

Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire

Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire explores the experiences of the enigmatic and controversial King Gongmin of Goryeo, Wang Gi, as he navigated the upheavals of the mid-fourteenth century, including the collapse of the Mongol Empire and the rise of its successors in West, Central, and East Asia. Drawing on a wealth of Korean and Chinese sources and integrating East Asian and Western scholarship on the topic, David Robinson considers the single greatest geopolitical transformation of the fourteenth century through the experiences of this one East Asian ruler. He focuses on the motives of Wang Gi, rather than the major contemporary powers, to understand the rise and fall of empire, offering a fresh perspective on this period of history. The result is a more nuanced and accessible appreciation of Korean, Mongolian, and Chinese history, which sharpens our understanding of alliances across Eurasia.

David M. Robinson is Professor of Asian Studies and History at Colgate University.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-09896-0 — Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire
David M. Robinson
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-09896-0 — Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire
David M. Robinson
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire

Alliance, Upheaval, and the Rise of a New East Asian Order

David M. Robinson
Colgate University, New York



Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-09896-0 — Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire
David M. Robinson
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009098960
DOI: 10.1017/9781009106672

© David M. Robinson 2022

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2022

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-009-09896-0 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-09896-0 — Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire
David M. Robinson
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

For Willard Peterson

Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-09896-0 — Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire
David M. Robinson
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Contents

<i>List of Charts</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>List of Maps</i>	ix
<i>Kings of the Late Goryeo Period</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xvii
Introduction	1
1 Child of Empire: 1330–1341	19
2 A Decade at the Yuan Court: 1341–1351	46
3 The Goryeo Dynasty on the Eve of Wang Gi’s Enthronement: 1341–1351	71
4 Becoming the Goryeo King: 1351–1353	91
5 Ally in Collapse: 1354–1355	111
6 Redefining Allegiance: The Summer of 1356	134
7 A Tipping Point: 1357–1367	153
8 Choosing a New Lord: 1368–1370	176
9 A New Age: 1370–1374	217
Conclusion	246
<i>References</i>	258
<i>Index</i>	276

Charts

0.1 Kings of the Late Goryeo Period	<i>page</i> x
3.1 Chart of succession	72

Maps

0.1	The Mongol empire	<i>page</i> 9
2.1	Yuan and Goryeo dynasties	48
8.1	Ming, Yuan, and Goryeo dynasties	179

Kings of the Late Goryeo Period

Temple name	Personal name	Mongolian name	Date of birth	Date of death	Reign
King Gojong 高宗	Wang Cheol 王暉		February 3, 1192	July 21, 1259	1213–1259
King Wonjong 元宗	Wang Jeong 王禎		April 5, 1219	July 23, 1274	1259–1274
King Chungnyeol 忠烈王	Wang Geo 王珣		April 3, 1236	July 30, 1308	1274–Jan. 1298 1298.8– July 1308
King Chungseon 忠宣王	Wang Jang 王璋	Ijirbuqa 益知禮普花	October 20, 1275	June 23, 1325	Jan.–Aug. 1298 1308–1313
King Chungsuk 忠肅王	Wang Do 王燾	Aratnashiri 阿剌納忒 失里	July 30, 1294	May 3, 1339	1313–1330 1332–1339
King Chunghye 忠惠王	Wang Jeong 王禎	Budnashiri/ Buddashiri 普塔失里	February 22, 1315	January 30, 1344	1330–1332 1339–1344
King Chungmok 忠穆王	Wang Heun 王昕	Padma-Dorji 八思麻朶 兒只	May 15, 1337	December 25, 1348	1344–1348
King Chungjeong 忠定王	Wang Jeo 王	Chosgen-Dorji 迷思監朶 兒只	1338	March 23, 1352	1349–1451
King Gongmin 恭愍王	Wang Gi 王祺 (later Wang Joen 王顥)	Bayan-Temür 伯顏帖木兒	May 23, 1330	October 27, 1374	1351–1374
King U 禡王	Wang U 王禡		July 25, 1365	December 31, 1389	1374–1388

Preface

“Being so unruly and depraved, how could he have hoped to be spared his end?”

Goryeo History

What went through the Goryeo king’s mind on October 10, 1374, as his mangled body collapsed to the palace’s smooth cool stone floor? Perhaps the forty-four-year-old Wang Gi pondered the cruel irony of dying at the hands of the same royal eunuch who cared for his intimate needs and members of his personal bodyguard who guaranteed his safety. Perhaps he wondered who had ordered his assassination and how they would explain his sudden death to subjects at home and allies abroad. If his life flashed before his eyes, he would have seen dizzying personal and political change, an unexpected rise to the throne, abortive coups, bloody purges, the fall of the mighty Mongols, and the rise of a new Eurasian order. Little could he have foreseen how government chroniclers would sum up the span of his existence. After praising his promising beginnings, they condemned his abdication of royal responsibilities and his rapid descent into drinking and depravity. The final line (noted above) of their account of Wang Gi’s reign in *Goryeo History*, one of most important surviving sources for understanding the king and his times, was less question than judgment. But how do we assess his significance today?

