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Mulan's Sisters on the Steppes of Inner Asia

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*Mulan's Sisters on
the Steppes of
Inner Asia*

Intro Sedentary Practices and Expectations

As cultures change so too do the dynamics within them, one of the most polarizing being the relationship between men and women. Each culture has adapted gender issues differently. This paper will focus on such gender issues within some of the historically nomadic populations in Inner Asia over a long period of time. In Inner Asia there were women who exercised their powers in different ways The Northern Wei (386-534 CE), which was a sedentary society established by the Taghbach, a nomadic people, that had female rulers. The story of Mulan shows a side of culture, women participating in war in Inner Asia, that is not often talked about. Finally, there were women who led the group of clans referred to as the Mongols (1206-1368 CE). The purpose of the examination of these three areas is so that we can better understand how the issues of power, war and gender has existed in the past and how that may influence us now.

Gender has always been an issue within societies, often resulting in large power imbalances with the men gaining power over women and being able to treat them like property. This is, of course, linked to the way gender has been linked to the responsibilities of a person in most cultures. The difference between cultures appears in what those responsibilities were and if they were seen in a positive or negative light by the culture. For example, in 1929 CE in Oloko, a village in Nigeria, the women organized a push back against British men as they perceived their responsibilities given to them by their culture were being taken away, namely the right to bear as many children as they wished.¹ In their society women were left in charge of childbearing and peacemaking, and they were also respected people of the marketplace. They believed that women and men were of equal necessity to have a functioning society. The British did not

¹ Susan Kingsley Kent. *Gender: A World History (NEW OXFORD WORLD HISTORY SERIES)* Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition. p 3.

understand that the women of Oloko had different views on gender and its stereotypes, as they came from a traditionally western sedentary view. In the European worldview women were entirely different from men and did not help govern, or run the market, they were supposed to remain in the private sphere while the men controlled the public one. In the European view both the lifestyle and responsibilities between men and women were distinctly separate, while for the village of Oloko one depended on the other for balance. The British then attempted to put a tax on women in Nigeria. While the British saw the counting of women to be necessary for knowing how much to tax each person, for the Oloko women it carried a very different connotation, on the basis of a cultural belief that counting a woman and her children curses her from being able to bear more children. Viewing their responsibility to their society to produce children as to their roles in society, these women therefore fought back against the British and their well-funded army. Because of these conflicting views on gender between the British and the women of Oloko sparked the *Ogu Umunwaanyi*, or Women's War that killed 58 women and injured another 31.²

Gender roles are divided on the basis of power distribution, and male power, though deriving from many places, comes especially from warfare. War and power have been linked in almost every society; one clan is more powerful than another if they are able to conquer their rivals in war. Due to the ability for males to produce testosterone and therefore more easily create muscle mass, warfare was generally restricted to males when it came to hand-to-hand fighting. This changed somewhat with the development of bows and arrows – the prime weaponry of steppe society – which allowed females to also triumph on the battlefield. No longer did the outcome of a fight rest solely on who had more brute strength. Now the stronger warriors could be taken down with a well-placed shot of the bow, which required less strength to wield.

² Kent *Gender: A World History (NEW OXFORD WORLD HISTORY SERIES)*. pp. 2.

This technological advancement coupled with horseback riding, which granted high mobility, allowed females to contribute to warfare in addition to men. Stories of famous warrior women depict them wielding these bows to destroy their enemies.

Sedentary Practices

There are many different approaches to creating the social construct that we acknowledge as gender. Nomadic societies, such as the Mongols and Taghbach, tended to allow their women greater autonomy and power through the control of camps and political power. Sedentary societies, such as China, partook in practices that focused on controlling women's power and their independence. The greatest demonstration within China was the practice of binding women's feet.³ Within China a tradition of binding a woman's feet while a child spread wildly around the beginning of the second millennium. The reason given was that tiny bound feet were seen as a symbol of a beautiful woman. To achieve the look of tiny feet, the bones within their feet were broken at a young age and then bound daily to keep the appearance of dainty feet. The result was startlingly small feet that negatively affected the women's ability to walk. Some were even rumored to be only 3 inches long⁴. To move about comfortably, upper-class Chinese women took palanquins to save themselves from the pain of walking. By taking away the fundamental of walking comfortably a footbound girl has absolutely no independent power and must rely on her father's support and eventually her husband's. If something were to happen to a woman's family her bound feet would prevent her from getting many jobs. Unable even to walk, she was useless when it comes to labor intensive jobs such as farming. Some women would be able to have a job that did not require the ability to walk, such as textile work. Binding feet was

³ Wang Ping. *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China*. New York: Anchor Books, 2002. p. 29

⁴ Wang. *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China*. p. 30.

also originally a sign of the upper-class, but by the 1500s it was more widespread in the population and practiced by both the upper and lower class. Eventually a high-class woman had to have bound feet to be able to find a suitable husband. Despite these expectations of binding feet to be more beautiful within China, women from societies such as the Mongols did not see their appeal. Even during the Yuan dynasty, when the Mongols ruled over China, Mongol women did not conform to the Chinese tiny foot beauty standards.⁵

