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Editors / Contact:

Dorothee Schaab-Hanke (Großheirath): DSchaab-Hanke@t-online.de

Achim Mittag (Tübingen): achim.mittag@uni-tuebingen.de

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Warband Cohesion in Thirteenth-Century Korea: Northeast Asian Influences on Sinitic Military Models*

Remco Breuker**

Introduction

The medieval state of Koryŏ 高麗 (918–1392) on the Korean Peninsula survived for almost five centuries, a feat that would likely have been impossible if it had not possessed a sound military system. For most of its existence, the Koryŏ state relied on a heavily Sinicized military structure to protect the peninsula from its foes across the border.¹ With the collapse of civil-ian rule and the military's ascent to the highest offices of the state in 1170, ironically, this system also collapsed, giving way to highly personalized and often improvised army structures. At the same time, influences from Northeast Asia² combined with the spreading realisation of the then hard to deny military superiority of the warriors from the north (whether Jurchen, Khitan, or Mongol), coalescing into the importation of a particularly important Northeast Asian cultural complex into Koryŏ. The sociocultural pattern of the warband was introduced to the Korean Peninsula several times, as part of a larger complex of Manchurian cultural (and other) achievements.³ The focus of this article will be on evidence pointing to

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** Remco Breuker is a professor of Korean Studies at Leiden University, Netherlands. He may be reached at r.e.breuker@hum.leidenuniv.nl.

- 1 The standard study on this topic is still Yi Ki-baek's 1968 monograph. Although clearly influenced in its structure and conceptualization, the Koryŏ army had been adapted to the situation on the Korean Peninsula, both organizationally and in terms of strategy. For a collection of articles on this and related topics in the 13th century, see Kim Tang-t'ack 1983, 1987 & 1998.
- 2 For the purposes of this article, I follow Li Narangao and Robert Cribb in their understanding of Northeast Asia as a region that is "defined primarily by its historical experiences ... but ... also has an environmental character distinct from that of the surrounding regions." The region roughly corresponds to "the Korean Peninsula, the Manchurian Plain, the Mongolian Plateau, and the mountainous regions of Eastern Siberia, stretching from Lake Baikal to the Pacific Ocean." For lack of a better term, I use "Manchuria" to indicate the states and societies that arose in the Manchurian Plain, such as Koguryŏ/Gaoguli, Parhae/Bohai, Liao and Jin. See Li & Cribb 2014, 2–4.
- 3 The warband would again reach Koryŏ with the Mongols in the form of the *kesig*, which was originally the band of loyal warriors and friends that had taken an oath to protect Chinggis Khan, but had morphed

the influence exercised by Northeast Asian (or Manchurian) practices on the formation and cohesion of warbands during the period of military rule in 13th-century Korea.⁴

This period was characterised by a century-long break in civilian rule on the Korean Peninsula as well as an intensification of often tense interaction with Northeast Asian states. In 1170, disgruntled military officials instigated a coup, slaughtering a number of powerful civil officials and ushering in a period in which – historically atypically – military officials took over the reins of government.⁵ The political rule of the warriors that came to power in the late 12th century on the Korean Peninsula was made possible as much by their anger at the institutional discrimination against the military⁶ as by their Northeast Asian-style warband organization at a time when competition and confrontation with those other Northeast Asian bearers of the warband heritage, the Jurchen, was increasing dramatically. Yun Yǒngin is right in arguing that the tone prevalent in textual evidence is not representative of the richness of relations between Koryŏ and its Manchurian borders.⁷ Ironically, the most savage confrontation the Koryŏ military experienced was with the armies of Chinggis Khan and his successors, which are perhaps the most successful examples of warband-based organization. As with basically all confrontations of Koryŏ with northern peoples, historiography has cast this confrontation in a mold that pits the “civilized/Sinicized” against the “barbarian”.⁸ There are more general arguments to be made against such a conception of Koryŏ’s relations with Chinese and Manchurian states (a debate on Sinicization has yet to be held in the field of Korean history), but there is also a possible counterargument based on the popularity of

into an enormous organization around the khan, numbering as many as 10,000 members. For the history of the *kesig*, see Liu Xiao 2008; Allsen 1986. For its Koryŏan inflection, see Lim Hyung-soo 2013, 217, Morihira 2001; Kim Po-kwang 2012.

4 Some studies have been conducted on the Tobang, but none of these connect the Tobang, a band of warriors loyal to the death to their leader, with Northeast Asian examples.

5 Shultz 2000.

6 This is the dominant narrative (see the studies by Shultz and Kim Tang-t’æk for example). I do not seek to topple this narrative (in my view it is a correct interpretation of the background of the military revolt) as much as I aim to complement it by focusing on a new and concrete way in which military might manifested itself during this period.

7 The northern frontier had always been (and would continue to be) the first place where Koryŏans, Jurchens, and all kinds of hard to define peoples would meet and trade, fight, or just coexist. It was Koryŏ’s most pressing security concern and an important lifeline for trade. Yun Yǒngin 2014 provides an up-to-date general (re-)consideration of Koryŏ’s relations with the north, noting the paucity of textual evidence but including the rich archaeological evidence still extant today. While acknowledging the sometimes antagonistic turns in these relations, he concludes that relations between Koryŏ and the north were multidimensional, prevalent and often also transcended the political boundaries implicit in textual sources.

8 Breuker 2011, 183.

the Manchurian model of the warband.⁹ Of late, some historians have started to re-evaluate the formative influences exercised by Manchurian states, acknowledging the fact that in many areas examples of innovation and creation can also be found throughout the northern frontier, and that Koryŏ was paying attention to what was happening.¹⁰

Evidence showing the popularity of Northeast Asian models and ideals of warriorship among Koryŏ warriors suggests not only that this influence was significant on an individual level (clothing, armor, weaponry), but that the historical circumstances had also created room for strategic and organizational changes in what used to be a very bureaucratic organization in the Sinitic mold. This article will look into these influences and try to connect these with the motives of warriors and soldiers to join a warband as well as the reasons why the warbands became the most important and prevalent socio-military organisational principle in 13th-century Korea. It will raise questions with regard to Northeast Asian influences in Korea, and it will draw a sharp contrast between the very different forms of military organization that existed during the period of military rule and in the periods before and after. Finally, this article will try to connect this specifically Korean inflection of the warband to Northeast Asian patterns and models.

The many guises of the warband

First, a working definition of the warband must be given. I will follow Jos Gommans' definition of the warband – a group of loyal (semi-)nomadic¹¹ warriors who follow their leader in the construction of an empire.¹² The warband as a successful form of organization and mobilization is wholly dependent on its internal cohesion. A warband is as successful as its success at staying together, particularly in the immediate aftermath of a conquest. As such, “the role of the nomadic warband in creating imperial cohesion beyond the warband, particularly its

9 The relatively recent extreme politicisation of the originally academic debate about whether ancient Manchuria was Chinese or Korean has not increased the academic quality of the discourse. Asking the wrong kind of question – was it Chinese or Korean – certainly did not help either. Most damaging perhaps are the writings of the so-called “pseudohistorians”, whose extremely nationalist perceptions of what they see as Korean history have muddled the waters of reasonable debate. See Breuker & Jackson forthcoming, section 1.

