

 PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

東亞圖書館  
*East Asian Library*  
and the *Gest Collection*

---

**This title is provided ONLY for personal scholarly use. Any publication, reprint, or reproduction of this material is strictly forbidden, and the researcher assumes all responsibility for conforming with the laws of libel and copyright. Titles should be referred to with the following credit line:**

**© The East Asian Library and the Gest Collection, Princeton University**

**To request permission to use some material for scholarly publication, and to apply for higher-quality images, please contact [gestcirc@princeton.edu](mailto:gestcirc@princeton.edu), or**

**The East Asian Library and the Gest Collection  
33 Frist Campus Center, Room 317  
Princeton University  
Princeton, NJ 08544  
United States**

**A fee may be involved (usually according to the general rules listed on <http://www.princeton.edu/~rbsc/research/rights.html>).**

*Morris Rossabi, "The Study of the Women of Inner Asia and China in the Mongol Era", The Gest Library Journal 5, no. 2 (1992): 17-28, accessed January 14, 2017, [https://library.princeton.edu/eastasian/EALJ/rossabi\\_morris.EALJ.v05.n02.p017.pdf](https://library.princeton.edu/eastasian/EALJ/rossabi_morris.EALJ.v05.n02.p017.pdf)*

# The Study of the Women of Inner Asia and China in the Mongol Era

MORRIS ROSSABI

During my scholarly career, I have written three essays exclusively devoted to the roles of women in China and Mongolia, and in other articles and books that focused on different political, economic, or social concerns I have also dealt with the status and activities of women in these same areas.<sup>1</sup> One of the three essays concerned Chinese women in the twentieth century; the other two related to my principal fields of research, the Yüan dynasty and the primarily nomadic peoples of Inner Asia.<sup>2</sup> The last two were parts of larger studies, but an understanding of the status of women was, in my view, integral to the more general concerns of these research topics. Simultaneously, other scholars were conducting research on women among the nomads and the influence of the so-called barbarian dynasties on the rights and position of Chinese women.<sup>3</sup> Yet they and I encountered serious hurdles.

One severe problem that has more to do with our own times and society than with Chinese or Inner Asian societies is the increasing and sometimes mindless politicization of research on gender. Let me cite one example. When I submitted an article on the Yüan artist Kuan Tao-sheng (1262–1319) to the *Bulletin of Sung Yuan Studies* some years ago, one of the referees accused me of sexism because I referred to this great woman painter-calligrapher by her personal name.<sup>4</sup> Leaving aside the ethics of such name calling and of such a rush to judgment with almost no supporting evidence, this assertion revealed either astonishing ignorance or willful and deliberate discounting of the conventions of biographies. Has anyone objected to Gerald Clarke's use of "Truman" in his biography of Capote or to Jacques Bar-

zun's use of the familiar "Hector" in his study of the life and times of Berlioz or to Justin Kaplan's reference to "Sam" in his biography of Mark Twain? Yet such trivial and absurd and occasionally politically generated critiques have no doubt deterred some scholars from pursuing research in this field.

To return to scholarly concerns, however, the problem of sources poses almost insurmountable obstacles. Indigenous traditional writings deriving from the peoples of Inner Asia barely exist, circumscribing efforts to portray events and attitudes from their own perspectives. The paucity of sources impinges particularly on knowledge of the activities and status of women because the meager available writings generally focus on military campaigns and on the male participants in intertribal politics. The *Secret History of the Mongols*, a typical and again a rare such source, alludes to women, but without doubt the principal protagonists remain members of the Mongol male nobility.<sup>5</sup> Women appear primarily as resourceful and determined mothers (e.g., Chinggis's wife Börte) or available sexual partners of defeated enemies. Since stereotypes prevail, it is difficult to distinguish between the reality and the ideal. Nonetheless, analysis of the traits of ideal women, as depicted in this unique text, yields insights into the values, limitations, and expectations imposed on women in this society. I have written something about this in my article on Khubilai Khan's female relatives, but a more systematic collection and study of the references to women in the work would be valuable.