For the Mongols, there were no such practices that limited a woman's ability to be independent and useful within the society. By binding the girl's feet in China, it became a statement that the women should remain in the house, and therefore did not have a need to be able to walk and leave. But in non-sedentary societies it did not make sense to limit the women in the same manner. If a woman had her feet bound in Mongol society then it is unlikely that she would be able to take care of the farm animals that were required for their survival. They would not be able to ride horses or defend their encampments against attackers. Even when encountering women from China with bound feet, Mongolian women would rather be seen as exotically different than conforming.⁶

Impact of Bows

One of the most famous group of stories is of the Amazons or, who were a mounted horsewomen unit around the Black Sea who are believed to be Scythians from the first millennium BCE. Adrienne Mayor, author of *The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women Across the Ancient World*, discusses that in these regions around 37% of graves

⁵ Wang, *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China*. p. 33

⁶ Kent, *Gender: A World History*, p. 49.

excavated are suspected to belong to these mythical mounted horsewomen.⁷ This is based on finding graves with women in them who were buried with weapons associated with those of mounted units. It is important, however, to acknowledge that we are making assumptions based on the grave goods found and cannot tell for certain that these women were the Amazons.

Women using bows to participate in battle is not restricted to Asia. There are also records by historians during the crusades that describe a few women participating in battle by both raising troops and sometimes leading them. One Muslim historian describes an appearance of a woman on the battle field, “wrapped in a green melluta [mantle]” standing behind the rampart of the trench, “who kept shooting arrows from a wooden bow, with which she wounded several of our men. She was at last overpowered by numbers; we killed her, and brought the bow she had been using to the Sultan, who was greatly astonished.”⁸ Once again it is the bow that allowed this woman to hold her own in the fight until she was entirely overwhelmed and killed. The choice to fight and possibly die for one's country was a civic duty allowed almost only to men until the development of bows and arrows. By choosing to be able to fight these women were gaining a power vested in warfare that many were denied.

Power can be welded and acquired in many different manners. The most obvious is the outright threat of violence and war. There are, however, many types of power that can be used. Since women were often excluded from the battlefield, they were forced to find other avenues to retain power over their own life and that of others. Many women adapted what can be referred to as soft power. This power was the ability to sway others and influence their decisions, which

⁷ As discussed in a review by Joshua Rothman. “The Real Amazons,” October 17, 2014.
<https://www.newyorker.com/books/joshua-rothman/real-amazons>.

⁸ Kent. *Gender: A World History (NEW OXFORD WORLD HISTORY SERIES)*. pp. 56-57.

contrasted with hard power which is power based on military might. To wield soft power effectively, one must have the respect of their society, intelligence, and the trust of one's followers. Some of the women who were able to utilize this power successfully were the regents of the Northern Wei.

Northern Wei and Wenming

Each society takes shape in its own way, and in each the power of women varies accordingly. Most societies will adjust the power that women are allowed in accordance to the morals held by the majority of the individuals, leading to a slow progression of change. As a more sedentary approach is established, men no longer leave to hunt, or go to war, which on the steppe led to leaving women in charge of the camp. With the shift away from such practice, societies have turned away from women's individuality and autonomy.

One society that experienced a change such as this was the Northern Wei. The Northern Wei was established by the Taghbach ruling family who were a part of the Xianbei. The Xianbei were a nomadic confederation comprised of several nomadic tribes. The Taghbach were nomadic people much like the Mongols who gained power and ruled over the sedentary people in a section of northern China⁹. They ruled a swath of northern China from 399 to 534 CE. They were known for having a system that allowed female regents to come into power and rule until the chosen emperor came of age. It is likely that they allowed women to have this power because they were descended from nomadic people and therefore held beliefs and morals like those of the later Mongols. However, unlike the Mongols, the Taghbach decided it was important to limit the power that the empress was able to conduct. Rubie Watson and Patricia Ebrey state that the

⁹ Songyan Wu. Xianbei Qi Yuan, *Fa Zhan De Kao Gu Xue Yan Jiu = Archaeological Study on the Origin and Development of Xianbei*. Shanghai Gu Ji Chu Ban She, 2018.

Northern Wei's ruling class separated the wife's function of producing an heir from her political role. Mothers of first-born sons could never become regents. This led to all of the regents who were appointed being childless.¹⁰ By separating the responsibilities of a mother and that of a ruler, the ruling class was attempting to ensure no regent would seize power for their own sons, as we shall see shortly was done by the Mongolian khatuns, Toregene and Sorqoqtani.