10 Some exceptions are Chang Nam-wŏn et al. 2009. Also see Yun Yŏng-in 2014, 129; Breuker 2010, 2011.

11 I have added “semi” here. The nomadic nature of these warriors did play an important role in other settings (such as among Mongols or Khitan), but significantly less so in the context of Koryŏ, which after all was a sedentary state with a mostly sedentary society. Still, the example of the nomadic, horse-riding warrior was influential among Koryŏ warriors, as will be shown later in this article. I also do not take “empire” here too literally; rather I take it to also mean “unconquered territory” in its metaphorical sense.

12 Cf. Gommans 2018.

position in the imperial organization and, to a lesser extent, its remuneration and cohesion” are important handles to get a grip on this phenomenon that at least in the study of medieval Korean history has received too little attention.¹³ A direct comparison should also be made with the historical “comitatus” as defined by Christopher Beckwith:

The comitatus is attested directly or indirectly in historical sources on the Hittites, the Achaemenid Persians, the Scythians, the Khwarizmians, the Hsiung-nu, the ancient and early medieval Germanic peoples, the Sasanid Persians, the Huns, the Hephthalites, the Koguryo, the early dynastic Japanese, the Turks (including at least the Türk, Khazars, and Uighurs), the Sogdians, the Tibetans, the Slavs, the Khitans, the Mongols, and others. It was adopted briefly by the Byzantines and Chinese, and especially by the Arabs, who, after adapting it to Islam, made it a permanent feature of Islamic culture down to early modern times.¹⁴

Koryŏ, as it turns out, was not isolated from this particular Eurasian concept. Until now, Koryŏ’s military organization has been characterized as based on Sinitic principles and examples. Tang and Song military texts informed the overall structure of the state armies, the capital regiments, the imperial guard, etc. In its use of strategy and choice of weapons, as well, Koryŏ military organisation was explicitly modelled on what Tang and Song armies had done before. Supplying the army with its backbone of professional officers was achieved through a hereditary system of military families, whose sons served in mid- to high-ranking positions, while *corvée* duty ensured the supply of ordinary soldiers. Leadership was predicated upon civil virtues first (indeed, often civilians would command armies) and military virtues second – it is well known that this was one of the core reasons for the military revolt of 1170.

In terms of local tactics, however, the Sinitic model was not followed. It has been noted that Koryŏ’s northern frontier was a hotbed of intense military activity, a region where seasoned military commanders emerged and where local (often semi-nomadic) warriors entered Koryŏ service, bringing with them their own military customs and concepts.¹⁵ The more – hostile – interaction, the more easily the warband culture would have taken root among Koryŏ warriors. Yet, a strong institutional element developed within the warband culture from Northeast Asia as it entered Koryŏ during the period of military rule between 1170 and 1270. Scholarly attention has mainly been devoted to the institutional changes brought on

13 This article is the result of a co-taught course on empires in Asia at Leiden University and a symposium that grew out of the course, focusing on the role of warbands in the construction of empires in Asia. The definition of the warband quoted above comes from course convenor and symposium organizer Jos Gommans (Leiden University).

14 Beckwith 2009, 15-16; Golden 2001.

15 Breuker 2011; Breuker 2012; Yun Yŏng-in 2014.

when Ch'oe Chunghŏn 崔忠獻 (1150–1219), the founder of the Ch'oe military regime that dominated this period, ended a period of severe domestic instability that had set in in 1170 and continued until 1196.¹⁶ The way he did this was – anachronistically – like something straight out of a Hollywood Western. Ch'oe had made a name for himself at the northern frontier as a fearsome warrior and an extremely capable leader of men.¹⁷ He eliminated his military rivals and the private armies of the capital's Buddhist monasteries one by one, until he faced off on the streets of Kaesŏng, the Koryŏ capital, with his one remaining rival, his younger brother, Ch'oe Ch'ungsu 崔忠粹 (1151–1197). They had fallen out over Ch'ungsu's insistence that his daughter should marry the crown prince.¹⁸ While Ch'ungsu apparently still hoped he could end the conflict without actually physically fighting his brother, his retainers reacted passionately when he suggested as much:

Generals O Sukpi, Chun Chonshim, and Pak Chŏngbu said: “The reason that we have been your retainers is because we admire your exceptional intelligence and courage. If you now persist with this cowardice, our families are exterminated. We humbly request that we decide the outcome by fighting.”¹⁹

Ch'oe Ch'ungsu had little choice but to assent, and he led over 1,000 warriors into battle on the central intersection in Kaesŏng, encouraging his men, shouting: “Let us fight with all our strength! I will give the position of those who are killed to their killers!” Whether it was due to his initial indecision or not, Ch'oe Ch'ungsu lost several of his officers and their men to his brother, consequently lost heart, and was killed while fleeing.²⁰

This public act of fratricide established Ch'oe as the new strongman of Koryŏ. He became the *de facto* ruler of Koryŏ, a position that would be inherited by his son, his grandson and his great-grandson, strengthening his hold on power by establishing a second administrative structure that took over most of the important powers and authority from the existing administration. The dual bureaucratic structure that he created would serve the military leadership well until the Mongol invasions. While there was no question that the military made the important decisions, the successful careers of literati such as Yi Kyubo 李奎報 (1168–1241) clearly show that they and civil officials still had enough room to maneuver.²¹

16 Shultz 1984, 58; Shultz 2000.

17 See the biography of Ch'oe Chunghŏn in *Koryŏsa* 129.1a-b.

18 Kim Tang-t'aeck 1987.

19 *Koryŏsa* 129.11a-b: 將軍吳淑庇·俊存深·朴挺夫等曰, “僕等所以遊公之門者, 以公有蓋世之氣. 今反怯懦如此, 是族僕等也. 請一戰以決雌雄.”

20 Shultz 1984; Kim Tang-t'aeck 1998.

21 As is noted by, among others, Edward Shultz, see Shultz, 2000; see also Kim T'aeuk 1996. Moreover, a number of civil officials (Ch'oe Yuch'ŏng, Im Kukch'ung) who had been banished under Ŭijong were

It has been noted that the Ch'oe regime relied heavily on what is usually described as their "private troops", but these private troops have never been identified as the Koryŏ inflection of the Northeast Asian (Eurasian) warband. The private troops of the Ch'oe leaders have customarily been understood as a more or less improvised and privatized version of the official state troops – the result of the degeneration of the standing state armies. I do not think that this characterisation aids in understanding what was happening structurally in late 12th-century Koryŏ. Furthermore, the dichotomy of private versus public has clear colonialist connotations.²²

In several ways, the administration of the Ch'oe regime shared characteristics with the *bakufu* in Japan.²³ In other ways, it seems to have been an uneasy compromise between the preservation of real political power within the Ch'oe lineage and the continuing necessity of having a Koryŏ ruler from the ruling Wang lineage on the throne, and to a similar extent the necessity of maintaining a functioning bureaucracy, staffed with professional officials, who also had the necessary social networks that they could rely on to get things done.²⁴

The Koryŏ warband is a good example of two of the characteristics habitually exhibited by warbands in Eurasia. It shows the particularly powerful nature of warbands in the areas with a nomadic frontier, and the Koryŏ warband also shows that the warband, if anything, is an institution of transition. In that sense, an analysis of the Koryŏ warband will be illuminating as to its function as a tool of transition in the construction and conservation of empire. Warbands were a stable concept in warfare along the northern frontier in medieval Korea. As mentioned above, warbands as such did not have a place in the formal conception of how the military should function in Korea, as the organisation of the military in medieval Korea was quite clearly modeled after Chinese paradigms. The realities of military life along the northern frontier, however, dictated that those members of the Korean military active along the

immediately reinstated by the new military powerholders, suggesting that the military revolt was significantly less military and more political than is usually assumed.

