**Some Notes on Koryŏ Military Units**

by William E. Henthorn

The Korean Research Center

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**SOME NOTES ON KORYŎ MILITARY UNITS**

In those periods when the control of the military becomes the criterion for the achievement of political aims, the study of the military is a prerequisite to an understanding of events—political economic and social—of the time. It is with this in mind that these notes are offered. I have dealt briefly with a consideration of the appearance of (1) ‘house armies’ (家兵) and (2) ‘elite units’ (別抄), during the period roughly from the third quarter of the 12th century to the third quarter of the 13th century.

1. General

According to the Koryŏ-sa (高麗史)1) the Koryŏ military system was, in general, modelled after the Tang (唐) Fu-wei (府衛) military system.2) The founder of the Koryŏ dynasty, T’ae-jo (太祖)3), established in the first moon of his 2nd reign year (AD 919), the ‘six defenses’ (六衛),4) ie, Jwa and U-wi (左右衛), Sin-ho-wi (神虎衛), Hung-wi-wi (興威衛;, Kum-o-wi (金吾衛), and Kam-mun-wi (監門衛). In the 5th year of Mokjong (穆宗)5) (AD 1002) a system of officials was established for the ‘six defenses’. Later two ‘armies’ (軍), the Ung-yang (鷹揚)6) and the Yong-ho (龍虎)7) were established over the ‘six defenses.’8)

The need for exercising caution in dealing with the Koryŏ military system as outlined in the Koryŏ-sa has already been voiced by Mr Lee Ki-baek (李基白)9) who points out that the resemblance of the Koryŏ military system to that of the Tang is doubtful and that the records are vague on many matters, such as the relationship between the regional military units and the national army.10) Mr Lee says however that he believes the two ‘armies’ were the King’s bodyguards rather than being units over the six ‘defenses,’ while the heart of the national army was the ‘six defenses’.

The relationship of the regional and national military units, and the degree to which the Koryŏ military system [page 68] was modelled after that of the T’ang, are however, beyond the scope of this paper. Whatever may have been the original structure of the Koryŏ military system set up by T’ae-jo, by the 25th year of Munjong (文宗) (AD 1071)12) the national army was in a state of disorganization,13), due to (a) the exemption of the sons of the wealthy and the powerful from conscription, (b) the conscripts were inadequately fed and clothed and, (c) there were, consequently, many deserters.14)

Thus, when this weakened army met the invading Eastern Jurĉed (東女眞) in the 9th year of the reign of Sukjong (肅宗) (AD 1104),15) the need for a reorganization became prerequisite to national survival. The need for cavalry units to match the mounted Eastern Jurĉed was especially urgent and in a memorial Yun Kwan (尹瓘) outlined the cause of Koryŏ’s defeats succinctly: ‘The enemy rode; we walked,16) In an effort to strengthen the national army Yun Kwan organized the Pyŏl-mu-pan (別武班), later his main instrument in defeating the Jurĉed during the reign of Yejong (睿宗)17); and then, he organized a cavalry unit, the Sin-ki-kun (神騎軍)18) of all those who had horses, while those men without horses were organized into the following units: (神步)19), (跳盪)20), (梗弓)21), (精弩)22), and (發火)23). Buddhist monks (僧) were selected to act as an ‘army to exorcise demons’ (降魔軍)24). Yun Kwan’s reorganization of the national army was, however, done in the time of crisis and, except tor the cavalry unit Sin-ki-kun, his efforts did not long remain intact. The Sin-ki-kun appears to have survived as a unit, for a unit with the designation Sin-ki was used against the Khitan (契丹) of Liaotung (遼東) in the 3rd year of Kojong (高宗)(AD 1216)26) and, as pointed out by Mr Kim Sang-gi (金庠基)27) they probably remained intact as a unit due to the continued necessity of countering mounted invaders.

**2. The Rise of ‘House Armies’**

In the latter quarter of the 12th century the dissipations of Uijong (毅宗)28) had enabled the civil officials and the eunuchs to assume much of the actual authority of the state. In their efforts to assume complete control they endeavored to make the military as weak as possible; however, their own power was short-lived, for the provincially-based military strongmen raised their own ‘house [page 69] armies’, easily plucked control of the state from the civil officials and eunuchs, and began to compete among themselves.

