorporated into a vast multi-ethnic Yuan empire.

There were several foreigners who rose to the top positions of the government with a rank of junior second grade or higher [known collectively as the *chaech' u*], and the majority of them were also honored with the titles of nobility. They were able to succeed because they fulfilled certain special functions, and in both quantitative and qualitative terms, the presence of foreigners in the Koryo ruling stratum during the period of Mongol domination was truly unprecedented and unparalleled in Korean history. However, the presence of many foreigners must have posed several problems to the Koryo aristocrats.

Through a preliminary examination of the foreigners in the Koryo ruling stratum focusing on their ethnic and social backgrounds, government ranks and positions attained, marriage patterns, and success of their descendents, this paper hopes to shed some light on the Koryo ruling stratum's view of their own social system and culture, and of the place of Koryo in the greater East Asian political structure. It should be noted, however, that these foreigners and their descendants in this study can by no means be considered as the representative of the vast number of foreigners who settled in the Korean peninsula during the period of Mongol interference. They were in fact a very tiny group among many foreigners whose total number may well have exceeded several tens of thousands.

I. Foreigners in the Koryo Ruling Stratum

1. Profile of Foreigners in Koryo

One way the Mongol Yuan court controlled and interfered in Koryo's internal affairs was through royal marriages between Koryo kings and Mongol princesses, and many successful foreigners came to Korea as private retainers or attendants (*ch' ieh-lien-k' ou*) of Mongol princesses. These royal retainers owed their political successes directly to patronage by Mongol princesses and Koryo kings. They were mostly of Mongol and Central Asian (*se-mu*) ethnicity (see Appendix I) who enjoyed special privileges under the four class system of the Yuan dynasty. They were the most successful group in the early phase of the influx of foreigners during the period of Mongol interference, but it is noteworthy that these Mongols and Central Asians in Koryo seem to have come from a rather humble social background. Thus, Na Se's (a Mongol general in late Koryo) statement that he was not from a distinguished family [*sadaebu*] was

perhaps not merely a conventional expression of modesty. A few Chinese also formed close personal relationship with Koryo kings and came to Koryo as royal personal attendants, and later as the Yuan dynasty began its irreversible decline, more Mongols, Central Asians, Chinese and Jurchens sought escape in Koryo as peasant rebellions and incessant warfare among the contenders vying for the control of empire turned the whole Yuan Empire into battlegrounds. In the biographical accounts of politically successful foreigners in official dynastic histories such as *Koryosa*, *Koryosa choryo* and *Choson wangjo sillok*, most foreigners appear to have been first appointed to military posts as they lacked scholarly training.

2. Power Base and Functions

Most previous studies of the late Koryo polity have generally considered the pro-Yuan groups as an entity separate from the Koryo king. However, the Yuan court more or less exercised its political control over Korea through Koryo kings, and only in rare instances do we see Koryo officials maintaining direct political connections with the Yuan court. Because foreigners did not have political sponsors at the Yuan court or local power base in Koryo, they found it necessary to attach themselves to Koryo kings and owed their political successes to Koryo kings or Mongol princesses. The historical records show that Koryo kings were the most powerful and often sole political sponsor for foreigners.

Koryo kings had been mere figureheads during the period of military domination, but beginning with King Ch' ungyol' s reign (1274–1308), political power of the throne was more secure *as long as* the king enjoyed the support of the Yuan court. The problem was that the Yuan court shifted its support from time to time, and the support [or non-support] was connected largely to shifting political situations in Ta-tu (the capital of the Yuan Dynasty) which Koryo kings could neither control nor influence much. Thus, even with the patronage of the Yuan court, Koryo kings had to worry constantly about the changing political climate at the Yuan court. In such a precarious political situation, it was only natural that Koryo kings felt a need to surround themselves with subjects loyal only to them, and Koryo kings promoted these subjects generously to high government posts. Here the potential followers of the Koryo throne included foreigners and Koreans

of humble social background who were totally dependent on the king for whatever wealth and political position they enjoyed. Thus, we find spectacular political successes by those of the slave background and by foreigners in this period.