22 Despite the often impressive objective appearance of Japanese historical writings on premodern Korea during the colonial period, the overall structure of Japanese colonial historiography played into the colonialist discourses, which were the mainstream discourses of the first half of the twentieth century. Ikeuchi Hiroshi, for instance, was one of the towering figures in the field of premodern Korean history during that period. His analysis was pre-empted, as it were, by the demands of colonialist historiography. The dichotomy between private versus public played into this discourse, because the Ch'oe regime's usurpation of "proper" royal and bureaucratic power could be construed as an indication of the inherent weaknesses of the historical Korean administrative institutions. See Breuker 2005.

23 This was also noted and elaborated upon by Shultz in his *Generals and Scholars* (2000).

24 For information on the indispensable position of the Koryŏ ruler and all its different aspects, see Breuker 2010, chapter 8.

frontier adapted quickly to local circumstances. And it should also not be forgotten that a sizeable number of them, who were formally in the service of Koryŏ, were in fact local inhabitants, most probably Jurchen from various communities, but also Khitan. This means, of course, that as the warband was the most important organisational concept the Jurchen used in warfare, it was the prevalent means of military (and to a lesser extent social) organization in the northern frontier region.

Military organization in Koryŏ generally took on the appearance of Sinitic military organization, adapted to suit local circumstances. In terms of the northern frontier, however, it seems that the veneer of Sinitic military organization did not hold – with the exception of the extraordinary instances when the capital sent out expeditionary armies to pacify the northern frontier with brute force. The frontier region – except in times of outright war – was mainly guarded by local people from the frontier area who had signed up with the Koryŏ army. In the absence of a streamlined frontier defense mechanism, much of the daily guarding of the frontier area fell to locally recruited soldiers, who fought the way they were used to: on horseback and in warbands. A warband entailed more than a strategic grouping to bolster military efficiency. More so than other organisational forms, it also underlined the primacy of the organisation surrounding the immediate and present leader. It is revealing that the Koryŏ ruler always took care to appoint particularly powerful Jurchen leaders in the Koryŏ bureaucracy: However, where an appointment normally clothed the appointee with the authority of the position, the Jurchen leaders' appointments were confirmations of their actual power and stature.²⁵ Thus, the northern region did not conform to rule by bureaucracy as did the rest of Koryŏ.

To a certain extent, the dual bureaucratic system the Ch'oe regime created reflects the same overriding importance of the leader as an individual (and not his symbolical qualities, which were dominant, for example, in the figure of the Koryŏ ruler). As a member of a warband, one was entitled to access to the ruler, could expect to share in the spoils of war, and also expect leniency when breaking rules and laws outside of that tight-knit circle of brothers. And, importantly, one expected to live and die (not always literally) with one's leader.

Influences from the north, from Manchuria, were of course not unknown in Koryŏ. One of Koryŏ's seminal texts, *The Ten Injunctions* (first half of the 11th century), issues in the fourth injunction a strong warning against allowing undue influence from either Khitan (i.e. Manchuria) or Tang (i.e. any Han Chinese state), which would have been an issue under most Koryŏ rulers.²⁶ From the end of the devastating wars with Liao in the 1020s to the fall of Liao

25 Breuker 2011.

26 Breuker 2008.

– and subsequent rise of Jin – a century later in 1125, Koryŏ experienced a period of extended peace and relative tranquility, in which its culture flourished to an unparalleled extent.²⁷ The fall of Liao not only brought to an end a century of mutually beneficial relations between Liao and Koryŏ; it also set the stage for the rebellion of Myoch'ŏng 妙清 (?–1135) in 1135.²⁸ Myoch'ŏng's ascendancy would in all probability not have been possible without the existence of a strong and credible foreign threat: the Jurchen at the northern frontier who had just established the Jin state, replacing the Khitan Liao. And although Kim Pushik 金富弼 (1075–1151) succeeded in pacifying the center of the revolt, P'yŏngyang, in 1136, less than four decades later Koryŏ would undergo a violent upheaval when the military revolted, ushering in the period of military rule and changing the nature of Koryŏ society for good. The 1170 military coup did not bring change immediately, however. For the first decade, it merely brought about a situation very much akin to civil war, in which warlords (both from the military and from Buddhist monasteries) fought and assassinated one another incessantly.

It was against this background of international dominance of the Jurchen Jin (based mainly on the strength of their seemingly invincible cavalry) and prolonged domestic violence and fighting that Ch'oe Chunghŏn came to the fore. He was the scion of a well-known military family and had made his name as a commander of an Extraordinary Watch (*pyŏlch'o* 別抄). The Extraordinary Watches (which would develop into the legendary but ultimately not very effective Sambyŏlch'o or Three Extraordinary Watches) were small-sized, mobile, decentralized fighting units, which bore more than a passing resemblance to Jurchen raiding parties.²⁹ It is this influence that made its way into early 13th-century military-ruled Koryŏ. An interesting entry in the *Koryŏsa chŏryŏ* 高麗史節要 from 1229 mentions that two different military organizations (the Tobang 都房 and the Extraordinary Night Watch) “vied enthusiastically with one another to emulate the customs and style of the Taltan by ostentatiously displaying their saddles, clothes, bows and arrows.” Even more surprisingly, the entry concludes with this statement: “The sons of the noble families of the capital vied with one another to purchase saddles and clothes in the style of the Taltan to such an extent that many lost their wives, who complained that these purchases had bankrupted them.”³⁰ The term “Taltan” is a Korean adaptation of the ethnonym known in English as “Tartar” and was used to signify peoples from the north (both Manchuria and Mongolia).

27 Yun Yŏng-in 2014.

28 Breuker 2008.

29 Breuker 2012.

30 *Koryŏsa chŏryŏ* 15.46a: 冬十月. 崔瑀宴宰樞於其第, 臨毬庭, 觀都房馬別抄擊毬弄槍騎射. 鞍馬衣服弓矢, 務相誇耀, 爭效韃靼風俗. 毬場舊有樓三間, 至是瑀命就增三間. 是日晚起役, 詰旦告畢. 瑀又邀宴耆老宰樞, 觀擊毬弄槍騎射. 能者立加爵賞, 都下子弟爭事鞍馬衣服, 妻家多以貧乏見棄.

