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Honors Thesis

WOMEN IN THE EARLY MONGOL EMPIRE:
FEMALE TYPES IN *THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE MONGOLS*

by
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ABSTRACT

WOMEN IN THE EARLY MONGOL EMPIRE: FEMALE TYPES IN *THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE MONGOLS*

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Bachelor of Arts

The Mongol Empire is highly susceptible to great-man history, placing all credit and blame on the figure of Genghis Khan and ignoring the contributions of others. Modern historians often read the primary texts through a patriarchal lens in assuming all decisions are made by men. However, the primary sources support a more feminist approach in emphasizing the importance of individual women, particularly Hö'elün, Börte, and the three regent-empresses. This research looks at how women are depicted in *The Secret History of the Mongols*. I identified four “types” of women in *The Secret History*, and therefore in medieval Mongolian culture. These are Great Mothers, Political Actors, Hostages, and Domineering Rulers. Each of these types have specific characteristics and roles in society and are treated as distinctive types by the contemporaneous historians and the other people in the stories of *The Secret History*.

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Mongolian culture is formed partially through shared sources and descriptions that harken back to the founding of the Mongol Empire. The cultural conceptions of women expressed in mytho-historical sources from 1200-1400 CE are still involved in gendered roles and expectations today.

In order to understand medieval Mongol women and their functions in the early Empire, I examine the most important women included in the historical sources and categorize them by the roles they played in society. This categorization is largely based on *The Secret History of the Mongols*, and so I first describe and justify this text as the main source for my analysis. From there, I examine specific women and their lives and contributions, specifically how they fulfill cultural conceptions of femininity as “Great Mothers”, “Political Wives”, “Domineering Rulers”, and “Hostage Wives”. I identify these types as present and impactful in *The Secret History*, and therefore the appropriate lens through which to interpret historical documents from the early Mongol Empire.

The Secret History and Modern Interpretations of Women

The Secret History of the Mongols: The Origins of Chinggis Khan (hereafter *The Secret History*) is the only historical document about the Mongol Empire from the Mongol perspective, and therefore is unique in its ability to speak to historical Mongol cultural conceptions of femininity.⁶ It was written for Ögedei, Chinggis Khan’s son and successor, by an anonymous author who was likely not Mongol himself, but it still

⁶ Paul Kahn, trans., *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Origin of Chingis Khan* (Boston, USA: Cheng & Tsui Company, 1988).

represents the cultural understandings of the Mongols in the 13th and 14th centuries.⁷ In addition, because it was secret and only available to the highest echelons of the Mongol Court, it was written for upper-class women like the women discussed in the text.⁸ The translation I use is by Paul Khan (1984), a revised edition largely based on the earliest English translation of the work by Francis Woodman Cleaves.⁹ I also consulted an edition translated by Igor de Rachewiltz.¹⁰ While I consulted other historical sources for this study, as well as modern scholarship, *The Secret History* remains the pivotal source for indigenous Mongol understandings of the roles women play in society.¹¹ In addition, this source is both a historical document, and mythology about the origins of the founder of the Empire. This mythic element makes it particularly appropriate for finding types of women, as it is written following specific mythological traditions. I did not look at art or archaeological data, largely due to the lack of research and materials on the relevant time period and place. This is a purely epigraphical study based on *The Secret History* as a mytho-historical record.

Myth and history cannot be separated as distinct modes of communication in *The Secret History*. However, they are both present. For the purposes of this argument, history is the recognition that the women I discuss were real people who made tangible contributions to the Mongol Empire. History is also the contemporaneous historians like Rashid al-Din or Juvaini, as well as the anonymous author of *The Secret History*, who choose what is historical enough to be recorded. One of the types, Hostage Wives, are

⁷ Kahn, xv.

⁸ Kahn, IX.