In dealing with the Mongols [and later with Chinese Ming], the Koryo court needed capable officials who were fluent in Mongol and/or Chinese languages and familiar with the political situation in China. Foreigners, especially the private retainers of Mongol princesses, were uniquely and well qualified for this job. They not only served as envoys to the Yuan court, but also composed and translated important diplomatic documents between Korea and China. **Although the linguistic talent alone did not always guarantee political successes**, the Koryo court [and later the Choson court] employed these foreigners and their descendants who had necessary linguistic skills.

A number of foreigners, especially the Mongols, also distinguished themselves as capable field commanders. The state needed capable generals to engage in the battles against Mongols, Jurchens, Khitans and Japanese pirates in the chaotic times of the late Koryo period. Indeed, the ascendancy of military officials in the late Koryo was probably due to the necessity of competent military officers of the time rather than the legacy of the military rule prior to the Mongol domination. Yi Songgye's spectacular rise to the founding of a new dynasty should be taken within the context of the highly militarized Koryo society of the time dominated by talented military commanders. Thus, we find several foreigners rising to high political positions solely on their military talents. In particular, three Mongols, In Hu, Hwang Sang, and Na Se, served as military commanders during the invasion of the Red Turbans and also in many battles against the Japanese pirates and Mongol troops of the Northern Yuan.

On the other hand, the Koryo court at the time was marred by severe political struggles between the kings and their heirs (for example, between Kings Ch'ungnyol and Ch'ungson, and Ch'ungsuk and Ch'unghye). Thus when a king passed away, old confidants of the deceased king were often ignored and even persecuted by the new king as in the case of King Ch'ungson's purge of his father's close attendants. Foreigners who relied exclusively on their personal connection to Koryo kings for their political power inevitably suffered from the decline of prestige and power of the Koryo royalty.

3. Marriage Relations of Foreigners and Their Descendants

It may perhaps be expected that the foreigners, having come to an unfamiliar country, would forge a clique of their own. Indeed, private retainers of Mongol princesses seemed to have initially associated primarily with themselves and with those Koryo officials who maintained close ties with the Yuan court. However, there is little evidence of foreigners trying to form a political faction of their own. On the contrary, these foreigners were often in competition with one another.

In the aristocratic Koryo society, elite families had to demonstrate and confirm their political standing through continuous intermarriages with the royal family and other leading families. Marriage relations were important politically because the protective appointment [*ŭmsŏ*] into the Koryo officialdom could be exercised through both the paternal and maternal sides, and they also had an economic importance as sons and daughters shared more or less equally in the inheritance practice of Koryo society.

When they first arrived in Koryo, most foreigners were probably already married, and their wives were very likely themselves foreigners since their marriages took place outside of Koryo. As marriage alliances between families were between those of equal status, leading aristocratic families were not very likely to have entered into marriage relations with foreigners. Thus, we see that two first generation foreigners married women of well-established aristocratic families. However, their descendants appear to have entered into marriage relations with more distinguished aristocratic families. Whereas Chong Sinbo and Chong In'gyong both took ethnic Chinese women, Chong In'gyong's first son, Chong Yu [also recorded as Sinyu], married a woman from the Yohung Min family. Yi Chiran's son, Yi Hwasang married a daughter of Kwon Kun of the Andong Kwon family, and his grandson, Yi Hyoryang, took as his wife a woman of the royal Chonju Yi family. These were the most prestigious aristocratic descent groups in the late Koryo and early Choson. Although we have only very scant information on the marriage relations of the daughters of foreigners, it may be surmised that their marriages too were made with aristocratic families of comparable political positions. For example, In Hu's daughter was married to Won Sonjang, son of Won Kyong of the Wonju Won clan.