Clues as to how this came about and how Taltan fashion spread amongst the sons of the Koryŏ nobility may be found in the rise of the military after 1170. The main reason that this phenomenon has been overlooked is that, in general, scholarship on the Koryŏ period has been dismissive of the relation between Koryŏ and the civilizations in Manchuria. The debate, whether dealing with Koryŏ, Liao, or Jin, still is cast in terms of relative Sinicization. And although Sinitic influence is impossible to deny, it would be reductionist to not acknowledge other kinds of influences as well. To make matters worse, there still is an implicit conflation of Manchurian (or northern) cultural achievements with barbarian influences (although current scholarship is addressing this), and the strong neo-Confucian bias of Chosŏn scholarship in the 15th century (when Koryŏ sources were compiled) has only exacerbated this. At that time, anything from the north, that was anything not from China, was received with suspicion.

But a closer look at how the military rulers came to power, how they then held on to it, and how they were ultimately betrayed, clearly shows the influence of the Eurasian concept of the warband in Koryŏ during the military period. According to the *Koryŏsa* 高麗史, it was one-time strongman Kyŏng Taesŭng 慶大升 (1154–1183), who was the first military leader to formalize his personal coterie of warriors under the name Tobang (I have no clear idea where this term originated). In 1179, Kyŏng “assembled a group of several hundreds of men around him who were willing to die for him, just in case something untoward might happen.”³¹ And in a manner attested also among the Mongols, Jurchen and other Eurasian (semi-)nomadic peoples, he was serious about sharing everything with the men he trusted with his life, upending the hierarchy that Koryŏans would have expected to exist between a general and his men:

But some military officials publicly declared: “Chancellor Chŏng, waving the banners of justice, cut down the criminals and held the civil officials in check, releasing the anger that had been building up in us for years. His merits in displaying the authority and might of the military officials are enormous, but yesterday Kyŏng Taesŭng killed four great ministers in one morning! Who is going to punish him?” This frightened Kyŏng Taesŭng, and he assembled a group of several hundreds of men around him who were willing to die for him, just in case something untoward might happen. He called this band the Tobang. He gave them long pillows and large blankets and ordered them to guard him in turns, day and night. In order to show his sincerity, he also shared their blankets with them, and they slept together.”³²

31 *Koryŏsa* 100.18a.

32 *Koryŏsa* 100.18a: 武官或宣言曰, “鄭侍中首唱大義, 沮抑文士, 雪吾曹累年之憤, 以張武威, 功莫大焉。今大升一朝而尸四公, 孰討之耶?” 大升懼, 招致死士百數十人, 留養門下, 以備之, 號都房。爲長枕大被, 令輪日直宿, 或自共被, 以示誠款。

Being so close to the leader meant privilege, even if at times this was unlawful. The rules inside the warband did not necessarily agree with those outside of it. An entry from 1180 in the *Koryŏsa* mentions the following after members of the Tobang had committed crimes:

After Kyŏng Taesŭng had killed Chŏng Chungbu and Song Yuin, he continuously felt uneasy. He repeatedly sent out his retainers to investigate groundless rumors, immediately imprisoning and torturing anyone thought to be involved. Several large prisons were built, where cruel punishments were meted out. At the time, the capital was plagued by many bandits who called themselves members of Kyŏng Taesŭng's Tobang. Whenever officers of the law apprehended them, they were promptly released by Kyŏng Taesŭng. On account of this, they were free to exploit people openly and with impunity. When a member of the Tobang killed the son of a well-respected family, he was arrested by officers of the law and about to be punished when Kyŏng Taesŭng opposed this with all his might and saved him from punishment.³³

This last example shows clearly that the warband was an external addition to a system already well in place. A suspected murderer had been apprehended by the relevant authorities and was about to undergo the Koryŏ judicial proceedings, when his Tobang brothers had their leader intervene, a leader who felt so insecure and vulnerable without their support, that he had little choice but to intervene on behalf of the offenders. It should also be noted that only the Tobang received this kind of preferential treatment: while it is not always easy to distinguish between the Tobang and the Extraordinary Watches, one of the defining differences seems to have been proximity to the leader and thus legal immunity. To understand the role of the warband in 13th-century Koryŏ, it is important to acknowledge the fundamentally foreign nature of the warband in the Koryŏ context. The indignation that speaks from the pages of the *Koryŏsa* clearly attests to this: bonds between warriors that transcended the rules and laws of the state were frowned upon and not supposed to exist. Yet, this example spawned an arms race of sorts.

33 *Koryŏsa* 100.18a-b: 大升自去鄭·宋以來,心不自保,常令數人,潛伺里巷。偶聞飛語,輒拘囚鞠問,累起大獄,用刑深峻。時京城寇盜多起,自稱大升都房,有司逮捕囚之,大升輒釋之,由是,公行奪掠無畏忌。大升門客,殺一良家子於路,有司捕之欲治,大升力救得免。Kim Tang-t'aek interprets this passage to mean that Kyŏng recruited criminals, but he confuses cause and result. According to Kim, the Tobang was recruited from criminals, fighters, and government soldiers. He misses the point. What happened is that Tobang members – who may have been criminals, fighters, and government soldiers – were not punished when they committed crimes: the point is that Tobang members were privileged members of society, rather than a motley crew of its most violent rejects. In Kim's analysis, this is how the state army starts to turn private bit by bit. In the vein of earlier historians, Kim basically laments the downfall of the state army and sees it as a form of degeneration. From the point of view of the state army, this may have been the case, but from the point of view of general Koryŏ military readiness (which was in the hands of the Ch'oe House), it certainly was not. See Chŏng Tu-hŭi 1977; Kim Tang-t'aek 1998.

There came to be many bandits in the imperial capital who called themselves members of Kyōng Taesūng's Tobang. Whenever an official would apprehend one of them, Kyōng Taesūng would invariably have him released. This caused the bandits to behave without restraint and without any fear of being punished for their crimes. After Yi Ŭimin had heard Kyōng Taesūng wanted to have him killed, he made sure his house was always guarded by a band of warriors. He grew even more afraid when he heard that certain people in the Tobang whom he shunned wanted to hurt him. At the entry to the neighborhood [he lived in], he erected a large gate which he had guarded day and night. This gate was called an "entry gate." Soon all other neighborhoods in the capital region followed this example.³⁴

Kyōng's example of surrounding himself with trusted warriors, even if it clashed with the system in place, was swiftly followed by his competitors.

Kyōng died in 1183.³⁵ What happened to his Tobang is revealing, as it shows the typical Eurasian characteristics of this phenomenon: the ultimate loyalty owed to the person and not to the system, a loyalty that often could not be transplanted (certainly not when there was no blood heir). As Edward Shultz noted, this was not a notion alien to Koryō warriors of the 12th and 13th centuries.³⁶ This of course made a surviving warband or Tobang extremely dangerous to any new leader:

When Kyōng Taesūng killed Chōng Chungbu, he received much help from guardsman Kim Chagyōk. This endeared Kim to Kyōng Taesūng who put him in charge of the Tobang. When Kyōng Taesūng died, the Tobang members all raised money to be used for the funeral. After the funeral, they gathered for a last time before disbanding and drank alcohol. Kim Chagyōk used this as an excuse to approach the ruler with a false accusation: "Kyōng Taesūng's Tobang is gathering as we speak, and it is only a question of time when it will revolt." The ruler, who had shunned Kyōng Taesūng when he was alive, ordered the Military Council to have Grand Generals Chōng Chonshil and O Sukpi punish them. Anyone who was listed on the roster of the Tobang was apprehended. Anyone who dared flee and hide was faced with the bitter experience of having their parents, wife and children, or even their entire family arrested, so that those in hiding had no other choice but to surrender themselves or to commit suicide. As a result, about 60 men were arrested and severely tortured on the orders of Chōng Chonshil.... The torture was

34 *Koryōsa chōryo* 12.46a-b: 京城盜賊多起, 自稱慶大升都房, 有司逮捕囚之, 大升輒釋之, 由是, 公行奪掠, 略無畏忌. 李義旼自聞大升圖己, 常聚勇士于家以備之. 又聞都房謀害所忌, 義旼益懼, 乃於里巷樹大門以警夜, 號爲閤門, 京城坊里, 皆效而樹之.

