

David Robinson, *Empire's Twilight: Northeast Asia under the Mongols* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009)

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As a new contribution to the recently galvanized debate on the nature of Mongol–Goryeo relations, David Robinson's recent book stands out by approaching the topic from within the broader framework of studies of the Mongol Empire. It is also noteworthy in that he uses not only Muslim and Mongol sources such as Jami' al-Tavarikh and *The Secret History of the Mongols*, but also a vast amount of classical Chinese sources, including official histories (正史) and individual collections of literary works (文集), as well as many studies produced in East Asia.

In the introduction he presents the four main themes of his study. First, he observes the diverse political entities under the Mongol Empire from the late thirteenth to the early fourteenth century from within the broader regional context of "Northeast Asia," rather than through a division of dynasties or countries that roughly corresponds to the boundaries of modern nation-states. What he calls "Northeast Asia" encompasses Goryeo, Southern Liaodong, Shandong, and the territories northeast of Daidu, the Mongol capital. His attempt to view this period from a "regional" perspective naturally leads to the second theme, that of uncovering the outcomes of the process of mutual association between various polities. He discusses the issue

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of borders under Mongol rule, which manifested a high degree of porosity in territorial, political, economic, and cultural terms. The expanded worldview that resulted from such a process of synthesis may structurally explain the period's trend toward giving personal and family interests priority over those of dynasty, state, or cultural unit—the topic which constitutes his third theme. Lastly, in consideration of the above-mentioned points, he regards Goryeo as part of the Mongol Empire.

Robinson takes the Red Turban Wars as a concrete example through which to demonstrate these points. This period—encompassing as it does Togon Temür's reign in the Mongol Empire and King Gongmin's in Goryeo—is very well chosen, in that it was a time when Mongol imperial power was waning and both the structure of the empire and Mongol–Goryeo relations were crumbling. For the polities that had been under Mongol rule, one of the most important legacies of the Mongol imperial period was the expansion of worldviews, as Robinson points out. Although the incorporation into the Mongol order that made such new worldviews possible was largely carried out under duress, these widened perspectives continued to affect the politics of Northeast Asia as Mongol power weakened, and even after it had disappeared. The period selected by Robinson illustrates the juncture between these situations.

Robinson draws attention to the integration of ruling structures across state boundaries in Northeast Asia which took place before the Red Turban Wars. The people of Goryeo, who used to be ruled by a king within a delineated territory, flowed out even into Liaodong and were ruled by various lords of Goryeo origin. Robinson concentrates on the Red Turban Wars because they both reflected and were also caused by the diverse phenomena of “integration” in economic, cultural, military, political, and transportation terms.

His view of the implications of the Red Turban Wars for the domestic politics of Goryeo is that they brought about the rise of warlords and clearly demonstrated the deterioration of the King of Goryeo's authority; in this, his view resembles the conclusions drawn in the conventional literature. However, with respect to where he locates the results of the Red Turban Wars—namely, not just in the domestic affairs of Goryeo, but also in parallel trends across the whole of Northeast Asia—his view differs significantly from other literature. Further, he sees the Mongol Empire's political legacy as still exercising strong influence on Goryeo's foreign relations, whereas conventional wisdom has considered Mongol–Goryeo relations as practically severed in the wake of the Red Turban Wars and the Tashi Temür incident. In

other words, the rise of the armed forces following the Red Turban Wars was paralleled by situations in other parts of the Mongol Empire. King Gongmin's attempts at communicating with the various armed forces on the Mongol side while weighing options in "foreign relations" in a period when a new order was taking shape, precisely reflected the political mechanisms among the Mongols. While making such broad arguments, Robinson does not overlook differences between the armed forces of disparate localities.