The Chinese sources on Mongol and Chinese women of the Yüan are similarly fragmentary. As I noted in an earlier article, "they [women] are rarely the focus of the accounts in the histories; in part, by omission, such works accommodated the traditional views of women."<sup>6</sup> Only two *chüan* of the *Yüan shih* (Dynastic history of the Yüan), for example, are devoted to the empresses,<sup>7</sup> and the rest of the work contains only the scantiest of references to women. The biographies of the empresses are generally brief, individual ones, amounting at most to five hundred characters, and the majority contain considerably fewer. Yet the vignettes in these sketches are, on occasion, telling. For example, the biography of Nambi, who was Khubilai Khan's principal wife in the later phases of his reign, reveals that visitors rarely saw the khan and that Nambi often conducted affairs in his name.<sup>8</sup> Similar insights may be gleaned from an examination of the biographies of the later Yüan empresses. A perusal of these biographies, to-

gether with a close analysis of political developments in the late Yüan, could provide valuable information on the political roles and influence of these empresses.

Nonofficial writings offer another source for insights into the position of women during the Yüan, as well as possible changes in this position from earlier dynasties, changes fostered by foreign rule. Jennifer Jay has used funerary inscriptions, random writings, family histories, and personal essays to broaden the range of knowledge about women in the Yüan. As she demonstrates, these sources yield colorful, seemingly more authentic anecdotes than the limited and stereotypical depictions of virtuous, responsible, and filial women found in the official histories and documents. One source describes "an administrator who raped a maid and found that she had both male and female genitalia."<sup>9</sup> Others narrate instances of prostitution, "rental" concubines (women leased for a set period by men who could not afford to purchase them outright) who remained loyal to their elderly sexual partners, incest, adultery between father-in-law and daughter-in-law, and bisexuality. These anecdotes provide vivid vignettes in contrast to the often pallid portraits in the official accounts.

Yet such data surely need to be used with care. Two problems limit attempts to generalize from these sources. First, it is unclear how representative these fragmentary glimpses of individual women are of the expectations, prospects, and problems confronting women in general. The paucity of references thus far uncovered and studied necessitates caution in claiming wider applicability for these fascinating but ultimately limited vignettes. Second, it is unlikely that additional references to women, which would facilitate attempts to generalize and to develop composite portraits, will be readily brought to light. It is unreasonable to expect that a single scholar would scan dozens and perhaps hundreds of texts to discover isolated bits of evidence. More likely, scholars engaged in economic, political, social, or biographical studies of the Yüan will, in the course of their research, come across such references to women. Thus the accretion of evidence will necessarily be gradual. Only with such additional references will it become possible to confirm Professor Jay's conclusions that

the Confucian tradition of formulaic gender roles of women is thus essentially characterized by the overwhelming concern to construct and preserve an outward manifestation of chastity, wid-

owhood, motherhood, sometimes at the risk of sacrificing the victims of rape and incest. The hierarchical relationship between men and women, or more specifically, the subordination of women to men, is the perceived basis of harmony at home, in the society and throughout the Chinese empire.<sup>10</sup>

Still another source lies in the legal codes and other legal texts produced during the Yüan. Herbert Franke has started to study these sources in order to delineate the position of women and to determine the influence of non-Chinese patterns and practices on Yüan statutes concerning women. His preliminary research appears to indicate that Yüan law deviated, though not dramatically, from T'ang law and that greater flexibility and leniency characterized the Mongol codes. Innovations in Chinese law included approval of the levirate, a Mongol practice that started to take hold in North China. The Chinese had traditionally prohibited marriage of a widow to her husband's brother; the Mongols not only encouraged but in some cases mandated the custom.<sup>11</sup> However, the Mongols were sufficiently flexible to waive the levirate in specific instances when its use would have been anomalous and perhaps ludicrous. For example, they did not compel an adult widow to marry her dead husband's nine-year-old brother. Like Chinese law, the Mongol code forbade the sale of women and female infanticide, but the Mongols seem to have been more determined to enforce these prohibitions. Finally, the Mongols had a "more lenient attitude towards illicit intercourse."<sup>12</sup> Franke's evidence differs from Jay's conclusions in showing that Yüan legal codes and practices deviated somewhat from the Confucian attitudes and usages.