⁹ Francis Woodman Cleaves, trans., *The Secret History of the Mongols* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹⁰ Igor de Rachewiltz, *The Secret History of the Mongols* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004),

¹¹ See bibliography for complete list.

often not discussed at all, and there is no record of some of their names. This is history of who was important enough to be remembered in the eyes of the historians. Myth is also present in these moments, both informing the behavior in the past and in the literary devices recording the moment. Marshall Sahlins, when discussing the significance as Captain Cook as Lono to the Hawaiians, says that “Cook was a tradition for Hawaiians before he was fact.”¹² When Captain Cook appeared on the island, at the correct time, and circumnavigating the correct direction, he was fulfilling a tradition and becoming fact.¹³ Similarly, the women in *The Secret History* are taking specific actions and live in specific roles in society, and by doing so, are fulfilling the mythical types. Chinggis Khan’s mother conformed to the requirements for a Great Mother, and so was a Great Mother in fact. The cultural repetition of the same types reinforced the power of that type. In the words of Sahlins, each woman was “absolutely unique, and...was repeated.”¹⁴

Further, to not recognize these types is to ignore what *The Secret History* is doing when women are discussed. The women, as well as specific events, cannot be understood correctly if the mythology that is informing their behavior as well as how the event is recorded, is not also understood. Other anthropologists, like David Sneath, have dealt with problematic social and cultural characterizations of the Mongols based on faulty models. Sneath discusses how Inner Asian pastoralists were written about and understood as a kinship based system because of a “theory of change” that held that

¹² Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 148.

¹³ Sahlins, 105–7; 120–35.

¹⁴ Sahlins, 108.

“egalitarian kinship society preceded impersonal class society”, even though the kinship-based model of social organizations is not the most accurate way to describe people like the Mongols.¹⁵ Similarly, some modern historians have misrepresented the behavior and impact of women in *The Secret History*, partially due to a theory of feminine behavior that does not originate in the cultural and historical context that is being discussed.

The basis for this research is the idea that to understand women in the early Mongol Empire the interpretations of historical women’s actions should be based in *The Secret History* and this document’s descriptions of women. I identified four types of women in *The Secret History*, named by me but clearly described by the text. The Great Mother type is very loosely based on the Jungian archetype of the same name but the particular characteristics I discuss are from *The Secret History*, not cross-cultural comparisons; the other three types (Political Wives, Domineering Rulers, and Hostage Wives) are my descriptions for the cultural type present in the text.¹⁶ Without the broader context in which individual women’s actions take place, the actions can be misinterpreted or even ignored, and therefore these contexts must also be explained.

While *The Secret History* itself makes clear the importance women played in the founding of the empire, some modern scholars have not taken these ancient women’s contributions seriously. As an example, in 1185 CE, Temüjin (Chinggis Khan)’s senior wife, Börte, advises Temüjin to abandon his blood brother, Jamuqa (see Figure 1).

Temüjin ultimately follows this advice, leading to one of the central conflicts in *The*

¹⁵ David Sneath, *The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, and Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 40; 59–64; 195–98.

¹⁶ Estella Lauter and Carol Schreier Rupprecht, *Feminist Archetypal Theory* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 223–25.

Secret History.¹⁷ Historian Paul Ratchnevsky presents this episode as Börte advising Temüjin, but ultimately places all of the authority and power on Temüjin.¹⁸ This may be because Ratchnevsky is focused on Chinggis Khan in the tradition of ‘Great Man’ history, i.e. it is his expectation that the success of the Mongol Empire was due almost exclusively to Chinggis Khan.¹⁹ Although Börte (and other women in other instances) are allowed some agency, Ratchnevsky centers Temüjin as the ultimate power, precluding the ability of women to make decisions.

Another historian, Timothy May, suggests that “perhaps [Börte] no longer wanted her husband to be Jamuqa’s apprentice. Alternatively, perhaps she was jealous that Temüjin was spending more time with [Jamuqa] than with her.”²⁰ Here, May allows that Börte’s wishes were followed, but categorizes Börte’s actions as jealous. At no point in *The Secret History* was Börte described as jealous, including when her husband takes more wives and brings these wives with him on campaign while she was left to run the camp.²¹ If she was not jealous of more wives taking her husband’s time, it seems unlikely that her political advice was a device to gain Temüjin’s attention. Instead of crediting Börte with political capabilities, May associates her advice with an idea of femininity that is not seen in *The Secret History*.

¹⁷ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 109–13.

¹⁸ Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy*, trans. Thomas Nivison Haining (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 37.

¹⁹ Ratchnevsky, 37.