This emergence of military strongmen may be said to have begun with the rebellion of Chŏng Chung-pu (鄭仲夫) during the reign of Uijong. The rebellion of Chŏng Chung-pu was quelled when Chŏng was killed by General Kyŏng Tae-sŭng (慶大升) in the 9th year of Myŏngjong (明宗) (AD 1179)29). Following this victory, General Kyŏng selected 110 brave warriors and set up a unit he called the To-pang (都房), a private army for his own protection.30)

Shortly thereafter, in the 13th year of Myŏngjong (AD 1182), General Kyŏng died, and this cleared the way for the rise of ‘house armies’, as the provincially-based military strongmen began to gather men, initially for defense, then expanding them into effective striking units. Initially this began by using ‘house pages’ (門客家僮). The ‘house pages’ of the clans of military strongmen, like Li Ŭi-min (李義旼), Ch’oe Ch’ung-Hŏn (崔沖獻) and Pak Po-jae (朴普材) were increased and came to be used as ‘house armies’.31)

The ‘house army’ of Ch’oe Ch’ung-Hŏn, the military strongman who overcame all opposition to establish himself and his clan as the ruling power behind the throne,32) increased to the point where it numbered some 3,000 men and was as strong as the national army.33) The status to which the government army had sunk was shown in the Khitan incursions during the 1st moon of the 3rd year of Kojong (AD 1216) when the government troops were said to be old and feeble while those of the ‘house armies’ of Ch’oe Ch’ung-Hŏn and his son Ch’oe U (崔璃) were recorded as being the most valiant.34) In the 11th moon of the same year when Ch’oe Ch’ung-Hon inspected his ‘house army’, it is said that it stretched 23 li (理)35) while the ‘house army’ of his son, Ch’oe U, was also considerable.

In naming his ‘house army’ Ch’oe used the same designation General Kyŏng Tae-sung had used, ie, To-pang.37) The To-pang was divided into 6 units, and, as they did guard duty at the Ch’oe house, they were called Yuk-pŏn To-pang (六番都房). In addition to guard duty, they also served as an escort unit for Ch’oe when he left [page 70] the house.38) It was on the strength of this ‘house army’ that Ch’oe rose to power.

The effects produced by the rise of these ‘house armies’, as well as the factors which contributed to their rise, are numerous; however, some primary features can be pointed out. First, the civil officials and eunuchs had strengthened themselves to the point of usurpation of the political power which became the basis for the retention and expansion of their economic objectives.39) In addition they attempted to shear the military of their power at a time when the northern borders were being continuously overrun; a time when the military was vitally needed.

The reaction of the military, with the consequent beginnings of military revolts and the build-up of private house armies led, finally, to the attempt by Wŏnjong and the civil officials around him to escape from the power of the military —later, under the shield of the Mongols, he succeeded—a primary factor in the final submission of the Koryo court to Mongol rule.

**3. The Appearance of ‘Elite Units’**

**a. ‘Elite units’ centered about the capital.**

The struggles of the military strongmen and the recurring invasion of the Jurĉed and the Khitan had reduced the land to chaos, and it is not surprising to find rebellions breaking out and brigandry flourishing. In an effort to re-establish order, Ch’oe U, who had assumed power upon the death of his father, organized the Ya-pyŏl-ch’o (夜別抄), an ‘elite unit’ of men selected for their bravery, which patrolled the capital and its vicinity at night to prevent brigandry, and to quell disturbances.40)

The selection of men of proven courage had been used by Ch’oe Ch’ung-Hŏn and by his son, Ch’oe U, in the formation of their ‘house armies’ prior to the formation of the Ya-pyŏl-ch’o. It should be noted that the Ya-pyŏl-ch’o was part of the national army, rather than merely Ch’oe U’s private army. However, since Ch’oe U controlled the government, the distinction does not become important until the elimination of the Ch’oe clan from power in AD 1258. [page 71]

However, the function of the Ya-pyol-ch’o was not limited to suppressing brigandry. They were also used as the advance units of the national army to suppress the slave rebellion which occurred in Song-to (松都) in 1232,41) the year following the 1st Mongol invasion, just after the capital was transferred to Kanghwa Island (江華島).42)

Following the transfer of the national capital to Kanghwa Island, the Ya-pyŏl-ch’o were used as the core of the island’s defense, and they were frequently sent to the Mongol-occupied mainland as raiding parties.43) An addition¬al function was the protection of the King. An increase in the numbers of the Ya-pyŏl-ch’o led to its division into two units,44) the ‘left and right’ and to this was added a cavalry unit, the Sin-ŭi-kun (神義軍).45) The resulting unit was termed the Sam-pyŏl-ch’o (三別抄).46)