4. Success of Descendants

Politically successful foreigners could have paved the way for their descendants in the highly ascriptive Koryo society. There were indeed several descendants of foreigners who began their official careers with help from the political prestige and power of their fathers. However, many descendants of foreigners failed to have successful official careers. It appears that some of the foreigners simply failed to produce any male heir, and other foreigners were producing only one or two sons. As social prestige and wealth flowed out of official positions, it was essential for them to produce many male offspring who could take the government examination and follow the footsteps of their father into the officialdom. Without male heirs, even the institution of protected appointment could not sustain the high political positions acquired by the first generation foreigners.

Moreover, it appears that the most important factor in the success of descendants of foreigners was their military skills and the ability to perform specialized task as diplomatic intermediaries between Korean and Chinese courts. Simply put, those descendants who had necessary literary or military skills continued to thrive and maintain the high positions of their fathers, but others who lacked any talents failed miserably and disappeared from the political arena in the critical period of dynastic transition. The descendants of the foreigners who not only rose to very prominent positions but also made a successful transition in the change of dynasties are listed in Appendix II.

II. Attitudes of the Koryo Aristocrats toward Foreigners

Overall, historical records suggest that there were little discernible racial, cultural, and social discrimination against foreigners by Koryo aristocrats. Almost all official denunciations or complaints against foreigners supply clear reasons, and the main reason why some foreigners elicited negative reactions was their abuse of power and unabashed avarice for wealth. However, similar misdeeds committed by Koryo officials also brought harsh judgments in the official histories. Thus, the very negative portrayal of many private retainers of Mongol princesses does not necessarily suggest ethnic bias against them. If we take the biographical account of No Yong, a retainer of Princess Cheguk who came to Koryo with In Hu and Chang Sunnyong, as an example, we see that all three men were recorded in the *p' yehaeng* (“those who gained to high official posts through flattery”) sub-section of the biographies in the *Koryosa*.

Yet, No Yong was portrayed in very favorable terms as he was said to have had a warm disposition and acquired some scholarly learning, and that he was not in the same league with In and Chang.

The few extant historical sources show that the Koryo society [at least in the upper class] seems to have been free of ethnic and cultural prejudices. Perhaps overt ethnic and cultural prejudices by the Koryo ruling stratum could not be expected when Koryo kings were themselves half-Mongols and many leading families of Koryo maintained marriage relations with prominent Mongol or Central Asian families of the Yuan dynasty. Culturally, the Mongol hair and clothing styles were very popular during the period. Even after the fall of the Yuan dynasty, as Koryo was about to clash with Ming China over a territorial dispute, the king abolished the Ming regnal title and ordered all Koryo people to revert to the Mongol style clothing. It was said that even before the king's decree was issued, many people in the Koryo capital had already changed their hair in the Mongol style and were wearing Yuan style clothing.

While it was certainly true that the Koryo aristocrats preferred and gave better treatments to those foreigners with elite lineage background such as Sol Son, other foreigners appear to have faced little or no discrimination because of their low social status. The family background information is conspicuously brief or entirely missing for many foreigners, and this in turn suggests that they were of rather humble social status. Except Han Pok, all three Mongols, In Hu, Hwang Sokki, and Na Se, appeared to have been descendents of rather humble Mongol families. However, this contrasts to the discrimination against those of slave background who were often targets of contempt by Koryo aristocrats.

On the other hand, there was a clear Confucian bias against foreigners. Although Koryo society was heavily influenced by Buddhism, there existed a considerable Confucian prejudice especially among those in the bureaucracy, and even those foreigners obviously lacking any Confucian background such as In Hu and Chang Sunnyong were said to have envied the glory of passing the examinations. They sent their sons to take the examination who were able to pass the exam not on their literary talents but by relying on the influence of their fathers. We cannot dismiss the overwhelming evidence of Confucian ideology prevalent among the leading political and intellectual figures of the time, and any attempt to ascertain the attitudes of the Koryo ruling stratum from the official histories must take into account this inherent Confucian bias. Indeed, it may be this Confucian bias that may have been responsible for the negative portrayal of the foreigners.