²⁰ Timothy May, *The Mongol Empire* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 31.

²¹ Anne F. Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 68.

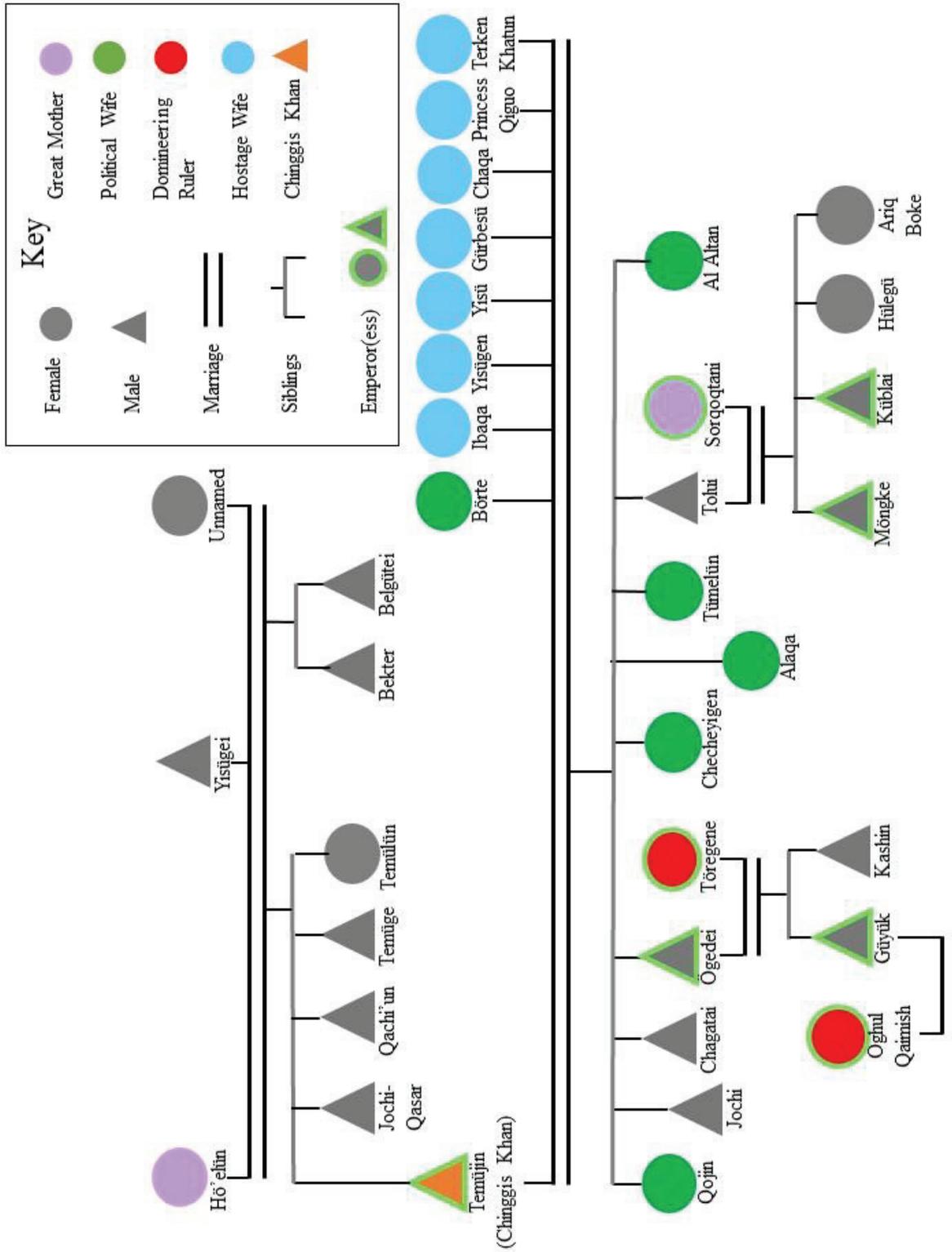


Figure 1
 Created by the author with information from Kahn, *The Secret History*, 202-206.