From 1351 to 1374, Wang Gi, posthumously known as King Gongmin, ruled the kingdom of Goryeo (today’s Korea). There are many ways to tell Wang Gi’s tale. He was a devout Buddhist who generously patronized religious activities and enlisted learned monks as advisers. Confronting foreign incursions and a massive surge in coastal piracy – so potent that the capital itself was repeatedly put on high alert – he reformed Goryeo’s military. He tried to implement structural change to his kingdom’s socioeconomic foundations, including land tenure and human chattel. A man of refined sensibilities, he abhorred the hunt for its brutality but adored hunting raptors for their ferocity. His Mongolian queen’s death in childbirth midway through his reign

plunged him into prolonged depression. His identity as a homosexual or bisexual man has fascinated contemporary Korean audiences in recent decades. Religion, military reform, socioeconomic change, emotions, and sexual identity are all important and promising lenses through which to examine Wang Gi.

Although touching on all those issues, this book explores Wang Gi's life and times through a different prism, that of the single greatest geopolitical transformation of the fourteenth century and one of the most consequential developments of early modern Eurasia: the collapse of Mongol power and rise of its successors in West, Central, and East Asia. In 1330, Wang Gi was born a scion of the Goryeo dynasty, a family that had ruled the Korean peninsula since 918. In 1351, he took the throne with the full support of the Mongols, with whom his family had allied and intermarried for nearly a century. For the first eighteen years of his reign, he held investiture as King of Goryeo from the Mongol Great Khan, and Wang Gi understood himself as a privileged member of the Mongol empire's ruling elite. In 1368, Mongol control collapsed, the Great Khan abandoned his capital at today's Beijing for the relative safety of the steppe, and the newly founded Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in today's Nanjing claimed to be China's sole legitimate government. In 1369, Wang Gi abandoned his formal ties to the Great Khan, and in 1370 he accepted investiture as King of Goryeo from the Ming emperor. Seen in this light, Wang Gi's story seems complete and successful. He had deftly directed the perilous transition from the Mongol empire to its principal successor in eastern Eurasia, shifting his allegiance from the Great Khan to the Ming emperor and securing the place of the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392) in a new regional order dominated by the Ming dynasty, which would reign until the mid-seventeenth century.

Reality was messier and more interesting than a simple one-and-done transfer of loyalty, swapping one regional superpower for another. Throughout his entire reign, Wang Gi's relations with the Great Khan, a descendant of Genghis (here spelled Chinggis) Khan named Toghan-Temür (1320–1370), were tumultuous. He sent troops to help Toghan-Temür crush spreading rebellion in China, later attacked the Great Khan's border outposts, and still later raised an army to prevent the Great Khan from dethroning him. Despite severing formal ties with the Great Khan and accepting investiture from the Ming throne, Wang Gi maintained informal links to the Mongols, while his relationship with the Ming founder, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398) was deeply fraught, and the Ming emperor repeatedly accused him of betrayal and openly threatened to rain down destruction on the Goryeo dynasty. Following Wang Gi's murder in 1374, the Goryeo court quickly reversed course, restoring formal ties with the Great Khan, which prompted even more bellicose threats from Zhu Yuanzhang.

The drama of Wang Gi's life is best understood in a wider historical context. As the Mongol polity across Eurasia faced mounting challenges in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – from floods, droughts, epidemics, and starvation to corruption, poor leadership, court intrigue, and insurrection – Wang Gi and other thoughtful observers throughout Eurasia began to reconsider, first, their place in the empire and, later, potential alternatives to the Mongol order. In contrast to Wang Gi, a Goryeo royal who married a Chinggisid noblewoman and who took the throne with Mongol backing, the Ming founding emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, had clawed his way to power from the bottom of Chinese society. Born into a family of tenant farmers, Zhu Yuanzhang was orphaned as a teen, briefly became a mendicant monk, and as a young man joined a millenarian rebel movement, where his charisma, leadership, and brutality won him growing numbers of supporters. Both Wang Gi and Zhu Yuanzhang were products of the Mongol empire, which deeply shaped their understanding of the world, but – and this is a key point – they also saw that change was possible and that through skill and determination they might shape the future.