The Northern Wei also strengthened this by separating the heir from his mother. Jennifer Holmgren states that the ruling class of the Northern Wei was drawing a line between Empresses and their duty as women. To do this they took the eldest sons – the heirs – and assigned them to the responsibility of a slave woman with no influential allies or family within court.¹¹ The birth mother was then separated and often forced to commit suicide.¹² By separating who was taking care of the child and limiting their influence, they ensured that the woman taking care of the child would be unable to use their position to gain political power. The first female regency was under the Grand Empress-dowager Wen-ming 文明 who was able to combine the responsibility of Empress and foster mother which gave her power over the entirety of court and government and allowed her rule until the latter part of the 5th century.¹³

Wenming singlehandedly changed the course of the Northern Wei. She was born in 442 CE within the royal family of another regime which was conquered by the Wei. She would eventually be married to Wencheng (r. 452-465) the current ruler of Northern Wei. In 465 CE,

¹⁰ Rubie S. Watson, and Patricia Buckley Ebrey. *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*. University of California Press, 1990, p. 76

¹¹ Jennifer Holmgren. *Women's Biographies in the Wei-Shu: A Study of the Moral Attitudes and Social Background Found in Women's Biographies in the Dynastic History of the Northern Wei*. Australian National University, 1979, p. 39.

¹² Pearce. *Northern Wei (386-534): A New Form of Empire in East Asia*. P.129

¹³ Holmgren. *Women's Biographies in the Wei-Shu: A Study of the Moral Attitudes and Social Background Found in Women's Biographies in the Dynastic History of the Northern Wei*. pp. 26-97.

when she was only twenty-three, Wencheng died. She then disappeared only to reemerge eleven years later having consolidated enough power to rule. This power was based on three columns of power she had built. Firstly, by becoming the dowager empress she was installed as the female head of the house. This put her in power of the entirety of the women's palace administrations. Secondly, she created allies within the court who would support both her decisions and edicts. Finally, she raised the next monarch, Xiaowen, and influenced his decisions until her death in 490 CE.¹⁴

Wenming was seen advising or influencing the new ruler so often that they were referred to as the two sages. When it came to large decisions that related to affairs concerning the ruler the two sages would be responsible to oversee it. One of biggest changes that she influenced was the 'Equal Fields' edict where in the tax system was redone for Northern Wei. The new system centralized the tax collecting power. When the edict was raised it was brought to Xiaowen, however it was Wenming who made the decision to implement it. As Xiaowen had been growing up, "All matters big or small were turned over to the Empress Dowager... [When it was needed that] things be decided in haste, there were many in which the emperor was not involved,"¹⁵ As Xiaowen grew there was an expectation that he would take power from Wenming since he was to be the next ruler. This was, however, not quite the case as when the Equal Fields edict was promulgated, Xiaowen was already of ruling age. Nevertheless, it was the Empress Dowager that called a meeting to discuss the implementation and possible negative effects of the new taxation system. Eventually it was on her orders that the edict was implemented.¹⁶

¹⁴ Pearce. *Northern Wei (386-534): A New Form of Empire in East Asia*. p.205.

¹⁵ Pearce. *Northern Wei (386-534): A New Form of Empire in East Asia*. P. 210

¹⁶ Pearce. *Northern Wei (386-534): A New Form of Empire in East Asia*. P. 210.

The rarely appointed empresses become even more rare as more non-Taghbach marry into court bringing more traditional sedentary ideas and morals, with Empress-dowager Ling being the last woman to rule from 515-520 CE as well as 525-528 CE.¹⁷ Due to the tradition of marrying off princesses to non-Han refugees the royal court slowly became less Taghbach in nature. Eventually the court preferred to choose an older male relative, such as an uncle, than appoint an empress to rule. This shows a progression from more rights to women, such as allowing them to rule, to the more sedentary approach where women were more useful as a means of producing heirs.

Mulan; The Legend

The myth of Mulan is now associated with the Han-Chinese culture. It has been retold many times within different medias, most obviously in movies, but it has truly been assimilated into popular culture. However, this raises the question of if the myth is a Han-Chinese originated myth. There is reason to suspect that it in fact originated from an Inner Asian population of the Northern Wei period. The statements regarding the Mulan myth are only based on hypothesis, as there are no historical records to prove whether they are right or wrong. However, it is argued by scholars that the poem had originally been written by an Inner Asian population, by the Wei or the countries established in its footprints, and then transcribed into Chinese. This Chinese copy is the only one that exists now¹⁸. Within the poem the author describes a young woman replacing her father when “The Khan mobilizes his forces” or “可汗大點兵”. As a part of the assembled mounted troops, she was then said to ride past the great bend of the Yellow River to fight on the northern steppelands. The line describing riding past the bend suggests this may have described

¹⁷ Watson, and Ebrey. *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*. p. 76.

¹⁸ Pearce. *Northern Wei (386-534): A New Form of Empire in East Asia*. P. 113.

events during Northern Wei, which regime often sent forays against nomad rivals. If the country that Mulan fights for is the Northern Wei then the people she is fighting would be the nomadic Rouran, and not the Huns as depicted in the Disney Mulan movies. If one believes that the myth originates from Inner Asian populations then an examination to see if women historically joined battle is important to understanding the myth itself.