In contrast, Anne Broadbridge, a historian specifically researching and writing about Mongol women, speaking of the same passage, says “Temüjin clearly valued the opinions of his female kin since he sought them out.”²² Broadbridge also credits Börte and Hö’elün, Temüjin’s mother, with consistent advisor roles. This interpretation is supported not only by this particular moment, but by how Börte and other women are portrayed in *The Secret History*, as shown later in this paper. The interpretations of these passages are provided as an example of the importance of first seeking out women in historical documents, and then interpreting the women through the specific mytho-history of the time and place. Börte’s actions are best understood if she is considered a Political Wife, or a wife that was expected to have significant contributions in the political and social realm of her family.

Historical Depictions of Women

Great Mothers

Women in the Mongol Empire were defined by their relationships to men, but men were also defined by their relationships to a woman—their mother. While the role of a wife was important, it was as mothers that women had the most power and prestige in this cultural context. Mothers were highly valued in the Empire and in the mythic retelling of the origins of Chinggis Khan. While mothers in general were well-respected, Great Mothers are a distinct cultural type in the Mongol Empire characterized by a single

²² Anne F. Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 64.

mother sacrificing to allow her sons to become “great Lords”, particularly through reference to the previous Great Mother.²³

The Secret History begins with a mythical chronology of the Mongol people, and with a mother. Alan the Fair was “indeed a good woman, fine to look at with noble manners, well known and respected by her own people.”²⁴ She married Dobun, a descendent of a deer and a wolf, and had two sons with him before he passed away; she then had three more sons without a husband.²⁵ Her older two sons thought the father must have been a servant boy who lived in the *ger* (a mobile tent structure known as a yurt in the Russian context) with their mother.²⁶ When Alan the Fair heard them talking, she gathered her sons and gave each an arrow, which they easily broke. She then bound five arrows together and asked them to break the bundle, which they could not. She explained to her sons that like the arrows, each of them could be broken individually, but when they remained bound together, they were stronger.²⁷ Her lesson of caring for and supporting family is carried throughout *The Secret History* and is one of the main tensions and narratives of the epic history.²⁸ The younger boy’s father was “a man as yellow as the sun” who entered “[her] tent by the light from the smoke-hole.”²⁹ Various clans eventually come from each of the five sons. The Mongols (and Chinggis Khan directly) came from Bodonchar the Fool, the youngest of the Alan’s sons and a mythical hero (see Figure 2).³⁰

²³ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 18.

²⁴ Kahn, 4.

²⁵ Kahn, 3, 5.

²⁶ Kahn, 5.

²⁷ Kahn, 6–7.

²⁸ Kahn, 5, 20.

²⁹ Kahn, 6.

³⁰ Kahn, 7–11.

Significantly, then, the origin story begins with a mythical lineage that was controlled by a woman. Alan the Fair was the progenitor, not Dobun, even though it was Dobun that comes from the superhuman family line started by a wolf and deer. His death is mentioned only to set up Alan the Fair's impregnation by the man of light.