In the end, the Koryo ruling stratum seems to have maintained a very pragmatic attitude. Once they realized that there were no other alternatives to the Mongol suzerainty, most accepted the situation and tried to make the best of it. This is not to say there was no political and cultural resistance to the Mongol interference in Koryo's internal affairs. As Koryo adopted many aspects of the Mongol culture, there were also attempts to preserve Koryo's own tradition. The considerable support for the Rebellion of the Three Patrols [Sam pyolch'o] also attests to strong anti-Yuan feelings of many Koryo nationals at the time. In the end, except for a few aristocratic families who had close connections with the Yuan Imperial family or other powerful leading clans in Ta-tu, most aristocratic families of Koryo turned against the Mongols as the Yuan Empire began its irreversible decline.

Conclusion

The basic attitude of the Koryo ruling stratum toward foreigners was pragmatism. In the peculiar political situations of the late Koryo period, there was a need for these foreigners who could fulfill the special function as intermediaries between Koryo and Yuan. The state also needed capable generals to lead its forces in many battles in the chaotic times of the late Koryo period. Thus, the kings and aristocrats accepted these foreigners into their ranks. It appears that Koryo aristocrats were much more willing to accept foreigners because the incorporation of small number of foreigners, unlike those of slave background, into the ruling stratum did not threaten the basic social status system.

Many Koryo nationals not only settled in the Yuan territory but also served in the Yuan bureaucracy. This along with the fact that foreigners were readily accepted by Koryo aristocrats suggests that they viewed their state in the larger context of the cosmopolitan imperial order. Koryo aristocrats certainly did not reject Mongol Yuan and accept Chinese Ming because of ethnicity or culture. In the Yuan-Ming dynastic transition, they chose the stronger Ming because of the geopolitical factor. As the demise of the Yuan dynasty threatened to break down the order, they simply chose to replace the Yuan with the Ming. Although the Koryo officialdom had little ethnic or social prejudices against foreigners, there was a strong Confucian literati bias of the early Choson dynasty as the material avarice and small mindedness of several foreigners were highlighted from a

Confucian standpoint. However, such Confucian bias and judgments were applied to all, not just to foreigners.

We must be careful in our use of the terms such as “Korea” and “Korean” so as not to project uncritically their modern imagery onto the past. The political successes of the foreigners suggest that the attitude toward foreigners was quite open and unbiased in the late Koryo period. The strict racial exclusiveness found in modern Korea appears to have begun after the founding of the Choson dynasty that closed its borders and tightly controlled any international exchange of ideas and movements of people.

Appendix I Successful Foreigners in Koryo

Name	Nationality	Year of Arrival	Highest Rank	Title of Nobility
Chang Sunnyong	Central Asian	1274	2b	no
Han Pok	Mongol	1370	2b	yes
Hwang Sokki	Mongol	1330?	2a	yes
In Hu	Mongol	1274	1b	yes
Kim Ui	Central Asian	before 1346	2b	no
Min Po	Central Asian	before 1294	2b	no
Na Se	Mongol	before 1264	2b	yes
Sol Son	Central Asian	1358		yes
Chong Sinbo	Chinese	before 1269	4b	no
Kong So	Chinese	1351	2a	yes
Pyon Annyol	Chinese	before 1363	1b	yes
Tang Song	Chinese	before 1356	2b	no
Yang Ki	Chinese	1351?	3a	yes
Yi Mindo	Chinese	before 1366	2b	yes