There are a few historical records of mounted women participating in battles, one such being the Wei general “Big Eye” Yang’s wife. She was a Poduoluo clanswoman, who openly joined her husband and his men on the battle field where, “[her horse’s] bit in line [with those of the men] on the field of battle, and galloping alongside [them through] the forested gullies.”¹⁹ This description of general “Big Eye” Yang’s wife mirrors the final verses of the Mulan poem where she describes “The he-hare’s feet go hop and skip, The she-hare’s eyes are muddled and fuddled. Two hares running side by side close to the ground, How can they tell if I am he or she?”²⁰ “雄兔脚撲朔，雌兔眼迷離；雙兔傍地走，安能辨我是雄雌？” In other words, in the heat of battle gender becomes a non-issue because everyone is equal. In the Mulan story this is shown by her stating that when both hares are running their gender is indecipherable. For the wife of General Yang, it is seen with her galloping her horse with the men as they make their way through the forested gullies. Another Inner Asian woman who was recorded as participating within battle was Khutulun. Of a much later age, she was a great-great-granddaughter of Chinggis Khan, whom Marco Polo likened to a bird of prey and claimed that she could swoop down and capture people within the ranks of the enemy, “as deftly as a hawk pounced on a

¹⁹ Pearce. *Northern Wei (386-534): A New Form of Empire in East Asia*. p 114

²⁰ Han H. Frankel. *The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady: Interpretations of Chinese Poetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, pp. 68-72.

bird.”²¹ She was yet another woman who used her skills as a horsewoman to even the playing field and participate directly in battles.

Although there are records of women from the steppes and Wei participating in battle it is likely that the story of Mulan is only a story inspired by real people. There are not enough records to prove that she was a real person. It is more likely that the story of Mulan arose as an accumulation of stories passed between the populations of Inner Asia regarding horsewomen fighting battles to defend their homes. Then someone used the inspiration of these stories to create the figure Mulan. But in an important way, such women were a push back against the male monopoly on power associated with war. With the advantages of horses and bows they were allowed the opportunity to participate in the male-dominated discipline which was war. Although there were women who took up arms and gained power by directly participating in battle, most women achieved their power in different ways.

Political Power in Non-sedentary States

Although some of the women participated firsthand in war, most others participated in war by controlling the resources. One of the things that is different in sedentary societies compared to non-sedentary societies is that the women in non-sedentary societies demonstrated a power of independence. These women held this power due to the nature of non-sedentary societies and how they obtained resources. Societies such as the Mongols obtained resources by conducting raids and taking them from sedentary societies. During these raids, women were left in charge of the yurts and resources such as food and wealth. As Anne Broadbridge in *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire* states, the majority of roles that women had were

²¹ Henry Yule, tr. *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, 2 vols. New York: Charles Scribner, 1903.

logistical and had to do with the management of the nomadic camps with their inhabitants. The women were responsible for gear, flocks, biannual migrations between summer and winter camping sites, and deciding of camp placement during military endeavors. However, with the women there was a divide between the senior wives, who ran camps and commanded the servants and staff, and the junior wives and concubines, who lived under the senior wife's rule.²² In addition to these responsibilities, women were also allowed to own property, and were given a share of their husband's raid booty. They also played important roles in collective political decision making. Two women who exemplified the power of non-sedentary women were Toregene and Sorqoqtani, both of whom used their power to become regents and rule the Mongol empire.

Mongol mothers were known to be the ones in the society to keep families together. They were the ones who championed family unity, while the men killed each other for power. One of the most famous women who did this was in the famous *Secret History of the Mongols*, where the legendary mother, Alan the Fair (d.u.). In legend she was descended from the founding blue grey wolf and fallow deer who were the beings who created the Mongols, demanded that her sons unite as a single force and refrain from infighting. She then likens them to a bundle of arrows. If alone one arrow or one man would break, but if he supported his family, they would be stronger together.²³ In this legend Alan the Fair is setting up the job of mothers to keep their children as a united front. To do this, many Mongol women implemented complicated networks throughout their family to ensure that they would stay united.

²² Anne F. Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*. Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 2

²³ Paul Kahn, and Francis Woodman. Cleaves. *The Secret History of the Mongols: the Origin of Chinghis Khan: an Adaptation of the Yuan Ch'ao Pi Shih, Based Primarily on the English Translation by Francis Woodman Cleaves*. North Point Press, 1984, pp. 5-6.

Another way these women held power was in politics as advisors. In *Secret History of the Mongols*, the only work created by the Mongol people themselves depicting their history, women are mentioned as very active in politics and being invited to important council meetings.²⁴ Some clans focused on marrying off women to protect themselves instead of investing in a military. One such clan called the Ungirad produced both Chinggis Khan's mother, Hogelun, and his primary wife, Borte. In *Secret History of the Mongols*, The Khan of the Ungirad (d.u.) says, "We offer our daughters to sit by the Khan, and he places them up on the throne. Since the days of old the Ungirad have had khatun [Khan's senior wife] as their shields. We've survived on the loveliness of our granddaughters, by the beauty of our daughters."²⁵ In this statement, we observe the Khan of the Ungirads arguing that the women of his tribe that he marries off protect him and his clan after they have left the Ungirad camp. This simple statement proves that women wielded enough power that some clans relied on this fact to protect themselves. Of the female regents two stand out, Toregene (d. 1246) and Sorqoqtani (1190-1252), who ruled the Mongol empire, because they exemplify soft power. While there are examples of women who wielded military might, as we see with the Amazons, neither of these two women did. Regardless of this they were able to rule and held the respect and allegiance of their people. These women rose to power after the death of Chinggis Khan and his chosen successors. Both of them had different backgrounds but gained enough power and respect in their society to be given the right to rule. They are special because they were some of the only women who rose to the station of ruler of the Mongol empire.