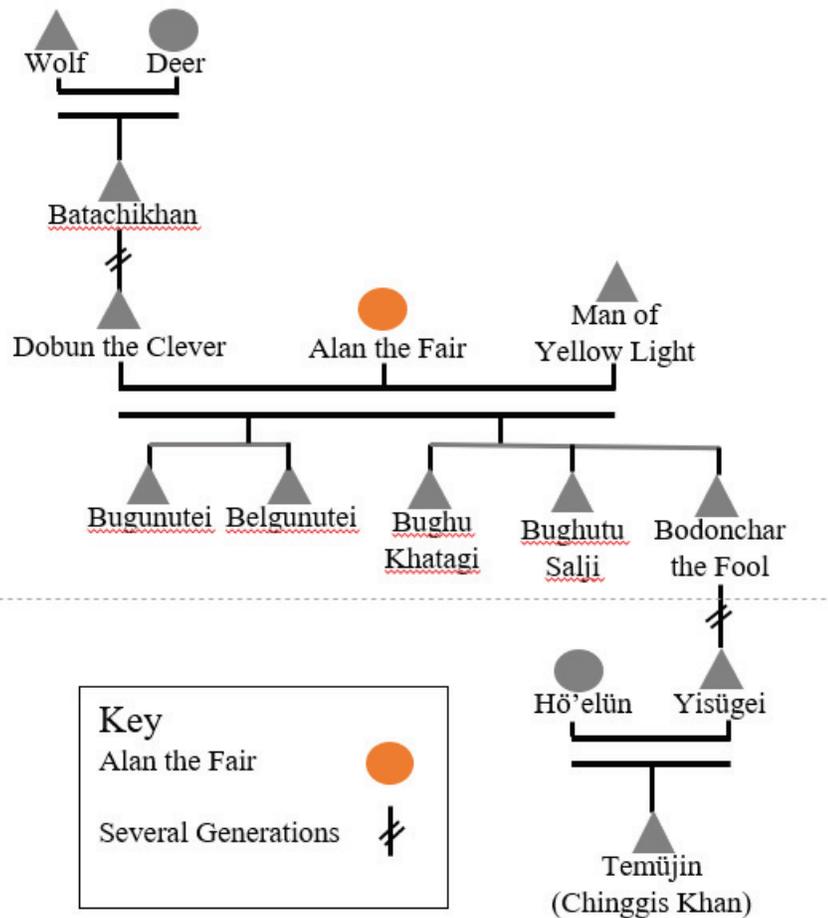


Figure 2
Mongol Descent

Created by the author with information from
Kahn, *The Secret History*, 7-11.

There were many mothers in the Mongol Empire, and all mothers were respected for that role. But a Great Mother is a distinct type of Mother, and that includes chastising her sons, and therefore providing the impetus and change necessary to turn her son into a Great Lord himself. She *mothers* her sons, and it was these mothering actions that make her a Great Mother. Alan the Fair was also a mother without a husband, meaning that her sons, who become important men, only owe ancestral fidelity to her, and not to their father, and own no

filial piety. Alan sets up a historical literary type of a Mongol female progenitor that is then immediately echoed by the next story presented in *The Secret History*, Yisügei and Hö'elün.

Yisügei, Temüjin's father, is introduced as the direct descendent of Bodonchar and therefore of the Mongol line.³¹ He was likely poor, but apparently a good hunter and war leader, as he leads a band of warriors. Steppe kinship was strictly exogamous, and so women were traded to create social bonds between tribes and clans. This normally involved a bride price paid by the groom (or groom's family) to the bride's family. The bride also brought a dowry that she controlled with her into marriage, often passing it down to her children.³² The groom could also work for the family for a period, like Temüjin did in order to marry Börte.³³ The third method to acquire a wife—kidnapping—was not socially accepted but did occasionally take place.³⁴ Yisügei kidnapped Hö'elün, who was likely about 15 years old, from the man who actually had paid her family and worked for them to obtain Hö'elün as a bride.³⁵ In a dramatic passage, Chiledu, the brother of the Merkid tribal leader, was bringing his new bride home after an elaborate wedding when Yisügei and his two brothers spotted him and the beautiful girl and started to chase them.³⁶ Hö'elün stopped and told Chiledu to run and find a new wife; the men wouldn't kill her, but they would kill him. "Then she pulled off

³¹ Kahn, 9–10.

³² Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 14–16.

³³ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 15.

³⁴ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 48.

³⁵ Broadbridge, 46.

³⁶ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 11.

her shirt and held it out to him, saying: ‘And take this to remember me, to remember my scent.’”³⁷

This episode underscores a few things about both Hö’elün and steppe society. Yisügei was likely poor because he could not afford to give livestock to a woman’s parents. This was evidenced by the poverty Hö’elün faced after his death. Hö’elün was likely a noble or at least higher-class, as her intended husband, Chiledu, was the brother of the leader of an important tribe. In addition, she was made the senior wife over an unnamed woman, Yesugui’s first wife.³⁸ Generally, wife precedence was based on marriage order, unless the wives demonstrated skills (or lack thereof) more useful in a senior wife.³⁹ Hö’elün may have been reported as the senior wife in *The Secret History* because of Chinggis Khan’s later position, but she was also credited with actions that portray her as a more active, powerful woman than the first wife, and so she took precedence as the senior (authoritative) wife.