It is impossible to understand the Mongols without close attention to their allies. The Mongol empire was an extraordinarily complex composite, including four main branches of the Chinggisid family, dozens of smaller courts of Mongol aristocrats, and hundreds of allied houses, ranging from mid-sized dynasties such as Goryeo to smaller, local polities and individual leaders. The Mongols' story is as much about the formation and dissolution of those hundreds of alliances across Eurasia as it is about the rise and fall of Chinggis Khan and his descendants. To live in an age of a faltering Mongol empire was to confront rapid change, unexpected reversals, and uncertainty with incomplete knowledge and unreliable allies. All leaders – and no small number of local elites and even common people – scrambled to reassess their interests, their friends and allies, their rivals and foes. As they built new alliances, sometimes they drew from practices and expectations developed during the Mongol age, sometimes they invoked classical native precedents, and sometimes they hammered out relationships that differed significantly from the past.

This book explores the experiences of one East Asian ruler – Wang Gi, King of Goryeo – as he navigated the upheavals of the mid-fourteenth century. The details of his tale not only yield a more nuanced appreciation of Korean, Mongolian, and Chinese history, but also sharpen understanding of alliances across Eurasia. The Mongol empire was unprecedentedly large, and its deterioration directly touched most of Eurasia, from today's Eastern Europe, Turkey, Russia, Iran, and Iraq, across today's Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, China, Korea, and Vietnam, and indirectly exercised an even broader influence. For a generation and more, polities and peoples in West, Central, and East Asia created, with many false starts, much uncertainty, and repeated clashes, a series

Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-09896-0 — Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire
David M. Robinson
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

xiv Preface

of new alliances in the wake of the Mongol empire's eclipse. The fortunes of the great powers – the Ming dynasty, Muscovite Russia, the Ottoman empire, among others – during that anarchic age have been recounted often and ably, but the fate of their smaller allies is much less known and far too underappreciated. Here, for the first time ever in English is the story of Wang Gi and his struggle for allies in chaos.

Acknowledgments

Over the years, colleagues in the field of Korean history like John Duncan and Sem Vermeersch have been extraordinarily generous in sharing their expertise. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to George Kallander and Edward Shultz for taking time to read and critique the entire manuscript. Chōng Yogūn 정요근 much improved my understanding of the Goryeo royal household, and Lee Kang-Hahn (I Ganghan) has patiently fielded my questions in Goryeo history. Scholars of the Mongol empire too continue to provide support, encouragement, and insight. I thank Jonathan Brack for an opportunity to discuss the project with the illustrious members of the Mongol Zoominar, hosted and supported by the Louis Frieberg Center for East Asia Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. Christopher Atwood deserves praise for his yeoman service on the unglamorous but vital work of transcribing Mongolian and Jurchen names from East Asian sources, as well as for sharing his seemingly infinite knowledge of Mongolian history. The late Thomas Allsen remains an enduring inspiration for how to write Eurasian history. For their generous bibliographic assistance, I am grateful to Martin Heijdra and Hyoungbae Lee of Princeton University East Asian Library and Cathleen Paethe of Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte. I am deeply grateful to Erin Greb Cartography for sharing their mapmaking expertise. The book could not have been written without the unfailingly helpful Colgate University Library staff, and I am especially indebted to Lisa King, our interlibrary loan co-ordinator. I extend my thanks to Rachel Blaifeder and Lucy Rhymer, my editors at Cambridge University Press. John Gaunt did much to improve the clarity and concision of my prose. An anonymous reader for Cambridge University Press offered several useful suggestions.

My research would have been impossible without the generous support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, American Council of Learned Societies, Institute for Advanced Study, Fulbright program to Taiwan, Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte, and Colgate's Research Council and Lampert Institute Faculty Fellowship. This work was supported by the Laboratory for the Globalization of Korean Studies

Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-09896-0 — Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire
David M. Robinson
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

xvi Acknowledgments

through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service of The Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2013-LAB-2250001). I thank Nam-lin Hur for his invitation so many years ago to join his research project; here, now long overdue, is my contribution.