²⁴ Kahn, and Cleaves. *The Secret History of the Mongols*. p. 152.

²⁵ Kahn and Cleaves. *The Secret History of the Mongols: the Origin of Chinghis Khan: an Adaptation of the Yuan Ch'ao Pi Shih, Based Primarily on the English Translation by Francis Woodman Cleaves*. p. 14.

Toregene and Her Background

If women were expected to protect their families after being married to a khan, then this raises the question about women who were not married off but taken in war. One such woman was Toregene. Toregene (d. 1246) was originally a member of the Merkit clan. It is unknown if she was married to the leader of the Merkits or was simply a woman of the clan. She was captured during the defeat of a number of Merkits by the Mongols. The Merkits and the Mongols had historical grudges due to stealing the wives of each other's khans for two generations. After her capture, Toregene was married to Ogedei (1186-1241) as a junior wife. Ogedei was Chinggis Khan's third son from his main wife Borte, and his chosen successor. As the first junior wife of Ogedei, Toregene was below the main and favorite wife, Boraqchin (d.u.), in rank and was second in terms of influence and respect.²⁶ However she was able to gain respect in the form of producing heirs. Ogedei's main wife Boraqchin never bore any children, so this left the position for a mother of Ogedei's heirs open. Toregene seized this opportunity and bore five of Ogedei's sons. Her son Kochu (d. 1237) was eventually selected by Ogedei to be his successor. When the time came to choose the regent ruler Toregene was able to argue her claim to the throne because she was the mother of Ogedei's sons. However, her son Kochu was killed resulting in Ogedei's previous alcohol problem becoming exponentially increased.

Ogedei is shown in the *Secret History of the Mongols* to enjoy vast amounts of alcohol, but after Kochu's death he was reported to be drunk most of the time, until he drunk himself to

²⁶ Igor De Rachewiltz, "Was Toregene Qatun Ogedei's 'Sixth Empress'?" *East Asian History*, 17/18, June 1999, pp. 71-76, http://www.eastasianhistory.org/sites/default/files/article-content/17-18/EAH17-18_03.pdf

death.²⁷ During the time that he was known to be excessively drinking, Toregene likely took over governing of the empire in her husband's place. This was like when men would leave for raiding excursions, as she was left in charge of the camps and their resources as Ogedei was drunk. She needed to independently care for the clan because Ogedei was indisposed. There is debate as to the extent of her contributions but it is agreed that this time acted as a trial run for her reign as regent. However, her trial run ended when her husband drank himself to death on December 11th 1241 CE.

Toregene's Rise to Power

The death of Ogedei affected the entirety of the empire. He had died at a party with several witnesses and left no declared successor. His sudden death in a public gathering led to many accusations thrown around and several servers executed. There were also several women who were not attending the party that were accused of cursing him with witchcraft who were put to a painful death. It is suggested that Toregene may have had something to do with her husband's death, especially with his main wife dying soon after from unknown causes.

With the death of her husband, Toregene began her five-year reign as regent. She gained acknowledgement that she was the best candidate for the position because she was the mother of Ogedei's oldest sons. After she gained the position of regent, she began her largest goal, to raise her son Guyuk (1206-1248) to be the next khan. She started by ridding herself of advisors who were loyal to her late husband and not herself. She had one true advisor by her side named Fatima (d.1246), who was known to be completely loyal to Toregene until her untimely death. There has been some speculation by historians that Fatima may have been more than a confidant

²⁷ De Rachewiltz, "Was Toregene Qatun Ogedei's 'Sixth Empress'?" p.72

to Toregene, possibly even her lover, however there is no evidence to prove whether she was or was not. With Fatima by her side, Toregene became regent and started to use her power to influence people to support her son in the next Quriltai. The Quriltai is a holy gathering where the clans meet up on the banks of the hallowed grounds of the Kerulen river, and choose the next khan. It was a time where the clans would put aside disagreements and come together to show off their wealth and present candidates for khanship. Toregene intended to put support her son to be the next candidate for khan. She also took a more traditional approach to taxation during her time in power. The more traditional taxation focused on extracting money from settled peoples to fund the empire. Since women were in charge of revenue in these clans, she would have had a uniquely educated approach to the economics²⁸. However, her taxation system led many settled people to resent her due to them being the target of the taxes.