While Hö’elün was clearly capable and clever in the moment of her kidnapping, it must have been a shocking change of lifestyle from being wealthy to being married to a probable poorer man, even if that man was a leader of the Mongol band. As she saw her espoused husband, Chiledu, ride away from her kidnappers, “she set up a loud wailing.”⁴⁰ While kidnapping was not an aberration in steppe society, it also was not common or accepted, as a bride price was normally expected. As George Dalton has pointed out, in modern scholarship, the practice of bride price has often been misconstrued as buying a

³⁷ Kahn, 11.

³⁸ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 45–46.

³⁹ Broadbridge, 15–17.

⁴⁰ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 12.

woman, or even as buying her loyalty to her new family. While women on the steppes were expected to live with their husband's family, there was no expectation that women abandon their natal families. The true societal function of a bride price (or more appropriately, a bride wealth) is to create a social bond between the two families and to provide for the bride in case of her husband's death, an illness, or a divorce.⁴¹ Political marriages are effective for this reason. If the bride was expected to cut off all relations to her birth family, then a political marriage would not serve the function of creating relationships. These social relations from a bride price would be broken with a kidnapping. Thus, Hö'elün (as a kidnapped bride) was isolated from her family in a way she would not have been had she been in a properly negotiated marriage. When she faces hardship after Yesugui's death, she did not turn to her birth family, or have financial resources from a dowry as might have been expected. She and the other wife were left to raise their children with the help of Charaqa, an elderly advisor or relative.⁴²

Yisügei died in 1171 CE, after drinking poison in a drink the Tartars, a rival tribe, offered him under the guise of hospitality.⁴³ After his death, it might have been expected that Temüjin, as the oldest son of the senior wife, would oversee the Mongol band, but Temüjin was still too young to effectively lead in battle. While steppe society was not a complete meritocracy, as there were class divisions and positions were handed down in family lines, leaders were expected to be effective. An incompetent leader would not be tolerated, regardless of his family line. Instead of following a child, Yisügei's band left

⁴¹ George Dalton, "'Bridewealth' vs. 'Brideprice,'" *American Anthropologist* 68, no. 3 (1966): 732–38.

⁴² Kahn, *The Secret History*, 17.

⁴³ Kahn, 15.

his family.⁴⁴ Two widows, Orbei and Sokhatai, “the senior women of the Tayichigud clan,” performed a ceremony before Hö’elün could arrive, leaving none of the meat for her.⁴⁵ “Later the old women conferred among themselves and said: the best thing to do is abandon these people, these mothers and sons. We should break camp and leave them behind.”⁴⁶ Clearly, the decision is attributed to the women, specifically women who were older and likely mothers themselves. Upon seeing that she and her children were being abandoned, Hö’elün “grabbed the standard of Yisügei the Brave and rode out into the travelling camp” which caused half the camp to turn back to her briefly before leaving again.⁴⁷ This standard was a horse-hair banner, taken from the favorite horse of a man. It is a masculine symbol still used in Mongolia today.⁴⁸ By grabbing the standard, Hö’elün made a statement of her own authority to lead that was briefly convincing to some in the clan.

After being left by most of her husband’s followers and family, “Hö’elün Ujin, a woman born with great power, took care of her sons.”⁴⁹ This life was likely hard, although perhaps not as hard as *The Secret History* portrays. *The Secret History* does use epic tropes, including bringing the hero down so low that the eventual rise feels more astronomic. However, the evidence suggests that Yisügei did not have an abundance of livestock, and it was unlikely that Hö’elün had a dowry to draw on, as most women would have had, due to the unusual start of her marriage. Instead of herding, the family

⁴⁴ Kahn, 16.

⁴⁵ Kahn, 17.

⁴⁶ Kahn, 17.

⁴⁷ Kahn, 17.

⁴⁸ Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York, USA: Broadway Books, 2004), 1–4.

⁴⁹ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 18.