Yet Franke is cautious about claiming too much for his limited evidence. He writes that "it is still too early to draw general conclusions from the data."<sup>13</sup> For one thing, the legal codes may not entirely reflect reality, since the provisions may not have been implemented as decreed in the statutes. Moreover, an insufficient number of cases has been studied. A more comprehensive analysis of cases involving women is required before judgments about the enforcement of the Mongol-inspired law codes can be evaluated.

A close study of Yüan imaginative literature would complement such an analysis. For example, female characters abound in Yüan drama, though almost all are Chinese, not Mongol. Some of the women in these plays are more dynamic and assertive than the stereotypical Chinese women of the

Sung or earlier dynasties. In *Rain on the Hsiao Hsiang* (*Lin-chiang i hsiao-hsiang yeh-yü*), a young woman betrayed, imprisoned, and sent into exile by her duplicitous husband-official survives and determinedly returns to exact revenge on him. In the *Mo-ho-lo Doll* (*Chang Ting chih k'an Mo-ho-lo*), a woman accused of poisoning her husband by the actual culprit, her brother-in-law, perseveres and finally is cleared of the crime.<sup>14</sup> The prominence of these determined and unbowed women challenges the depiction of passive and pliant females found in traditional Chinese texts. Yet the question remains, How representative are these plays? Are the Chinese women portrayed in Yüan theater generally assertive and dynamic? Does this portrait reflect the influence of the Khitans and the Jurchens, who controlled part or all of North China from the tenth to the thirteenth century, and the Mongols? Since Mongol women barely appear in these plays, Yüan theater will not contribute much to an understanding of their status and role during the Yüan dynasty.

The nature of the available sources has, in part, stymied my own attempt to depict the position of and possibilities for Mongol women. The references focus on Mongol noblewomen and scarcely, if ever, mention ordinary women. The sources generally omit consideration of women who were not part of the Chinggisid line. The personality and the roles of these noblewomen, several of whom played significant political roles, often emerge with great clarity from the sources. One even served as a regent for the khan of the Mongol empire. Khubilai Khan's mother, Sorghaghtani Beki, used her political savvy to ensure that her sons replaced their cousins as great khans of the Mongol domains. His wife Chabi shaped policy by persuading Khubilai to foster agriculture in North China rather than seeking to convert Chinese farmland into pasture for the Mongol animals. Her devotion to Buddhism led Khubilai to be responsive to the religion, to support and patronize Buddhist monasteries and temples, and to recruit Buddhist advisers for prominent positions at his court. Other Mongol noblewomen "arranged their own marriages, administered appanages, and owned property."<sup>15</sup> After Khubilai's reign, however, women in the elite appear no longer to be involved in political decision making. It seems likely that growing sinicization at the court reduced political opportunities for Mongol women. The women of the later Yüan dynasty did not match their remarkable and influential counterparts of the thirteenth century.

One principal exception is Khubilai's great-granddaughter Sengge Ragi,

granddaughter of Chen-chin, the most sinicized of Khubilai's sons. Though she did not assume the political roles adopted by her thirteenth-century female ancestors, she was an ardent patron of painting. She amassed a sizable collection of Chinese paintings, favoring traditional Chinese themes but showing specific predilections of her own. As Fu Shen has shown, her collection resembled those of Chinese connoisseurs in themes and subject matter, though the large number of bird and flower paintings and of subjects imbued with Buddhist themes reveals her own taste. Consulting colophons on paintings she owned, contemporary poetry, and scraps of biographical information found in the *Yüan shih* and other historical texts, Fu Shen describes a woman passionately engaged in and supportive of Chinese painting.<sup>16</sup> His articles serve as an admirable model of the type of research that will widen knowledge of the contributions and status of Mongol elite women during this era.