As she collected the money needed to support her son and raise him to power, other individuals began to make bids for power. One such individual was Temuge (1169-1246), Chinggis Khan's brother. Temuge believed that the khanship belonged to him and not to Ogedei or any of Toregene's sons. He began to gather an army planning to use military might to impose his rule. As his army advanced on Toregene's position she used one of the most powerful weapons a Mongol woman had, her network. Mongol women were known to have networks of friends and family throughout the separate clans, this worked as a spy network for them as well as a way for them to present a united front against men. The spy network was often linked with familial ties such as sisters and mothers, therefore if one came from an influential family their network would be stronger than that of a kidnapped wife. Toregene was the latter, but still used her network to find out that Temuge was starting to march against her. In response she found

²⁸ Broadbridge. *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*. pp. 173-177

individuals that worked for her that were related to Temuge and sent them out to convince him to halt his advances. By sending out family to convince him she was able to avoid bloodshed and dissuaded him from attempting to remove her from her position. She used her soft power, or connections with Temuge's family, to stop a military threat without it turning into a battle. Toregene's power can be seen in the fact that she was able to disarm this military threat and the fact that her people listened to her orders. It was the power she gained in the form of respect as the mother of Ogedei's sons, that gained her the recognition and deference of the Mongols. After five years of defending her position as regent and gaining respect for her son the 1246 Quriltai was called.²⁹

1246 Quriltai and Toregene's Fall from Grace

Quriltais, in addition to being a chance to choose a new khan, were also a time for the families to display their wealth by making extravagant yurts to hold the feasts in after the ceremony. These special party yurts would take years to build so families would have to start construction early. The time and materials for these yurts made them a show of wealth within the society. Toregene would need money for her son's party yurt and to convince other leaders that he was the correct candidate for Khan. This is one place that she used the money she had collected from taxes. She was successful in enthroning her son Guyuk as the new Khan of Khans. With the enthronement of her son, she gave up the power she had acquired as regent. Her loss of power is exemplified with the horrible subsequent death of Fatima.

Koten, Guyuk's brother sent a letter at this time to his brother claiming that he believed Fatima to be behind his current illness. In the same letter he begs Guyuk to execute Fatima as a

²⁹ Broadbridge. *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*. p. 182

witch if death should befall him. Rashid al-Din, in *The Successors of Gengis Khan*, describes the accusation and subsequent death of Fatima:

Following [on this message] came news of Kote's death. Chin'ai, who was again a person of authority, reminded [his master] of the message, and when Guyuk Khan ascended the throne, his first act was to hold a trial at which Fatima was questioned. She confessed after being beaten and tortured, her lower and upper orifices were sewn up, and she was thrown into the river.³⁰

Toregene was unable to protect her closest advisor and confidant. All of the power she had acquired was immediately overruled by her newly empowered son. Ata Malik Juvani in *The Successors of Genghis Khan* described Guyuk ensuring that Toregene wouldn't be able to protect Fatima, "As a result [Guyuk's] his relations with his mother became very bad, and he sent the man from Samarqand with instructions to bring Fatima by force if his mother should delay in sending her or find some reason for refusing. It being no longer possible to excuse herself she agreed to send Fatima; and shortly afterwards she passed away."³¹ Toregene died months after her son rose to power and directly after Fatima was taken from her. This was a demonstration to Toregene of the degree that she had lost her power when she enthroned her son as khan. She ruled for five years to give her son power, and he used that power to take her closest confidant.

Her Legacy

Toregene was a woman doing what she perceived to be best for her family, by trying to keep them united and giving her son the power, she believed he deserved. However, how did the historians of her time perceive her? When looking at the Persian reviews of her character one

³⁰, Rashid al-Din Fadlallah. *The Successors of Genghis Khan*. Translated by J. A. Boyle, 1971, p. 179
<https://archive.org/details/Boyle1971RashidAlDin/page/n23/mode/2up>

³¹ Ala- ad-Din Ata-Malik Juvani, et al. *Genghis Khan: the History of the World Conqueror*. Manchester University Press in Association with UNESCO, 1997, p. 245.

must remember that she had increased the taxation on settled people and by extension the Persians themselves. Rashid al-Din (1247-1318) reviews her in a very negative light stating, “This wife was of no great beauty but of very masterful nature.”³² His claims are superficial in nature, stating that she was not beautiful and a conniving woman. Ata Malik Juvani (1226-1283), another Persian historian, takes a slightly less disapproving tone but still used negative wording when describing her intelligence, “Now Toregene was very shrewd and capable woman, and her position was greatly strengthened by this unity and concord.”³³ Both of these historical scholars acknowledge that she was in fact an intelligent woman, Ata Malik Juvani even described her gaining favor of officials, “By means of finesse and cunning she obtained control of all affairs of state and won over the hearts of her relatives by all kinds of favors and kindness and by sending gifts and presents.”³⁴ Both scholars acknowledge her intelligence in gaining the power she had, however they also claim that she used this power to negatively impact the empire due to grudges.