Appendix II Successful Descendants of Foreigners

Name and Date	Father	Highest Rank	Title of Nobility
Chang Son (?)	Chang Sunnyong	2b	no
Chong In' gyong (1267-1305)	Chong Sinbo	1b	no
Hwang Sang (?)	Hwang Sokki	2a	yes
In Sungdan (?-1359)	In Hu	1b	yes
Kong Pu (?-1416)	Kong Yo (Chinese)	2b	no
Pyon I (?-1439)	Pyon Annyol	2b	no
Sol Changsu (1341-1399)	Sol Son	1b	yes
Sol Misu (1343-1415)	Sol Son	2a	no
Sol Sun (?-1435)	Sol Kyongsu	2b	no
Yi Chin (?-1448)	Yi Mindo (Chinese)	2b	no
Yi Hwasang (?)	Yi Chiran	2a	no
Yi Hwayong (?-1424)	Yi Chiran	2a	no
Yi Hyon (?-1415)	? (Central Asian)	2b	no

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ch'oe Chaesok. "Koryo cho e issoso ui t'oji ui chanyo kynbun sangsok." *Han'guksa Yon'gu* 35 (1981): 33-44

Chong Inji, et al. *Koryo sa*. 3 volumes. Seoul: Asea Munhwasa, 1972.

Choson wangjo sillok. Seoul: Kuksa P'yonch'an Wiwonhoe, 1982.

Chu Ch'aehyok. "Mongol?Koryo sa yon'gu ui chae komt'o: Mongol?Koryo sa ui songgyok munje." *Kuksagwan Nonch'ong* 8 (1989): 25-66.

Duncan, John B. "The Social Background to the Founding of the Choson Dynasty: Change or Continuity?" *Journal of Korean Studies* 6 (1988-89): 39-79.

Duncan, John B. *The Origins of the Choson Dynasty*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000.

Hong Sunggi. *Koryo kwijok sahoe wa nobi*. Seoul: Ilchogak, 1983.

Hsiao Ch'i-ch'ing. *The Military Establishment of the Yuan Dynasty*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978.

Kim Chongso, et al. *Koryosa choryo*. Seoul: Asea Munhwasa, 1972.

Ko Hyeryong, "Pang Sinu soron." In Ko Pyongik sonsaeng hoegap kinyom sahak nonch'ong kanhaeng wiwonhoe. *Yoksa wa in'gan ui taeung*. Seoul: Hanul, 1985, pp. 83-99.

Koryo myonghyon chip. 5 volumes. Seoul: Songgyun'gwan Taehakkyo Taedong Munhwa yon'guwon, 1980.

Langlois, John D. Jr., ed. *China under Mongol Rule*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

Pak Okkol. *Koryo sidae ui kwihwain yon' gu*. Seoul: Kukhak charyowon, 1996.

Rossabi, Morris, ed. *China Among Equals*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983.

Shultz, Edward J. "Military Revolt in Koryo: The 1170 Coup d'Etat." *Korean Studies* 3 (1979): 19-48.

Shultz, Edward J. "Twelfth-Century Koryo Politics: The Rise of Han Anin and His Partisans." *Journal of Korean Studies* 6 (1988-89): 3-38.

Sung Lien, et al. *Yuan shih*. Beijing: Chung hua shu chu, 1976.

Wang, Q. Edward. "History, Space, and Ethnicity: The Chinese World View." *Journal of World History* 10.2 (1999): 285-305.

Wittfogel, Karl A., and Feng Chia-sheng. *History of Chinese Society: Liao*. Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1949.

Yi Sugon. *Han' guk chungse sahoesa yon' gu*. Seoul: Ilchogak, 1984.

Yijo myonghyon chip. In five volumes. Seoul: Songgyun'gwan Taehakkyo Taedong Munhwa Yon'guwon, 1985.

Yun, Peter I. "Foreigners in Koryo Ruling Stratum during the Period of Mongol Domination." M.A. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1992.

Yun, Peter I. "Rethinking the Tribute System: Korean States and Northeast Asian Interstate Relations, 600–1600." Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1998.