35 *Koryōsa* 20.14a.

36 Shultz 2000.

so severe that out of those who were sent in exile to distant islands most died on the way there and only four to five made it alive.³⁷

A similarly grim fate awaited the members of the warband of Kim Injun 金仁俊 (?–1268), the strongman who had come to power after the assassination of the last Ch'oe ruler in 1258. When Kim Injun himself was assassinated, his son convened “the six units of the Tobang and other troops to defend himself.” The threat Kim's warband posed was swiftly realized by his antagonists, who cried foul, begging for the arrest of the Tobang. Their wish was granted:

After Im Yŏn killed Kim Chun, Kim's son Kim Chu convened the six units of the Tobang and other troops to defend himself against Im. Ōm Suan accused him, while knocking on the palace gates: “If we don't eliminate these men, I'm afraid they'll start a rebellion!” The king immediately sent Pak Sŏngdae to have Kim Chu apprehended.³⁸

The Tobang, which consisted of a group of loyal warriors that followed their leader in the reconstruction of the Koryŏ state, or perhaps rather in the construction of a new bureaucratic layer on top of the existing system, seems to have quickly taken root among the military, for in 1200, an entry in the *Koryŏsa* mentions how

Ch'oe Ch'unghŏn summoned from among the civil and military officials those without fixed positions and ordinary soldiers anyone who had a tough disposition and was physically strong. He divided them into six *pŏn* (units) and had them lodge at his house in turns. They were called the Tobang. When Ch'unghŏn would venture out onto the streets, he was always accompanied by a *pŏn*, creating the impression of him going to war.³⁹

It seems that once the Ch'oe House took power, the Tobang was to a certain extent institutionalized. The warriors immediately surrounding Ch'oe Chunghŏn and his successors were either part of the Tobang or of one of the Extraordinary Watches. It is in fact not entirely

37 *Koryŏsa* 100.19b-20a: 初大升之討仲夫也，牽龍金子格有力焉，大升愛之，俾領都房。大升卒，都房斂錢以葬，將散復聚飲，子格誣告曰，“大升都房往往復會者，將為亂也。”王素忌大升，命重房捕之，使大將軍鄭存實·吳淑等治之。苟名在都房者，悉捕之，其或逃匿，縛其父母妻子及族黨，困苦之，匿者自出，或自刃死。凡得六十餘人，復諭存實等，嚴加拷掠，窮索其黨。又令內官，伺用刑苛緩，於是，捶楚甚酷。並流遠島，多死于路，存者不過四五人。

38 *Koryŏsa* 106.37a: 林衍誅俊，俊子柱聚六番都房諸軍，謀拒之。守安扣宮門告曰，“此輩不散，恐為變。”王即遣朴成大等捕柱。

39 *Koryŏsa chŏryo* 14.8a-b. 忠獻自知縱恣，恐其變生不測，大小文武官吏閑良之士至於軍卒強有力者，竝皆招致，分為六番，更日直宿其家，號都房。及其出入，合番擁衛，如赴戰鬪焉。A later source confirms this; see *Mokchaegip* 木齋集, “Chapchŏ pyŏngji” 雜著兵志 a124525d. 李義旼為攝將軍崔忠獻所殺。而忠獻遂執國命。磔戮朝紳。毒痛生靈。甚於仲夫。義旼。而懲其忽於防衛也。於是自文武官吏，閑良軍人有勇力者。悉招致之。分為六番。更日直宿其家。號曰都房。

clear how membership in the Tobang and the Watches differed: preferential treatment seems to have been given almost exclusively to the Tobang members, but in terms of organization they were very similar. It should not pass unnoticed that Ch'oe himself had risen to fame as a fearless leader of a mobile watch unit with frontier duty, or *pyŏlch'ŏ*. Warband members were given generous presents, and they received military training. Part of this was undoubtedly functional, but partly this was also a means of creating an unbreakable bond between the leader and his men through shared suffering, shared toil, and shared pleasure. In 1210, it was recorded in the *Tongsa kangmok* 東史綱目 (Entries and Articles in Korean History) that when

Ch'oe Chunghŏn invited guests over to celebrate the feast of the ninth day of the ninth month, he ordered the strongest members of his Tobang to fight each other with bare hands. As a reward, he promoted the winners to the ranks of commander and company commander.⁴⁰

His son followed in his footsteps, as illustrated by this entry from 1229:

In the eleventh month, Ch'oe U had his house troops, the Tobang, and the Extraordinary Night Watch stand to attention. He then proceeded to give them expensive and luxurious saddles and other riding implements, clothes, swords, armour and arms. He then divided them into five armies and had them practise war games, but many horses tripped and fell, wounding or killing many warriors and their horses. The war games were stopped, after which Ch'oe had his troops practise their hunting skills, circling endlessly, surrounding hills and riding in file through the fields. This made Ch'oe U very happy, and he feasted the men with food and alcohol.⁴¹

Then again, Koryŏ had had ample time and opportunity to get to know the Mongol warriors up close: between 1216 and 1219, continuing invasions by Khitan armies had driven Koryŏ and the Mongols to cooperate in defeating the Khitan. The Khitan armies that had been forced out of their homelands by the invading Mongols sought relief in Koryŏ. Koryŏ general Kim Ch'wiryŏ 金就呂, however, was of no mind to give them what they were seeking. Instead, he negotiated with the Mongols and struck a deal with them to vanquish the Khitan.

40 *Tongsa kangmok* 10.16b. 忠獻會賓客. 設重陽宴. 使都房有力者. 相手搏. 勝者即校尉隊正以賞之.

41 *Koryŏsa chŏryŏ* 15.46a: 冬十月. 崔瑀宴宰樞於其第. 臨毬庭. 觀都房馬別抄擊毬弄槍騎射. 鞍馬衣服弓矢. 務相誇耀. 爭效韃靼風俗. 毬場舊有樓三間. 至是瑀命就增三間. 是日晚起役. 詰旦告畢. 瑀又邀宴者老宰樞. 觀擊毬弄槍騎射. 能者立加爵賞. 都下子弟爭事鞍馬衣服. 妻家多以貧乏見棄. In *Koryŏsa chŏryŏ* 15.46b it was further recorded that during such matches, many of the participants (both men and horses) died or were seriously hurt – as was the case the next month. (For the original text see fn. 43.)