Even current historians are not free of the influence of these Persian scholars, Ruth Dunnell in *Chinggis Khan: World Conqueror* only remarks about Toregene once to say, “The great Khan’s main wife, Toregene, became regent, initiating a prolonged period of political instability and factional fighting then ended the first phase of the Mongols’ mission as “world conquerors.”³⁵ She credits Toregene with the decline of the Mongol empire. One can tell that she had been influenced by the Persian scholars because she only cites Ata Malik Juvani, and Rashid al-Din as her sources regarding Toregene. Even more historians omit her from their histories claiming that she did not have an impact on the Mongol empire.³⁶ She was a woman who was

³² Fadlallah. *The Successors of Genghis Khan*. p. 18.

³³ Juvani, *Genghis Khan: the History of the World Conqueror*. p. 239.

³⁴ Juvani, *Genghis Khan: the History of the World Conqueror*. p. 239

³⁵ Dunnell. *Chinggis Khan: World Conqueror*. p. 89.

³⁶ Peter B. Golden. *Central Asia in World History*. Oxford University Press

used to taking care of the camps and a mother that sought to keep her family united and in power, both goals making her a good candidate to be a ruler. Her power also came from the respect awarded mothers in this society. In addition, her power as a widowed woman who avoided levirate marriage. Levirate marriage was a Mongolian tradition that when a woman's husband died, she should marry the closest male relative that she is not blood related to. Both Toregene and Sorqoqtani were able to avoid this practice likely due to the position they earned by marrying Chinggis' sons³⁷. The denying of levirate marriage allowed Sorqoqtani autonomy over her decisions and finances, which she used to place her son in power. Regardless of how she was viewed by people she was not the last female regent of the Mongol empire.

Sorqoqtani

Sorqoqtani (1190-1252) began her bid for power following Guyuk's death in 1248 CE. She was the primary wife of Tolui, Chinggis Khan's fourth son, and her older sisters each had an arranged marriage with Chinggis and Jochi. Sorqoqtani was a Kereit wife, a daughter of Jaqa Gambu the brother of the leader of the Kereits. As Temujin rose to power, one of the powerful clans that he defeated were the Kereyids. The conquering of the Kereyids became a show of the strength that he had accumulated and was a warning to other clans. After Chinggis conquered the Kereits, Sorqoqtani and her sisters were married off so that their father could retain a position of power in the newly conquered Kereit clan. Proceeding their weddings, she and her sisters were sent off with doweries of servants, and retainers. This eventually allowed the three sisters to set up an informational network which they also shared with their father.³⁸ This was the important Kereyid informational network that Sorqoqtani was known to make use of.

³⁷ Broadbridge. *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*. pp. 178-179, p 198

³⁸ Broadbridge. *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*. p 36, pp 80-83.

Following the death of her husband she avoided levirate marriage with Temuge. This lack of a husband gave her full autonomy over her actions. After her husband's death Sorqoqtani ran her clan as she would have if her husband was on a raid, consolidating resources and governing her people.

The death of Toregene's son Guyuk left his wife, Oghul-Qaimish(d.1251), as the regent. There is not much information about Oghul-Qaimish other than that she was born to a Merkit family during the prosecution of the Merkits and that she was Guyuk's senior wife. Sorqoqtani spent most of her time using her intelligence network and a knowledge of inter-clan relations to remove Oghul-Qaimish from the throne and replace her.

Sorqoqtani also had economic ventures in the north of China, therefore she had more money than Toregene did to sway supporters. Sorqoqtani used her influence and money to convince individuals that her son Mongke was best suited to become the next khan. While she was in power, she also rescinded the traditional taxation method that Toregene had used. This is one major factor as to why she is viewed more positively in sedentary historical records. After securing her position as regent she began preparations for Mongke's Quriltai such as starting to construct a party yurt.³⁹ In 1251 CE she used her influence to convince Batu, son of Jochi, Temujin's eldest son with Borte and a respected member of society, to call a quriltai for the next khan. However unlike Toregene her son had several political rivals.

1251 Quriltai

The 1251 Quriltai was held in the summer when it was warm enough to be outside of the yurts and when the horses were in milk so that the very important alcoholic mares' milk, qumiz,

³⁹ Broadbridge. *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*. p.214

could be made. Qumiz is the traditional drink of the Mongols, with 0.7-2.5% alcohol concentration and was the only source of alcohol they had access to until they took over China. Sorqoqtani had used her money to sway as many people as she could to her son's side. She gained her money through commercial ventures, meaning that she did not need to raise taxes on the settled people to fund her reign. However, her money was only able to sway so many people. At the 1251 Quriltai several other candidates were presented as options. As the important individuals gathered, including Sorqoqtani one of the few women to be mentioned by the histories, missing were the notable faces of Oghul-Qaimish and the son she was supporting for khanship. This lack of Oghul-Qaimish and her family made it easier for Batu and Sorqoqtani to convince individuals to raise Mongke to khan of khans.⁴⁰ With her goal completed, her son in power, Sorqoqtani passed away in March-February 1252 CE.

