

Fall of the Koryo Dynasty

Edgar Allan Poe wrote an eerie supernatural story called "The Fall of the House of Usher". There is an episode of Korean history, perhaps equally as macabre, which could well be titled "The Fall of the House of Koryo".

The Koryo dynasty had been ruling Korea since 935 A.D. It had taken over from the United Shilla dynasty. A Koryo king named Kong-min had a terrifying dream. In it he was almost stabbed by an assassin, but a Buddhist monk saved his life. A few days after the dream, Kong-min saw a man who closely resembled the monk who had saved him in the dream. The man's name was Shin-don. Shin-don had been a monk, but had been expelled from a Buddhist monastic order for improper behavior. Kong-min took Shin-don to his palace and bestowed many lavish favors on him. Shin-don lived it up in excess at the palace and eventually wore out his welcome. He was banished to Suwon and executed.

Kong-min's wife had died and he did not have a male heir. So Kong-min decided to claim as his own a certain boy who had been born to one of the concubines. This particular woman had spent much time with Shin-don and some people said that the child was actually his.

In 1375 Kong-min learned that another of his concubines had given birth to a child. The king was not so pleased when he found that a court official named Hong was the father. Kong-min decided to have Hong killed, so that the paternity of the child would not become known to the public. But a eunuch whom the king had told of his intent, went to Hong and informed him about the plan. Hong and the eunuch went to Kong-min's bedroom and stabbed him in his sleep.

The ten year old prince named Shin-u (who may have been the son of Shin-don) became king. Shortly after Shin-u ascended the throne, two women came forth, each claiming to be the mother of Shin-u. One was named Pan-ya and the other's name was Han. Han had more influence in the royal court and succeeded in having Pan-ya sentenced to death by drowning. As Pan-ya stood at the edge of the river, she cried out that a gate would fall if she were executed and that the falling of the gate would signify her innocence. As she sank beneath the water, a gate fell in the city. Everyone was shocked. They now felt that an unjustified execution had taken place and that Pan-ya was actually the mother of Shin-u.

A Korean general named Yi Song-gye was sent north to fight in a border war with China. Clashes between Korea and China were common back then. While on the campaign, the general had a dream in which he was lying down on three logs. When Yi Song-gye awoke, he told Min-hak, his favorite Buddhist priest about the dream. Mu-hak pointed out that the general lying on the three logs formed the Chinese symbol for king. Yi Song-gye decided that it meant he was to become king. Mu-hak encouraged him to take the throne.

And that is exactly what he did. After the campaign was over, Yi Song-gye led his troops back to the Korean capital of Song-do (now Kaesong). He overthrew King Shin-u, thus ending the Koryo dynasty. Yi Song-gye became king and founded the Chosun (also called Yi) dynasty. He also changed his name to Yi T'aejo and moved the capital from Song-do to Hanyang (now called Seoul). The Chosun dynasty that he founded lasted from 1392 to 1910.