Yet these isolated biographies of prominent women scarcely provide even a glimpse of the lives of women deriving from nonelite backgrounds. Marriage patterns, female ownership of property, and the laws regarding adultery by either marital partner are only vaguely described in the available sources. Did the severe punishments inflicted on both female and male adulterers apply to the elite alone or to ordinary Mongols as well? Could women own or manage flocks of sheep independently? Could they as widows or unmarried women obtain grazing rights in specific lands? Mongol elite women often undertook the responsibility of socializing and educating their children, but did nonelite women turn the task of training their sons over to their husbands? It would seem logical that sons would be apprenticed to their fathers to learn the pastoral and martial skills they would need as adults, but then what influence did their mothers have? These questions may never be answered, as the written sources simply fail to yield sufficient data. Study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts of the roles of women among the Mongols has been suggested as a means of understanding the status and activities of Mongol women in pre-Yüan and Yüan times. This assumes that the position of nonelite women among the Mongols has remained unchanged, an assumption I find untenable. The differing Mongol societies were transformed over the six to seven centuries from the 1200s to modern times, and Mongol women were affected by these developments. More frequent and extended contacts with both China and Russia influenced the Mongols and had an impact on the status and roles of

Mongol women. Thus generalizations about nonelite women based on studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century social circumstances may be misleading, if not grossly inaccurate. The chances of increasing our knowledge of nonelite women and, for that matter, nonelite men appear to be slim. Despite the recent spate of articles and books on the social history and popular culture of traditional China,<sup>17</sup> many subjects concerning the pre-Ch'ing era remain shadowy to modern scholars, and the status of nonelite women in both China and Mongolia is one of the most elusive subjects of inquiry.

The accounts of non-East Asians who traveled in the Mongol world in the thirteenth century offer useful data that I and other researchers have employed to write about Mongol and Chinese women in pre-Yüan and Yüan times. The travel reports of the Franciscan missionaries John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck provide brief but valuable comments on both elite and nonelite women. Though both accounts are hostile to the Mongols, they offer first-hand, colorful descriptions of Mongol society at its height — that is, after Mongol armies had occupied North China, Central Asia, and much of Russia and Persia and had reached Poland and Hungary. Discounting the derogatory remarks, readers can glean some facts and inferences about the status of Mongol women. John of Plano Carpini confirms the existence of the levirate and the Mongol prohibition on adultery, describes in some detail the differing clothing, including the unique headdress known as the *boghtagh*, worn by unmarried and married women, and writes with amazement of the active lives led by Mongol women. He appears startled that women “ride and gallop on horseback with agility like the men,” that they “are able to endure long stretches of riding,” and that they carry bows and arrows. Praising the women, he writes that they “make everything, leather garments, tunics, shoes, leggings, and everything made of leather; they also drive the carts and repair them, they load the camels, and in all their tasks they are very swift and energetic.”<sup>18</sup> Like numerous other sources, John was also impressed by Khubilai's mother, Sorghaghtani Beki, whom he described as the “most renowned” woman among the Mongols and the second “most powerful” figure in the Mongol domains. These observations coincide with those in contemporary Mongol and Chinese sources, but a few of his jottings contradict other primary sources and must be evaluated with caution. For example, his remark that “each man has as many wives as he can keep, one a hundred, another fifty,



1. Yüan-dynasty Mongol noblewoman (left) and two Mongol noblemen (right) depicted as donors at Buddhist shrines. Redrawn from wall paintings in the Yü-lin caves at An-hsi (left) and cave 332 at Tun-huang (right), from Shen Ts'ung-wen, *Chung-kuo ku-tai fu-shih yen-chiu* (Researches on the history of Chinese costume; Hong Kong: Shang-wu yin-shu-kuan, 1981), p. 394.

another ten — one more, another less”<sup>19</sup> refers doubtlessly to the elite and perhaps (at least for those with ten or more wives) to the Chinggisid royal family. The ordinary Mongol pastoralist could not afford polygamy. John of Plano Carpini here describes the atypical because it caught his attention as it differed so much from the European practices to which he was accustomed.