The Sam-pyŏl-ch’o functioned similarly to the Ya-pyŏl-ch’o, and like the Ya-pyŏl-ch’o before them, they were undoubtedly the most powerful military unit in Koryŏ. Control of these units meant de facto control of the country; they were especially active in various coups d’etat which began in the 45th year of Kojong (AD 1258).47)

Later, in the 11th year of Wŏnjong (AD 1270)48) they refused the King’s order to return to the old capital (Songto) from Kanghwa Island, which would have meant submission to the Mongols and the subsequent loss of their own power. They then revolted and their strength was such that they formed their own government, the ‘Maritime Kingdom’ (海上王國) and for four years held various islands of the south —at their zenith they held 30 islands— in open defiance of the combined Koryŏ-Mongol forces.49)

**b. Regional ‘Elite Units’**

In addition to the ‘elite units’ centered about the national capital, regional ‘elite units’ began to appear in number50) following the Mongol invasion in the 18th year of Kojong (AD 1231). In the 8th moon of the 18th year of Kojong, Mongol forces under General Ch’ol-lye-tap (撤禮塔) swept across the Yalu River at Ham-sin Garrison (咸新 鎮),51) came south to capture Ch’ ŏl-ju (鐵州)52) and then went to Ku-ju (龜州)53) where a 20-odd day battle ensued. At this time General Kim Kyŏng-son (金慶孫) led 12 men [page 72] who volunteered to fight to the death against the Mongols to Ku-ju.54) It is here in the battle at Ku-ju that regional ‘elite units’ began to become prominent.

The ‘elite units’ from the ‘forts’ (城) in the vicinity met at Ku-ju to fight the Mongols. From this time many ‘elite units’ appear, commonly identified geographically by the region of their origin, eg, Wi T’ae-ju Pyŏl-ch’o (渭泰州別抄), ie, the ‘elite units’ of Wi-ju and T’ae-ju.55)

These regional ‘elite units’ seem to have been organized at the local, (州縣), level, and appear to have been used mainly for defense, for in addition to attacking the Mongol forces in their own vicinity in surprise raids,56) in the 9th moon of the 36th year of Kojong (AD 1249), during the period the capital was on Kanghwa Island, Kyŏngsang-do (慶尚道) and Chŏlla-do (全羅道) each sent pyŏl-ch’o to do duty at the capital.

The question of whether these regional ‘elite units’ were a permanent part of the regional military units, or whether they were organized locally as needed, is unclear.57) There is little doubt, however, that they were the primary unit of regional defense during the period of the Mongol invasions. With the exception of their use against the Sam pyŏl-ch’o during the period of its revolt, the regional ‘elite units’ seem to disappear from the scene following Koryŏ’s submission to the Mongols in 1270.

During a period when the Mongol cavalry was riding the countryside, brigandry was flourishing, rebellions and uprisings occurring, and Japanese pirates (Wako (倭寇)) pillaging the coastal areas, the regional ‘elite units’ seem to have kept the slight measure of order seen in the provinces at this time.

**NOTES**.

1. Koryŏ-sa (高麗史), ‘The History of Koryŏ’, hereafter abbreviated KS. All references to the

KS are to the Tokyo, 1909 edition.

2. cf KS 83.671

3. The reign of Wang Kŏn (王建), canonized T’ae-Jo (太祖) is commonly said to begin in 918, the year his dynasty was recognized by the Silla King.

4. cf KS. 81.637

5. The reign of Wang Song (王誦), the 7th monarch, canonized Mokjong [page73] (穆宗), was 998~1009.

6. Ung-yang (鷹楊) Lit: ‘Hawks on the wing’.

7. Yong-ho (龍虎) Lit: ‘Dragons and tigers’.

8. cf. KS 81.637

9. Lee Ki-baek, (李基白, 高麗 初期 兵制에 關한 後代諸說의 檢討) (‘On the Military Institutions of the Early Koryeo Period’), 亞細亞研究 1(1958)2. P 129-150 (‘Journal of Asiatic Studies’) ; English resume pp 151~4.

10. Lee Ki-baek, op cit, p 134~5. Perhaps ‘commands’ would be a better rendering for (軍) than ‘armies’ here, however, since their function is beyond the scope of this short paper I have loosely rendered ‘armies’.

