

History of Korea - Part 6

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Silla conquered the other two Korean Kingdoms, Goguryeo and Baekje to create the Unified Silla Dynasty but it never included the entire peninsula nor did it create a unified people. One might think this was the beginning of one Korean people, but it wasn't. It was the expressed policy of Silla that Silla people were a separate class above other people. From the beginning, Korean society was extremely stratified with the ruling elite on top, the common people below and the slaves at the bottom. All things that made life livable were distributed on this basis. Silla took it further when it established the True bone system. The bone rank system divided the aristocracy into a caste system based on blood lineage. This system allowed the ruling elite who held power to maintain that power and position. One's place and position in society was 100% inherited through your blood lineage.

The job or position you could hold, from king or prince to village official or judge, was dictated by your bone rank. The highest rank was sacred bone and belonged to those who were of the royal family. Only those of this rank could become a king or queen. Next there was the True bone rank. These were lesser royal family members and upper Nobility. Others were members of head ranks from 3 to 6. Your rank determined who you could marry, what decoration you could wear on what clothes, how big a house you could live in and whether it had a tile roof or was thatched. Of course this allowed the ruling elite to exercise strict control over the population. There was almost no way to move up under this system. Whatever bone rank you were born under, you stayed there for life. Over the years, the discontent of the people grew as did the entitlement of the ruling class.

The descendants of Goguryeo and Baekje were excluded from the bone system and so were treated as commoners and slaves. The descendants of the conquered people could only dream of the former glory days and plot revenge. This bone system is said to have led to the corruption and decline of Silla in the Later Three Kingdoms period.

Silla rode roughshod over the peninsula for hundreds of years but eventually began to decline. Various aristocrats began to bid for independent power. Due to corruption, civil society began to break down and the captive people of Goguryeo and Baekje began to rise up and rebel. This so-called Later Three Kingdoms period saw a revival of the previous three kingdoms period based on the rebellions against the weakened Silla.

Due mainly to the century-long struggle for the throne by the royal family, Silla fell into chaos and corruption. During that period, there were fourteen kings. Three kings were assassinated and one committed suicide. The royal family and aristocrats led opulent lives of excess in the city of Kyongju. The common people paid the heavy price, who said, if they have no rice, let them eat sujebi 수제비?

Due to the corruption and lack of competence of the royal family, aristocrats and nobles began to carve out independent holdings and even began to collect the taxes that the royal family was unable to collect. In 892, a young Silla general, Kyong-won, seized a territory in Cholla Province in the southwest, and declared independence from Shilla. He claimed that he was the descendant and inheritor of the former

kingdom of Baekje. He established a capital in Chongu. In 900 CE, he proclaimed himself King of Later Baekje.

Another prominent figure of the time was named Kyung ye. He was born a prince of the royal family in Kyongju. His father was the king but decided the boy's birth was inauspicious. He was ejected from the palace and his nurse saved and raised him. As far as the custom of the time often went, when he was 10 years old, he entered a Buddhist monastery. Although trained as a monk, he later joined the military forces of a bandit. A bandit was a guy who could raise a fighting force, contend for a piece of land, and beg borrow or steal the funds needed to keep the endeavor afloat. Apparently he wasn't treated well in the bandit's camp and decamped to join another bandit, Yang gil. He did well with Yang gil, and became his lieutenant. Kyung ye was a leader of men and a fighter. He won a lot of battles and gathered fighting men around himself. Before long he had a substantial army. One recruit was a member of the local gentry, local to Song-do/Song-gak nowadays Kaesong, by the name of Wang Kon. Kyung ye was doing so well that he incurred the envy and jealousy of Yang gil. The boss man, naturally, attacked the upstart, but Kyung ye survived and prospered.

Kyung ye envisioned himself as the descendant of kings, specifically the kings of the Goguryeo kingdom. When he started a new state in 901, he called it New Goguryeo, kicking off what is known as the Later Three Kingdoms period lasting from 900 CE to 936 CE. He announced Song-gak as his capital and proclaimed himself King. After his success as a bandit, a military leader, and a king, Kyung ye turned to Buddhism. With every intention of conquering the world of Buddhism and devoting his life to it, he declared himself the Maitrya Buddha. The Maitrya Buddha is the Buddha of the future who is to come. Maitrya comes from a Sanskrit word that means 'loving kindness. To cement his place in the Buddhist pantheon, he proclaimed his sons bodhisattvas. Next he authored 20 books of Buddhist scripture and showed them to Sockchong, a revered monk, for approval. The monk declared they were nonsense and heretical. Kyung ye killed him.

After that he became more violent and unpredictable. He accused his Queen of infidelity and killed her. His sons tried to intervene so he killed them. He became a psychopath. Officials under him were scared to death of the king and looked for ways to remove him. Impeachment having not yet been invented, they begged Wang Kon to depose him. Wang Kon with 10,000 troops surrounded the royal palace. Kyung ye escaped but was later tracked down and put to death. Wang Kon was the new king and was posthumously named Taejo. He renamed the kingdom, Koryeo and set up the capital at Song-gak, his home town. Wang Kon was a totally different King than his predecessor. He set up diplomatic relations with Silla but remained the enemy of Later Baekje. When the king of Later Baekje marched on Silla, The current King of Silla called on Wang Kon for help. He didn't hesitate but immediately led a force to reinforce Silla. He was too late and Later Baekje devastated Kyongju. The Silla king was forced to take his own life and his Queen and ladies were raped. Wang Kon eventually arrived and drove the brutes away. Before departing the city, a relative of the dead king was placed on the throne and reigned as the last king of Silla.

It was internal discord, so typical of Korean royal families, that was the undoing of Later Baekje. Kyon hwon, the king, had many wives and ten sons. He favored his 4th son, Kuomgang, and anointed him the successor to the throne. The eldest son, Sin gom, gathered his younger brothers, kidnapped the old man, and imprisoned him in a Buddhist temple then killed the heir apparent and made himself King. In three months' time, the old man was able to escape and presented himself in surrender to his arch nemesis, Wang Kon. The brilliant diplomat received his enemy and treated him royally.

That same year, the last King of Silla was facing facts. Silla was no longer viable, having been reduced in territory to lands immediately surrounding Kyongju. The king was contemplating giving up to Koryeo. Although there was some opposition from the crown Prince, the king made up his mind and marched in a long procession from Kyongju to Song-gak to capitulate. Wang Kon received them, giving the royal persons land and positions. In this way, after nearly a thousand years, Silla came to an end.

In 936, the former king of Later Baekje convinced Wang Kon to mount an attack on his own sons. The battle was joined and after fierce fighting Wang Kon was victorious and Kyon hwon was killed. The Korean peninsula was once again united under one banner, the banner of Koryeo and the warrior/master diplomat, Wang Kon/Taejo in 936 CE. From the word Koryeo comes the word Korea that the nation is known as internationally today. The success of Koryeo, at least initially, based on the character of Wang Kon/Taejo. He was a warrior that led his men into battle, he was a competent administrator, and most important, he was a diplomat. He was able to gather in former rivals and make them friends and countrymen. Through this acceptance of former enemies, for the first time, the animosities of the former three kingdoms could be dissolved and the citizens could be integrated into one Korean people. Koryeo existed for almost 500 years 918 CE-1392 CE. It fell, not due to internal strife, but due to external pressures.