William of Rubruck confirms but also supplements John’s observations. Like John, he devotes space to the physical appearance and the clothing worn particularly by elite women, but he adds that “the women are astonishingly fat” and “the less nose one has, the more beautiful she is considered.” Yet William goes beyond the surface by describing in detail the tasks and responsibilities of Mongol women. His listing of the work entrusted to women is more comprehensive than that found in John’s narrative. His report has been described as containing “a good deal of factual information which represents a significant advance on the knowledge currently available to the West.”<sup>20</sup> His precise delineation of the division of labor between the sexes and his account of marital rituals (e.g., payment for the bride, the simulated kidnapping of the intended bride by the prospective groom) contribute additional detail to John’s observations. However, since William cites many traits and practices (e.g., polygamy) that characterize the social status and activities of elite women, caution is critical in using his insights to make generalizations about the vast majority of Mongol women. In addition, since neither John nor William reached China, they provide no information about Chinese women during the period of Mongol rule in North China.<sup>21</sup>

Surprisingly, Marco Polo, another major European source on the Mongols and on Yüan China, turns out to yield scant new information on women. He virtually omits mention of Chinese women and, remarkably enough, fails to describe the practice of bound feet, which at this time was surely pervasive among the elite Chinese women. Instead Marco focuses on the exotic, not the typical. He briefly describes the condition of prostitutes and the process of selection of wives and concubines for the Mongol great khan.<sup>22</sup> These accounts provide colorful vignettes, which are fun to read but which are not particularly illuminating about Mongol women in general.

Persian and Korean accounts offer other potentially valuable sources on Mongol and Chinese women during the Yüan. Since the Persian records

were written at a distance from China and the Persian historians tended to focus on the Mongols, most of the references deal with Mongol women and particularly those in the royal family or the elite. Yet not all the Persian sources have been carefully scrutinized, and a more deliberate scanning and analysis of these accounts may lead to the discovery of data on Mongol women of nonelite backgrounds. The Koreans had greater access to China during the Mongol era, and the Korean kings frequently received Mongol princesses in marriage. Thus the *Koryŏ-sa* definitely contains information about Mongol elite women, and a close reading of this text as well as other accounts (e.g., travel diaries) may yield informative data about Mongol and perhaps Chinese women.<sup>23</sup>

In sum, prospects for increasing knowledge about Mongol and Chinese elite women in the Yüan appear to be good. The possibility of uncovering data about the nonelite women of both peoples during the same era is more remote. One of the most interesting directions for research is the possible influence of Mongol attitudes and policies toward elite women on possible changes in status and roles of Chinese women.<sup>24</sup>

## NOTES

1. I have taken advantage of the kind invitation to contribute to the *Gest Library Journal* to write an informal, anecdotal essay. This style affords me the opportunity to raise questions rather than to provide ready answers to problems I have been pondering for the past few years.
2. These are "Chinese Communists and the Peasant Women, 1949-1962," master's thesis, Columbia University, 1964; "Khubilai Khan and the Women in His Family," in *Studia Sino-Mongolica: Festschrift für Herbert Franke*, ed. Wolfgang Bauer (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1979), pp. 153-180; "Kuan Tao-Sheng: Woman Artist in Yüan China," *Bulletin of Sung Yuan Studies* 21 (1989), pp. 67-84.
3. See, for example, Jennifer Holmgren, "Empress-Dowager Ling of the Northern Wei and the T'o-pa Sinicization Question," *Papers on Far Eastern History* 18 (1978), pp. 123-170; "Lineage Falsification in the Northern Dynasties: Wei Shou's Ancestry," *Papers on Far Eastern History* 21 (1980), pp. 1-16; and "Women and Political Power in the Traditional T'o-pa Elite: A Preliminary Study of the Biographies of Empresses in the *Wei-Shu*," *Monumenta Serica* 35 (1981-1983), pp. 33-74; Beatrice Spade, "The Education of Women in China during the Southern Dynasties," *Journal of Asian History* 13.1 (1979), pp. 15-41; Herbert Franke, "Women under the Dynasties of Conquest," in *La Donna*