Kim Ch'wiryŏ, who seems to have been quite the dashing figure, seems to have established warm relationships with the Mongol generals, which they celebrated in shared drinking sessions.⁴² direct meeting with the Mongols

An entry from the same year reveals the Eurasian provenance of the notion of the warband and, in particular, how members of such a band, the most highly skilled and brave warriors, were supposed to dress from the viewpoint of contemporary warriors:

[1229] Winter, Tenth Month. Ch'oe U held a banquet for the high-ranking officials. They arrived at the polo field and watched the Tobang and the Mounted Extraordinary Watch (*mabyŏlch'o*) play polo, toss spears and practice mounted archery. [The Tobang and the Mounted Extraordinary Watch] endeavored to outshine one another by emulating the customs of the northern peoples (*taltan*). There were three pavilions lining the polo field, but at this time Ch'oe U ordered that three more be built. Work began late that day, and early the following day it was announced that construction had been completed. Ch'oe U again entertained the most senior high officials with a banquet, and they watched [the troops] playing polo, tossing spears and practicing mounted archery. The most capable individuals were rewarded on the spot with titles and prizes. The sons of the noble families of the capital vied with one another to purchase saddles and clothes in the style of the Taltan to such an extent that many lost their wives, who complained that these purchases had bankrupted them.⁴³

This entry shows how the Tobang and Extraordinary Watches explicitly traced their lineage back to the north. Again, it is worth noting that a tour of duty along the northern frontier in Koryŏ (or several) was a *sine qua non* for a successful military career, the place where one encountered (indeed, fought with or against) the Taltan.

The Tobang was ever present in the life of its leader, even in the mundane task of building his house:

On the *kyŏngin* day of the tenth month [in 1234], Ch'oe U was enfeoffed as Duke of Chin'yang. Prior to this, the king had issued an edict [saying]: "Ch'oe U's superlative merits merit him being enfeoffed as a duke and the creation in his name of a *pu*." As a result, all the capital's officials went to his house to congratulate him. When the king had originally wanted to enfeoff him, on the *ŭrhae* day, Ch'oe had declined, stating that he did not possess the necessary ritual implements to receive

42 Han'guk chungsesa hakhoe 2011.

43 *Koryŏsa chŏryŏ* 15.45b: :十一月. 崔瑀聞家兵都房馬別抄, 鞍馬衣服弓劍兵甲甚侈美. 分五軍, 習戰, 人馬多有顛仆死傷者. 及其終, 習田獵之法, 籠山絡野, 循環無端. 瑀悅之, 犒以酒食.

the royal edict. Then this day was selected. People from the district and the county vied with each other to give Ch'oe [the most wonderful] presents. When Ch'oe U had built his house, he had had the Tobang and the Saryŏng-gun do the work and transport timber from the old capital in Songdo, as well as pine trees and nut pines. Many of these were planted on the hills behind his house.⁴⁴

Even the enemy, the Mongols, perceived the importance (and the strength) of the Tobang; in 1256, a Mongol commander accused Ch'oe Hang of having the Tobang defend the most strategic locations.⁴⁵

The manner in which the members of the Tobang behaved and the way they were treated by their leader show how intimate their bond was. They also show how the institution was explicitly aimed at creating and constantly reinforcing the bond between the leader and his most trusted warriors. It is easy to imagine why a warrior would want to become a member of a warband: closeness to the real center of power and perhaps some form of participation, a privileged position – socially and legally, access to the ruler, and the real expectation of material benefits in the form of spoils of war. The combination of personal bravery, political power, and the northern notion of the warband would turn out to be not only very attractive but also necessary in the brutal battle for political – and biological – survival: When military strongman Ch'oe U 崔瑀 banished his sons Manjong and Manjŏn to the southwest of the peninsula and forced both to become Buddhist monks, they felt threatened and fell back on what they would have seen around them when under threat: they formed a warband. They drew its members from what they called their disciples (*mundo* or *cheja*), whose “riding saddles and clothing imitated those of the Taltan.”⁴⁶

The conscious emulation of what seems to have been the Platonic ideal of the northern mounted warrior was, however, not enough to stop the Mongol armies when they invaded Koryŏ in 1231. Koryŏ's state armies met the Mongols on the battlefield and were routed

44 *Koryŏsa* 16.21b.22a: 冬十月庚寅. 冊崔瑀爲晉陽侯. 先是, 詔, “論瑀遷都之功, 可封侯立府.” 百官皆賀于第. 王欲以乙亥冊封, 瑀辭以迎詔禮物不備, 乃用是日. 於是, 州郡爭致餽遺. 瑀營私第, 皆役都房及四領軍, 船輸舊京材木, 又取松柏, 多植家園.

45 *Koryŏsa* 44.25a.

46 *Koryŏsa chŏryo* 16.28b. The *mundo* or *cheja* mentioned here were in all probability young men from families that had attached themselves to his branch of the Ch'oe family. Most often, such persons are referred to as *mun'gaek* or clients in Koryŏ sources. Clients entered into informal and voluntary ties of obedience with Koryŏ's great families, a phenomenon most clearly seen when state organization was at its weakest. Most scholars locate the origins of the private soldiers of the Ch'oe in the *mun'gaek* system: I agree that clients (provided they were highly-skilled fighters) would have provided the Tobang with some of its members, but I disagree with the notion that the organizational model of the Tobang was derived from this practice. See Yu Ch'ang-gyu 1985, 379.

each time they met. Although both Kuju in the north and Chungju in the central part of the peninsula withstood the Mongols, the capital of Kaesŏng was not able to offer an effective defense against the highly mobile enemy, prompting the Ch'oe government to sue for peace. The Mongols left behind 72 overseers (*darugaci*), while the Ch'oe government made a strategic move: the capital was moved from Kaesŏng to Kanghwa-do, an island off the coast of present-day Seoul. Due to the island's treacherous tide, its slippery coast, the fortifications on the island, and the fact that the island functioned as the tax collection center, it offered the Ch'oe regime the opportunity for long-term resistance. The 72 Mongol overseers were killed throughout the country in a coordinated operation. At the same time, the mainland population, especially in the north, was left to its own devices and exposed to the wrath of the Mongols, although the government did keep calling on the population to retreat to the safety of the mountains and islands. It was at this time that the impromptu mobile fighting bands called *pyŏlch'o*, or Extraordinary Watch, emerged throughout the country.⁴⁷ There was no loyalty oath that tied members and their leader together, but in terms of tactics, weapons, and fighting methods, the Extraordinary Watches shared many similarities with the warband.

In the meantime, the warband changed. The history of the Mongol *kesig* reveals an inevitable development: the longer a ruler is in place and the more powerful he gets, the larger, and thus the more unwieldy, his warband will get. Chinggis Khan's *kesig* numbered 10,000 warriors, who accompanied him day and night. That high of a number was not reached in Koryŏ, but it seems safe to assume (in the absence of any hard numbers) that the Tobang and the Extraordinary Watches grew to an extent that an individual relationship with the ruler had become impossible for most warband members. This had a dangerous consequence: once the emotive bond between leader and warband weakens, there is a real chance that the momentum will shift to the warband itself. The Mameluks in Egypt are a prime example of this.⁴⁸

Koryŏ experienced something very similar. The Extraordinary Watches in their different incarnations have been called the "teeth and claws" of the Ch'oe regime. It seems that the Tobang should also be included in this (the difference between the two organisations vis-à-vis the Ch'oe leader is not clear). When third-generation power holder Ch'oe Hang died in 1257 and his son Ŭi succeeded him, "the Extraordinary Night Watch, the Army of Divine Justice [the Shinŭigun, a cavalry unit composed of Koryŏ soldiers who had returned from Mongol captivity], the three units of the Sŏbang and the 36 units of the Tobang guarded him day and night," showing the increasingly central role the institutionalized warband had come

⁴⁷ Breuker 2012.