Abbreviations

- BXSJ Liu Ji 劉佶. *Beixun siji* 北巡私記. Reprinted in *Mingdai Menggu Hanji shiliao huibian* 明代蒙古漢籍史料彙編. Edited and punctuated by Baoyinhu 薄音湖 and Wang Xiong 王雄. Hohhot: Neimenggu daxue chubanshe, 2006, vol. 1, pp. 1–17.
- CGL Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀. *Nancun chuogeng lu* 南村輟耕錄. 1366. Rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997 [1957].
- CHC *Cambridge History of China*.
- CXWG Su Tianjue 蘇天爵 (1294–1352). *Cixi wengao* 慈溪文稿. Punctuated by Chen Gaohua 陳高華 and Meng Fanqing 孟繁清. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012 [1997].
- DMB *Dictionary of Ming Biography*. Edited by Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang. New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1976.
- DMTZ Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋. *Da Ming Taizu Huangdi yuzhiji* 大明太祖皇帝御製集. Reprinted in *Xijian Mingshi yanjiu ziliao wuzhong* 稀見明史研究資料五種, edited by Zhonghua shuju. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015, vols. 1–4.
- GCWL Su Tianjue 蘇天爵 (1294–1352). *Guochao wenlei* 國朝文類. Reprinted in *Sibu congkan*, 四部叢刊 “chu series” 初編. Rpt. Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1989.
- GMJ Gim Yongseon 金龍善. *Goryeo myojimyeong jipseong* 高麗墓誌銘集成. Chuncheon: Hallim daehakkyo chulpanbu, 1997.
- GS Jeong Inji 鄭麟趾 (1396–1478). *Goryeosa* 高麗史. Reprinted as critical edition *Gaolishi biaodian jiaokanben* 高麗史標點校勘本, edited and punctuated by Sun Xiao 孫曉. Chongqing: Xinan shifan daxue chubanshe and Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2014.
- GSJY Gim Jongseo 金宗瑞. *Goryeosa jeolyo* 高麗史節要. Rpt. Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1974.

xviii List of Abbreviations

- GSWSJZ Quan Heng 權衡 and Ren Chongyue 任崇岳. *Gengshen waishi jianzheng* 庚申外史箋証. Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1991.
- HGMJ *Yeongin pyojeom Hanguk munjip chonggan* 影印標點韓國文集叢刊. Seoul: Minjok munhwa chujinhoe, 1900–2005.
- HMJS *Huang Ming jingshi wenbian* 皇明經世文編, edited by Chen Zilong 陳子龍. Pinglutang, 1638. Fascimile reprint. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962; third printing 1997.
- JSDD *Jingshi dadian jijiao* 經世大典輯校. Compiled by Zhao Shiyuan 趙世延 and Yu Ji 虞集. Edited and punctuated by Zhou Shaochuan 周少川, Wei Xuntian 魏訓田, and Xie Hui 謝輝. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2020.
- KDRB Maema Kyōsaku 前間恭作 and Suematsu Yasukazu 末松保和, compilers. *Kundoku ribun* 訓讀吏文. Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1975, 1942.
- MGMG Yi Saek 李穡. *Mogeun seonsaeng mungo* 牧隱先生文稿. Reprinted in HGMJ, vol. 5.
- MTZBX *Ming Taizu baoxun* 明太祖寶訓. Rpt. Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1961–1966.
- MTZSL *Ming Taizu shilu* 明太祖實錄 in *Ming shilu* 明實錄. Facsimile reproduction of *Guoli Beiping tushuguan cang hongge chaoben* 國立北平圖書館藏紅格抄本. Rpt. Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1961–1966.
- NGS *Nogeoldae eonhae* 老乞大諺解. Keijō (Gyeongseong): Keijō teikoku daigaku hōbungakubu (Gyeongseong jeguk daehak boemmun hakbu) 京城帝國大學法文學部, 1944.
- NTBY *Nantai beiyao* 南臺備要. Edited by Liu Mengchen 劉孟琛. Reprinted in *Xiantai tongji wai sanzong* 憲臺通紀 (外三種), edited by Zhao Chengxi 趙承禧. Punctuated by Wang Xiaoxin 王曉欣. Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2002. Also reproduced in YLDD 2611.2.
- OXQJ Ouyang Xuan 歐陽玄. *Ouyang Xuan Quanji* 歐陽玄全集. Punctuated by Tang Rui. Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 2010.
- QYS *Quan Yuan wen* 全元文. Edited by Li Xiusheng 李修生 et al. Nanjing: Jiangsu gujichubanshe/Fenghuang chubanshe, 1999–2004.
- SLQJ Song Lian 宋濂. *Song Lian quanji* 宋濂全集. Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1999.
- TJSL *Joseon wangjo Taejo sillok* 朝鮮王朝太祖實錄.
- YCJ Gwon Geun 權近. *Yangchon seonsaeng munjip* 陽村先生文集. Reprinted in HGMJ, vol. 7.

List of Abbreviations

xix

- YDZ *Yuan dianzhang* 元典章. Punctuated by Chen Gaohua 陳高華, Zhang Fan 張帆, Liu Xiao 劉曉, and Dang Baohai 党寶海. Tianjin and Beijing: Tianjin guji chubanshe and Zhonghua shuju, 2011.
- YLDD *Yongle dadian* 永樂大典. Rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986, third printing 1998.
- YS *Yuan shi* 元史. Edited by Song Lian 宋廉 et al. Rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-09896-0 — Korea and the Fall of the Mongol Empire
David M. Robinson
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)