- Nella Cina Imperiale e Nella Cina Repubblicana*, ed. Lionello Lanciotti (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1980), pp. 23–43; Jennifer W. Jay, “Prefaces, Jottings and Legal Proceedings on Women in Thirteenth-Century South China,” *Chinese Culture* 32.4 (December 1991), pp. 41–56; Francis W. Cleaves, “The Biography of the Empress Cäbi in the *Yüan Shih*,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 3–4 (1979–1980), pp. 138–150; Fu Shen, *Yüan-tai huang-shih shu-hua shou-ts’ang shih-lüeh* (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1980). This is not to mention research on women under the indigenous Chinese dynasties.
4. As it happens, I am a political liberal, yet I have tried to resist efforts to intrude my own political views on scholarship or the curriculum.
  5. For a nonspecialized but useful guide to the various translations of this text, see Paul Kahn, *The Secret History of the Mongols* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), pp. xi–xvii.
  6. Rossabi, “Kuan Tao-sheng,” p. 67.
  7. *Yüan shih* (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1976) 114, pp. 2869–2884; 116, pp. 2897–2903.
  8. *Ibid.*, 114, p. 2873.
  9. Jay, “Prefaces, Jottings and Legal Proceedings,” p. 45.
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
  11. Franke, “Women under the Dynasties of Conquest,” pp. 38–39.
  12. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
  13. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
  14. Both of these plays are translated in James I. Crump, *Chinese Theater in the Days of Kublai Khan* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980).
  15. Rossabi, “Khubilai Khan,” p. 174.
  16. See Fu Shen, *Yüan-tai huang-shih shu-hua shou-ts’ang shih-lüeh*.
  17. Many of these studies are nonetheless illuminating. See, for example, Patricia Ebrey, trans., *Family and Property in Sung China: Yüan Ts’ai’s Precepts for Social Life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984); and Patricia Ebrey and James Watson, eds., *Kinship Organization in Late Imperial China 1000–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
  18. Christopher Dawson, ed., *Mission to Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 18.
  19. *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 7.
  20. Peter Jackson and David Morgan, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990), p. 49.
  21. Another serious effort to consider the status of Mongol elite women during this time is Paul Ratchnevsky, “La condition de la femme mongole au 12<sup>e</sup>–13<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in *Tractata Altaica Denis Sinor sexagenario . . . dedicata*, ed. W. Heissig et al. (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1976), pp. 510–523.
  22. A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot, *Marco Polo: The Description of the World* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1938), vol. 1, p. 205.
  23. For information on women in Persian sources, see, for example, John A. Boyle, *The Successors of Genghis Khan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), pp. 168–171; and for examples of evidence in Korean sources, see Chöng In-ji, *Koryö-sa* (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankö-kai sōsho, 1909); and Louis Hambis, “Notes sur l’histoire de Corée à l’époque mongole,” *T’oung Pao* 45 (1957), pp. 151–218.

24. For a general description of the roles and tasks of women in modern Mongolia, see Sechin Jagchid and Paul Hyer, *Mongolia's Culture and Society* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1979), pp. 111-115.

GLOSSARY

*Chang Ting chih k'an Mo-ho-lo*

張鼎智勘魔合羅

Chen-chin 真金

chüan 卷

Fu Shen 傅申

*Koryō-sa* 高麗史

Kuan Tao-sheng 管道昇

*Lin-chiang i hsiao-hsiang yeh-yü*

臨江驛瀟湘夜雨

*Yüan shih* 元史