Legacy According to Sedentary Sources

Sorqoqtani was not viewed as negatively as Toregene was in the Persian sources. This positive outlook of her reign may have been tied to her lowering taxes on the settled people of the empire. However, in the praises that are said about her, many refer to the Persian idea of what a woman should be, citing her ability to teach her children and chastity for not marrying another man. Both actions, it must be noted, that Toregene completed as well. Rashid al-Din (1247-1318) describes Sorqoqtani and her influence as,

She was extremely intelligent and able and towered above all the women in the world, possessing in the full measure the qualities of steadfastness, virtue, modesty, and chastity. Thanks to her ability, when her sons were left by their father, some of them still children, she went to great pains in their education, teaching them various accomplishments and good manners and never allowing the slightest strife to appear amongst them. She caused their wives also to have love in their hearts for one another, and her prudence and counsel

⁴⁰ Juvani. *Genghis Khan: the History of the World Conqueror*. p. 568.

[she] cherished and protected her sons, their children and grandchildren, and the great emirs and troops left by Chingiz-Khan and Tolui Khan were now attached to them. And perceiving her to be extremely intelligent and able, they never swerved a hair's breadth from her command."⁴¹

Rashid al-Din praises her for the same accomplishments that Toregene had also achieved. Both women used their influence and power to empower their separate families, did not get remarried and educated their own children. The Persian historians cite chastity and teaching her sons as some of the reason for her success.

One should note that chastity was not a concept that the Mongols believed in. In the harsh areas the Mongols were from, the most important thing was that there were children being produced. There was no shame in remarriage, or in fact in illegitimate children. Chinggis Khan's first-born son, Jochi, was in fact an illegitimate child that Borte conceived while she had been kidnaped and married to the Merkit leader. He did not treat this son differently than his own blood and raised him to the same positions as his other sons. Therefore, the term chastity would not have had the same weight in Mongol society than in Persian society. Sorqoqtani is presented as a shining beacon of moral values in the Mongol empire due to the light taxation of settled people, even though she was simply doing the same that Toregene did, protecting her family and raising them to power.⁴² Sorqoqtani is a shining example of the power that non-sedentary women were able to wield. Since women were allowed autonomy and rights as people and mothers in society, Sorqoqtani was respected enough by the Mongols to rule. She was able to use her influence, or power, to change the minds respected individuals such as Batu, when he called a Quriltai for her. It was the power that women gained when they were allowed to retain property and revenue that allowed Sorqoqtani to consolidate wealth and fund her campaign for Mongke.

⁴¹ Fadlallah. *The Successors of Genghis Khan*. p. 168

⁴² Bruno De Nicola. *Women in Mongol Iran: the Khātūns, 1206-1335*. Edinburgh University Press, 2018.

Both Sorqoqtani and Toregene women used their position as mothers to give themselves respect in these societies and that respect allowed them to rule the Mongol empire.

Impacts

What could looking back on the actions of women who lived hundreds of years ago tell us? It can be seen that in non-sedentary societies, where women are essential not simply as means to create children but individuals with a responsibility to keep the camp functioning after the men left. They were not given the same rights as men to choose their own spouses or go into battle themselves, but contrasted with their neighbors in Persia and Northern Wei they were more equal in rights. It also shows that historians from sedentary societies are quick to dismiss societies that are non-sedentary, seen in both Rashid al-Din's works as well as Ata Malik Juvani's

The technological advancement of the bow and arrow allowed a select few women to attain power on the battlefield. It became an equalizer allowing women to fight, defend and die for their country. For many societies through the ages the right to fight and die for one's country is the greatest. It in a way is a civil-duty given to citizens. A government allows those it considers true citizens within their armies, which is why policy regarding who is allowed to serve within a military can show the social dynamics of a country. For example, the US has had different policies as to who can serve within the military and that mirrors who the government considers as people good enough to represent them on the battlefield and die for them. This can be seen especially in the ban on transgender service people. By removing a population from their right to defend their country they are deeming them as below the average citizen. When women, such as the wife of General Yang, participate directly in warfare they are showing that in the male dominated battlefield they can be equal.

It was the autonomy and individuality required of women in raiding societies that gave Toregene and Sorqoqtani the ability to rise through political battles and become the leaders of a famous empire. It was their strength as mothers that fought to put their sons into power and it was their ability to network that allowed them to create allies. These women give a glimpse as to what could have been if sedentary morals had not taken over and robbed women of their power, as seen in the Northern Wei. Toregene and Sorqoqtani tell the story of mothers who wanted to protect their family and raised their sons to power to accomplish that goal, this coupled with their skills of running a camp made them uniquely qualified to govern. Neither of them wasted time starting wars, Toregene even diffusing a potential one. They focused on taxes, ruling and ensuring the success for their children. This is why it is important to learn of their stories and not let them disappear into history because the sedentary historians disliked the power they held and the more rights they were allowed. This dislike is due to the differences in culture and morals. In a sedentary society, women are expected to run a house and to listen to their husbands, while in non-sedentary societies women are needed to be autonomous because the men need to leave to collect resources. It is important to view their actions through the lens of non-sedentary societies and to fairly describe and remember them in history as the distinguished women and mothers they were.

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