11. Lee Ki-baek, op cit, p 132.

12. The reign of Wang Hŭi (王徵), the 11th monarch, canonized Munjong (文 宗), was 1047~1082.

13. cf. KS 81.639

14. Kim Sang-gi 金庠基, Tong-pang Mun-hwa Kyo-lyu-sa Non-go, 東方文化交流史論攷, Seoul, 1954, 2 ed; also cf. KS 81.639.

15. The reign of Wang Ong 王顒, the 15th monarch, canonized Sukjong 肅宗 was 1096~1105.

16. cf. Bio. of Yun Kwan, KS 96.112; also cf KS 81.640.

17. The reign of Wang U (王俁), the 16th monarch, canonized Yejong (睿宗), was 1106-1122.

18. 神騎軍 Lit: ‘Divine cavalry’.

19. 神步(軍) Lit: ‘Divine infantry’

20. 跳盪 were ‘troops used to throw the enemy into confusion’. Mathews’ Chinese-English’ Dictionary, Cambridge 1957, No. 6287. 12.

21. 梗弓(軍) I would render ‘(a unit whose) bows ward off calamity’, rather than ‘bows of (the wood of) a thorny tree’, ie, I believe that the stress is on the function of the unit.

22. 精弯(軍) Lit: ‘(a unit) skilled with crossbows.

23. 發火(軍) Lit:’to burst into flames’, ie, it was probably a unit which used flaming arrows or spears.

24. cf Bio of Yun Kwan, KS 96.112.

25. Lee Ki-baek, op cit, pp 131~2, points out that the compilers of the Koryŏ-sa pyŏng-ji pyŏng-je (高麗史 兵志 • 兵制) list Yun Kwan’s reorganization as a permanent and central feature of the national army, yet the names of the units involved do not appear in the records at later dates.

26. The reign of Wang Ch’ ŏl (王澈), the 23rd monarch, canonized Kojong (高宗), was 1214~1259.

27. Kim Sang-gi, op cit, p 97.

28. The reign of Wang Hyŏn (王眼), the 18th monarch, canonized Ŭijong (毅宗), was 1147~1170.

29. The reign of Wang Hŭn (王昕), the 19th monarch, canonized Myŏngjong (明宗), was 1171-1197

30. Kim Sang-gi, op cit, p 99; also cf Bio. of Li Ŭi-min (李義旼), KS 128.618

31. ibid

32. The Ch’oe clan ruled as the real power behind the throne for four generations until Ch’oe Ch’ung-Hŏn’s great-grandson was killed in the 45th year of Kojong (AD 1258).

33. cf. Bio. of Ch’oe Ch’ung-Hŏn KS 129.628.

34. cf. Bio of Cho Ch’ung (趙冲). KS 103.204.

35. Li (里) “360 paces, or about 1890 feet in English measure”. Mathews’ [page74]

Chinese-English Dictionary, Cambridge, 1957, No. 3857.

36. cf. Bio. of Ch’oe Ch’ung-Hŏn KS 129.630.

37. Ch’oe evidently copied the term from General Kyŏng Cf. Kim Sang-gi, op cit; also cf. Dr lkeuchi Hiroshi (池內宏 ‘高麗の三別抄について’), 史學雜誌 37.(1926)9, Tokyo, pp 809~848.

38. The size and number of the units of the Ch’oe clan’s ‘house army’ increased with time. The 6-pŏn (六番) for example increased to 36-pŏn, and a cavalry unit, the Ma-pyŏl-ch’o (馬別抄) was also organized.

39. Cf. Li U-chŏl (李愚喆), ‘高麗時代의’ 宦官에 對하여’ (‘A Consideration on the Eunuch in the Koryeo Dynasty’) 史學研究 1 (1958). Seoul, pp 18~45.

40. I am uncertain of the time of the establishment of the Ya-pyŏl-ch’o. The first reference to the Ya-pyŏl-ch’o appears when their commander, Kim Se-ch’ung (金世冲) opposed the transfer of the capital from Songdo (松都) to Kanghwa (江華島) Island in the 6th moon of the 19th year of Kojong (AD 1232). Since Ch’oe U, their organizer, assumed power in the 6th year of Kojong (AD 1219), their establishment falls somewhere in this period. Cf KS 81.

41. cf. Bio of Li Cha-sŏng (李子晟), KS 103.