⁴⁸ Holt 2005.

to play.⁴⁹ Instead of serving like bodyguards and as extensions of the ruler's authority, both the Tobang and the Extraordinary Watches became indispensable for the exercise of power by the military leadership. From their initial presenting of ostentatious symbols of that authority, parading over the polo grounds or showing off their physical and martial prowess, they gradually became that authority themselves. In the process, they transitioned from being warbands formed around a leader to the organisations that made and broke leaders.

When Im Yŏn 林衍 (1215?–1270) executed his coup d'état against Wŏnjong 元宗 (1260–1274) in 1269, he did so with the Three Extraordinary Watches and the Tobang in attendance. This seems to have been such an intimidating spectacle that when Im rhetorically pondered whether he should start a revolution, “the ministers and councillors dared not answer him.”

On the *imjin* day Im Yŏn convened the Three Extraordinary Watches and the six units of the Tobang on the polo field. He told the ministers and security councillors present: “I have removed an illegal powerholder for the benefit of the royal house, but the king is conspiring with the faction of Kim Kyŏng to kill me. I cannot sit back and wait until they kill me. But what if I instigate a revolution?” The ministers and councillors dared not answer him.⁵⁰

Im went ahead with his coup and declared Ch'ang, the Duke of Agyŏng, the new king; he did so with the Three Extraordinary Watches and the six *units* of the Tobang backing him up.

On the *ŭlmi* day, Im Yŏn, wearing full armor, led the Three Extraordinary Watches and the six units of the Tobang to the house of Ch'ang, Duke of Angyŏng. In the presence of the assembled officials, he declared Ch'ang king. Immediately a storm arose, blowing over trees and blowing away roof tiles.⁵¹

Im was accompanied by his warband wherever he went. They also guarded his family, at least until Im died; again, the loyalty to the person of the leader and not to his office is apparent.

Im Yŏn sent the Extraordinary Night Watch to villages in several provinces to tell the population to go live on coastal islands. That night Yŏn was so consumed with stress and worries, an abscess burst open and he died. The weather had been

49 *Koryŏsa* 24.27a, 129:52a; *Koryŏsa chŏryŏ* 17.29b.

50 *Koryŏsa* 130.21ab: 集三別抄·六番都房于毬庭, 與宰相議曰, “我爲王室, 除權臣, 王乃與金鏡等謀, 欲殺我, 不可坐而受戮, 我欲行大事, 不爾竄之海島, 如之何?” 宰相莫敢對。

51 *Koryŏsa* 130.22b: 衍擐甲, 率三別抄·六番都房, 詣安慶公溫第, 會文武百僚, 奉鬯呼萬歲, 入本闕, 卽王位。宗室·百官朝賀, 忽風雨暴作, 拔木飛瓦。

grey for ten days in a row, but now the skies cleared. The Duke of Sunan appointed Yŏn's son Yumu as supervisor of the Policy Formation Department. Yumu convened the Tobang's six units and had them guard his own house. He told his son Yun to take three units of the Söbang and guard the house of his elder brother Yugan.⁵²

The clearest example of what the warband had become – an evolutionary danger all warbands face – may be seen in what happened when Ch'oe Ŭi 崔瑄 (1233–1258), the great grandson of Chunghŏn, took power. He was killed in the third month of 1258 by what looks like at least one warband member, who relied on his own following to do the killing. To be very explicit, the warband that had once enabled Ch'oe Chunghŏn's rise to power had now evolved into the instrument that would overthrow and kill his great-grandson.

On the *pyŏngja* day Chancellor of the Directorate of Education Yu Kyŏng and Watch Commander Kim Injun killed Ch'oe Ŭi, restoring the authority of the king. The king appointed Yu Kyŏng as member of the Security Council, Pak Songbin as Grand General and Kim Injun as General. The other members of the faction that executed the coup were also given promotions based on their merits.

On the *kimyo* day the king went to the Kangan Hall. The assembled officials came to congratulate him as if he had just ascended to the throne. The king left after the ceremony ended.

Wearing their official robes, Pak Songbi and Kim Injun led the meritorious Extraordinary Watches of the Left and the Right, the Army of Divine Justice, and the Tobang to the palace grounds, where they bowed before the king, loudly shouting "Manse!" Then the property of Ch'oe Ŭi was divided among them according to each person's merit.⁵³

52 *Koryŏsa chŏryŏ* 18.47b-48a: 林衍遣夜別抄, 巡行諸道州郡, 督民入居諸島。是日, 衍憂懣, 疽發背而死。時, 天陰旬餘, 至是, 開霽。順安侯以衍子惟茂爲敎定別監。惟茂集都房六番, 自衛其家, 使弟惟相, 領書房三番, 衛其兄惟幹家, 爲外援。According to Edward Shultz, the Söbang was an institution created by the Ch'oe for notable Confucian scholars. Shultz quotes the *Koryŏsa* as follows: "Ch'oe I's [U's] retainers were all famous Confucian scholars of the age. They were divided into three divisions: the Che'bang, Sukpang, and Chamber of Scholarly Advisers (Söbang)." Shultz writes that "the chamber comprised three divisions that patrolled with Ch'oe military units to maintain peace." See *Koryŏsa* 129.32b and Shultz 2000, 78.

53 *Koryŏsa* 24.32b-33b: 丙子 大司成柳璥, 別將金仁俊等誅崔瑄, 復政于。以璥爲樞密院右副承宣, 朴松庇爲大將軍, 仁俊爲將軍, 餘皆賜爵有差。己卯 王御康安殿, 百官陳賀如新卽位。禮畢出, 朴松庇·金仁俊以時服, 率諸功臣·左右別抄·神義軍·都房等, 入殿庭羅拜, 呼萬歲。發崔瑄家貲, 分給有差。

It should not pass unnoticed that the victorious perpetrators of the coup were accompanied by the “meritorious Extraordinary Watches of the Left and the Right, the Army of Divine Justice and the Tobang to the palace grounds, where they bowed before the king, loudly shouting ‘Manse!’” The transition was complete. Power and authority now resided in the institution of the warband, which had previously existed to serve and protect that power and authority from the outside. In the case of Koryŏ, the complicated situation in which military leaders struggled to adapt to circumstances in which the king had allied himself with the Mongols led to the demise and destruction of the Three Extraordinary Watches and of all those who had joined them in their resistance against the now allied Koryŏ-Mongol armies. Ironically, the moment the Koryŏ warband had made its transition from a group of loyal followers to the organisation that held true power, it was destroyed. In its stead, the Mongol warband, the *kesig*, entered Koryŏ.