Another point on which he departs from the literature in discussing the Red Turban Wars is his reexamination of King Gongmin's and Goryeo's "anti-Yuan" consciousness, which used to be emphasized in characterizing the politics of Gongmin's era. This stems from his position that Goryeo was part of the Mongol order. Conventionally, Korean academic literature has held that the "anti-Yuan" consciousness manifest in a series of political acts in the early years of King Gongmin was a reflection of Goryeo society at large. "Anti-Yuan" consciousness was supposed to have been undermined by the Red Turban Wars when Goryeo was inundated by the renewed influence of the Yuan, eventually leading to King Gongmin's dethronement. Countering this, Robinson argues that neither Goryeo nor the Yuan were monolithic entities, but were both made up of various forces with their own goals: it is therefore unlikely that oppression by a unitary "Yuan" caused a unitary "anti-Yuan" orientation among a unitary "Goryeo."

Robinson's suggestion hits the core of historical truth about this period. As he correctly points out, the Goryeo royal family came to identify itself as one of the elite households in the Mongol Empire and accordingly behaved to secure its own political interests; in fact, the king and his bureaucrats often failed to act in harmony. Robinson's analysis of the situation, however, is insufficiently concrete or complete, as his emphasis mainly falls on the incorporation of Goryeo into the Mongol order that took shape before the period in question, as well as the indisputable fact that the Mongol imperial order was quite different from modern imperialism, especially that of the Japanese Empire. At any rate, as Robinson himself points out, King Gongmin demonstrated his "anti-Yuan" stance by brave and insolent political actions. Admittedly there is room for rethinking or redefining that "anti-Yuan" consciousness in King Gongmin's reign, but this needs to be done by more fine-grained contextualization, factoring in the disparate orientations in Goryeo and evaluating them in the light of the complicated internal and external affairs of King Gongmin's reign.

In the same vein Robinson continues by questioning the validity of such concepts as the "pro-Yuan" (親元) faction and the "collaborators with the

Yuan” (附元輩). This connects to his third theme, namely the tendency of individual interests to take priority over dynasty or state, and this in turn ties into his view of Goryeo as a part of the Mongol Empire. In a situation where almost all the elites in Goryeo had to side with the Yuan—even the so-called “anti-Yuan” royal family of King Gongmin depended for the maintenance of its regime on Mongol support—these concepts may indeed not be useful for reminding us to view the nature of power, political dynamics, or alliances from a vast regional perspective. He presents the dethronement of King Gongmin by the faction of Empress Ki as an incident that reflects such a supra-dynastic level of politics.

Indeed, his suggestions are meaningful for the very reasons he himself gives. The concept of “pro-Yuan” (親元) in particular may be of dubious validity, while the idea of the “collaborators with the Yuan” (附元輩) may still mean something in that there were people who existed only as men of the Mongol Empire, discarding their previous identity as the subjects of the Goryeo dynasty. In any event—and just as Robinson states—to evaluate such people from the viewpoint of the modern nation-state inevitably distorts our view of the individuals and social structures of the era. It is more important to understand the diverse desires created in a political environment where there was no clear separation between “domestic” and “international,” as well as to reflect on the whole structure that nurtured them and how such a structure incorporating such diverse desires affected Mongol–Goryeo relations, domestic politics in Goryeo, and post-Mongol Goryeo and East Asia.

Last but not least, Robinson places importance on looking at the long-term development of Korean history and on adopting a perspective on Goryeo which includes it as part of the Mongol Empire. Korean scholars have tended to see the Mongols as an element external to Goryeo and have unilaterally underlined the negative aspects of Mongol–Goryeo relations in this period. This attitude is reflected in terms such as “Yuan interference” (元干涉期), or “Yuan oppression” (元壓制期). In so doing, they have regarded the Mongol imperial age and the period that followed it as totally separate, as if the pre-Mongol order was restored without change in the post-Mongol era. Naturally, however, many trends continued from the Mongol era, as Robinson points out, and to understand the situation in Northeast Asia, such as relations between Goryeo/Chosun and the Ming, it is absolutely necessary to recognize the changes engendered by Mongol rule.

David Robinson’s study transcends its primary focus on the late Mongol period, and provides elements that are essential to consider within the entire gamut of Mongol–Goryeo relations. Scholars of this period, regardless of

whether they agree with him, will obtain rich food for thought from his book.