42. The capital was transferred from Songdo to Kanghwa Island in the 6th moon of the 18th year of Kojong at the insistence of Ch’oe U. The capital remained at Kang-do (江都) on Kanghwa Island, until it was ordered transferred back to Songdo in June 1270, as a result of a conference between Wŏnjong and the Mongol Governor Tu-lyon-ka (頭輦哥).

43. The Ya-pyŏl-ch’o appears to have operated in the nature of a raiding party, ie, a small group, using surprise attacks, often by night, with limited objectives. Cf. lkeuchi Hiroshi, op cit, and Kim Sang-gi, op cit.

44. Kim Sang-gi believes the Ya-pyol-ch’o was divided in the 39th year of Kojong. Kim Sang-gi, op cit, p 106.

45. Kim Sang-gi believes that the Sin-ŭi-kun was organized in either the 40th year of Kojong at the time of the Mongol invasion under Ya-Kul (也窟) or in the following year during the Mongol invasion under Ch’a-la-tae (車羅大). Kim Sang-gi. op cit, p 105.

46. I am uncertain of the time of the organization of the Sam-pyŏl-ch’o. The three units which the KS records as comprising the Sam-pyŏl-ch’o, viz, left and right Ya-pyŏl-ch’o and the Sin-ŭi-kun, appear in action together in the 3rd moon of the 45th year of Kojong. Yet the term Sam-pyŏl-ch’o is not used until the 1st year of Wŏnjong. Dr lkeuchi Hiroshi and Mr Kim Sang-gi both prefer the earlier period as the time of the establishment of the Sam-pyŏl-ch’o on the ground that the units involved are seen in action together.

It should be noted that the organization of the Sam-pyŏl-ch’o as contained in (李齊賢 櫟翁稈說) is given as the Ma-pyŏl-ch’o (馬別抄), the Ya-pyŏl-ch’o and the Sin-ŭi-kun. Dr lkeuchi and Mr Kim Sang-gi, op cit, in discrediting this, point out that (1) the author was born 78 years after the abolishing of the Sam-pyŏl-ch’o and, (2) that the Ma-pyŏl-ch’o was part of the house army of Ch’oe U.

47. Coups d’etat in which either the Ya-pyŏl-ch’o or the Sam-pyŏl-ch’o were involved:

1) Kojong’s 45th year (AD 1258); Kim Jun (金俊) and Yu Kyong (柳璥)kill (崔瑄) (the great-grandson of Choe Ch’ung-hon), bringing the Ch’oe Regency to an end. [page 75]

2) Wŏnjong 9th year (AD 1268); Im Yon (林衍) kills Kim Jun and seizes the reins of government.

3) Wŏnjong 10th year (AD 1269); Im Yŏn deposes Wŏnjong. (Wŏnjong later regained the throne at the insistence of the Mongols.)

48. The reign of Wang Sik (王稙), the 24th monarch, canonized Wŏnjong (元宗), was 1260~1274.

49. Two studies, one in Korean (Kim Sang-gi, op cit) and one in Japanese (Ikeuchi Hiroshi, op cit) exist on the Sam-pyŏl-ch’o. I am currently preparing a paper on this rebellion.

50. There was one regional pyŏl-ch’o in the 5th year of Sinjong, ie the pyŏl-ch’o of Kyŏng-ju (慶州別抄). However, not until the 1st Mongol invasion does the pyŏl-ch’o again appear in the records.

51. Ham-sin Garrison (咸新鎭); the present Ŭi-ju (義州), Tong-kuk Yŏ-ji Sung-nam (東國輿地勝覽), Ko-jŏn Kan-haeng Hoe (古典刊行會), edition, Seoul, 1958, p 960.

52. Ch’ŏl-ju (鐵州); in the present Chŏl-san-kun (鐵山郡). ibid, p. 968.

53. Ku-ju (龜州); the present Ku-sŏng (龜城), Ibid, p 975.

54. Bio of Pak Sŏ (朴犀), KS 103,212; also cf Bio of Kim Kyŏng-son (金慶 孫), KS 103.214.

55. Cf Bio of Pak Sŏ, op cit.

56. Cf. KS, Kojong Seka (高宗世家) in the following periods. 23rd year 10th moon; 40th year, 8th moon; 40th year, 11th moon; 42 year, 2nd moon; 43rd year, 4th moon; and 45th year, 10th moon. Cited Ikeuchi, op cit.

57. Dr Ikeuchi and Mr Kim Sang-gi both incline to the latter view on the basis of the appearance of the pyŏl-ch’o only in time of crisis.