Putting everything together

The private troops that protected Ch’oe power were more than just disgruntled or unpaid soldiers who had deserted from the state armies. These troops originated from among the most trusted and loyal warriors the Ch’oe leaders and their predecessors had, who were inspired by the continuous presence of the warband in Manchuria and the northern region, which served as an example to the extent that even northern clothing became fashionable. The relationship between Koryŏ and the north was complex, multifaceted and intricate. The north formed a veritable counterforce to the impressive might of Sinitic influences, and one of the ways it manifested itself was in the warband. It should be noted, however, that this relationship consisted of two different components. The first component was the structural, inherited, if you will, relation that can also be observed between Koryŏ and Liao in, e.g., religious architecture, astronomy, Buddhist art, etc.⁵⁴ The second component was the perceived structural relation the young sons of the Koryŏ nobility and warriors saw, the one they aimed to emulate, reinforced in their efforts by a century of intimate relations with Liao and almost a century of Jurchen military superiority, which they accepted only with gritted teeth.

The Ch’oe emphasis on the military supremacy of their own troops had direct consequences for the state military system. When the Mongol armies invaded in 1231, the state armies Koryŏ fielded were without exception routed in battle, which was both a testament to Mongol strength and to the shift in military power that had been underway in Koryŏ itself. The structural weakening of the state military system was in this sense a negative

54 Chang Nam-wŏn et al. 2009.

development: While entertaining thoughts of how a Koryŏ state army that had been properly trained, supplied, and provisioned would have fared against the Mongols means engaging in counterfactual history, it nonetheless remains the case that the heyday of the state military system had long since passed. But the Ch'oe House's use of the warband as a critical tool to create and sustain its grip on Koryŏ political power also had positive aspects.

Faced with a Sinitic model of military organization that seemed defunct (internationally, the Jurchen Jin had just defeated the Song) and faced with a strong potential enemy in the north (the same Jurchen Jin), the warband had shown its efficacy as an organizational principle in an organizationally predominantly Sinitic environment. Domestically, the Sinitic model of military organization had also run into serious problems due to its inherent and structural emphasis on civilian superiority, leading to structural discrimination of the military in Koryŏ. This provided the main reason for the military to revolt in 1170, which underlined the importance of the Northeast Asian warband by bringing it with them from the northern frontier and using it as the main foundation for their political power. Manchurian techniques had, to a certain extent, supplanted Sinitic forms of organization: the differences in dimensions and context between Han Chinese states and the Koryŏ state put into sharp relief the proven weaknesses of the Sinitic model.

The Ch'oe regime and the other military leaders would not have been able to survive very long without their trusted warbands. The fact that these warbands came to play such an important role in 13th-century Koryŏ, although a fundamentally different system had been in place – and had functioned successfully – for a very long time, reveals much about the stress the Koryŏ system was under during that period. The ingenious second bureaucratic layer Ch'oe Chunghŏn had built atop of the existing bureaucracy can perhaps be seen as related to the warband, inasmuch as it also sought to replace loyalty towards the system with personal loyalty. Be that as it may, the development of warbands from a marginal phenomenon located at the frontier into a formidable force that shaped the fate of the state is noteworthy in itself. Its structural affinity with concepts and practices found among the Jurchen, Khitan, and the Mongols, but also among the Russians, Turks, and Arabs, merits further consideration.⁵⁵

Seen through the prism of the warband, the military revolt of 1170 was pursued by military means, but consolidated through structural changes. The gradual emergence of the Tobang as an organization that had transitioned, entirely predictably when compared to other Eurasian examples, into one that decided who would be the new leader of the country shows as much. At the time of Ch'oe Chunghŏn's ascension to power, Tobang

55 Beckwith 2009; Golden 2001.

members either died or went rogue when their leaders died. By the time of his great-grandson (and his successors), this was no longer the case. Tobang members actively participated in the succession process, and it was more likely that the leader would die if he did not satisfy Tobang expectations. Although the Tobang did not lose its military character, it did acquire a civilian character in the sense that while the early Tobang exercised military power through the application of violence, the later Tobang exercised civilian political power through the application of violence.

The place of conduit for the warband had been the northern frontier: this was a contact zone where exchange, trade, battle, and cooperation with the north took place. It was also the place of origin of virtually all real powerholders on the Korean Peninsula from the founder of Koryŏ, Wang Kŏn, onwards – including Ch'oe Chunghŏn and all important Koryŏ military commanders. This incidentally also includes the founder of the Chosŏn state, Yi Sŏnggye, whose own warband of Jurchen warriors was so vital to him that, in an echo of Kyŏng Taesŭng's Tobang, they too were all but unassailable, even to the authorities.⁵⁶ The role of the northern frontier as a cauldron of leadership is still underestimated. The leaders of the Extraordinary Watches (*pyŏlch'o*) and the Tobang were experienced soldiers; many were professional soldiers, yet all had been forged in the battles in the north.

In itself, the adoption of the warband principle in 12th-century Koryŏ is worthy of historical investigation particularly because of the political power the warband came to possess in the 13th century. The fact, however, that an important element of a larger Northeast Asian cultural complex entered Koryŏ through the northern frontier is just as important and should be seen in the broader context of Northeast Asian and Manchurian influences upon Koryŏ, much of which has yet to be researched. The warband was a Northeast Asian inflection in terms of warfare, but also in terms of the exercise of political power. Evidence showing the popularity of Northeast Asian models and ideals of warriorship among Koryŏ warriors does not stop at the individual level of clothing, armor, and weaponry, and goes even further than the purely tactical level of fighting techniques and strategies. Due to the contingent historical context that gave rise to the military coup of 1170, strategic and organizational changes were added in the form of the institution of the warbands to what had been a military organization in the Sinic mold. As such, the warband became the most important and prevalent military organisational principle in 13th-century Korea, and would ultimately become the institution that would decide the fate of the country – and certainly the life and death of its rulers – until the Mongols took over the governing of Koryŏ.

56 Wang Young-il 2003.

Conclusions

In this article I have shown how the predominantly Sinitic organization of the Koryŏ armies underwent a fundamental change when the military took over the reins of government in Koryŏ in 1170. Their frontier experiences and Koryŏ's long exposure to the Manchurian north had accustomed Koryŏ's most valued warriors to living and fighting in warbands – bands of warriors loyal to the death to their leader, irrespective of earlier organizational principles that stressed loyalty to ruler and state. The notions of absolute personal loyalty and – to the extent that this was possible – fundamental equality in everything but the authority to give orders were perhaps familiar to the Khitan and Jurchen of the north but had never managed to play an important role in Koryŏ. Due to their organizational coherence and fighting power, the warbands facilitated the rise to power of individual warlords and finally brought the Ch'oe House to the apex of power in Koryŏ. Under the Ch'oes the warbands underwent a transformation often observed in other periods before and after as well as in other regions of the world: decision-making power increasingly came to rest with the warriors of the warband, which became an increasingly bureaucratized and growing institution, to the extent that the erstwhile protectors of the warband leader became de facto kingmakers – and king slayers. The warband is yet another example of the north's formative influence on Koryŏ concepts and practices.

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