(including the two sons of the second wife) subsisted from hunting, a less honorable livelihood and existence.⁵⁰ It drove Temüjin to drastic measures. Temüjin, angered that the oldest son of the other wife, Begter, stole his fish, kills Begter with the help of Khasar, Temüjin's full brother. They leave him to bleed out under the sky, a serious taboo violation under the local shamanistic religion.⁵¹ Hö'elün chastised her two sons harshly, comparing them to a list of animals, and referencing Alan the Fair's story of the five arrows.⁵² She referenced the previous Great Mother in order to mother her sons appropriately. *The Secret History* clearly shows that in order for Temüjin to become Chinggis Khan, and to justify Chinggis Khan's preeminence, it was required for his mother to be the cultural type of a Great Mother. Great Mothers and great Lords are reciprocal, in that one cannot exist without the other.

After her son Temüjin gains power and becomes Chinggis Khan, Hö'elün continues to play an important role. When Chinggis Khan conquered a new steppe people, he married one of the women and gave one of the male children to Hö'elün to raise. Hö'elün thus became the literal mother to the nation created by Chinggis. Captured women were given to Temüjin, and captured young boys were given to Hö'elün and so, this process created a royal family that encompassed the multiethnic identity of the new empire. Again, it is in her role as a mother that Hö'elün was of ideological and material importance.

⁵⁰ Natasha Fijn, *Living with Herds* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 222–24, <https://search.lib.byu.edu/byu/record/cat.5029407.item.31197232433893?holding=vhaz7uvmnmdsit72>.

⁵¹ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 20, 113.

⁵² Kahn, 5, 19.

When these adopted sons were grown, Chinggis saw one of these sons, Khasar, as a political rival. Khasar was being prepared to be killed by Chinggis when Hö'elün came and "brought out her two breasts from under her coat...and cried: 'Do you know these breasts? These are the breasts you sucked from! These are the source of your life.'"⁵³ Chinggis listened to his mother speak, and then said "seeing how angry our mother is, We're afraid of her. We're ashamed of what We've done."⁵⁴ Chinggis still removed most of Khasar's men behind Hö'elün's back, but her role as his mother allowed her momentary governmental power. Chinggis could make decisions that opposed her wishes, but he did not do it in her sight. This phenomenon could be because of the characteristics of these particular individuals, but it also speaks to the important fact, that mothers, and this particular mother, influenced Chinggis so strongly that he did not contradict his mother in front of his other advisors.

Alan the Fair and Hö'elün are species of the same type. Both take the role as the 'ultimate mother', a progenitor who gives birth to the great works of subsequent generations without the presence of a husband. In *The Secret History*, several lines explicitly conflate sacrifice with motherhood in describing the poverty-stricken period of Temüjin's life, saying "these boys who were nourished on the wild onion and pear, who were fed by Uij, *the Mother*, became the great Lords of all men."⁵⁵ This defines the boys as eventual Lords because of their mother's sacrifice in feeding them, as well as by the absence of a father in nourishing them. Thus, a Great Mother is a mother whose sons become powerful through the mother's actions.

⁵³ Kahn, 140.

⁵⁴ Kahn, 140.

⁵⁵ Kahn, 18 emphasis added.

However, both Alan the Fair and Hö'elün were more than symbols in motherhood; they have substantial roles in teaching their sons through chastisement and therefore establishing them as leaders of men. A great lord does not exist without a Great Mother. Hö'elün was also a political player, chasing after the tribe that abandoned her with a spirit banner and taking control of the camp afterwards. It is critical that Chinggis Khan is noted as having been raised by women alone within the Mongol sagas. Alan the Fair and Hö'elün both raise their sons without a father. Both Alan the Fair's husband Dobun and Hö'elün's husband Yisügei were descended from important lineages, but neither actually raised their sons, and so the sons gained the mythic importance of the descent while also being the first males in their family. The framing of *The Secret History* is through Alan and Hö'elün; it specifically examines the origins of Chinggis Khan as being directly linked to not only a motherly female figure, but specifically individual and named mothers. Chinggis Khan could not exist as Chinggis Khan without his relationships to women, and *The Secret History* in fact justifies Chinggis Khan as a leader because of his relationships to women.

In addition, the role of mothers (particularly Great Mothers) was presented as more important than the role of wives in the case of Sorqoqtani Beki. Sorqoqtani (Beki being a title for Queen) is by far the empress most favorably remembered, but she was also the progenitor of the ruling line during the time period that the sources were written. The Muslim historian Rashid al-Din considers her as even more exemplary than Hö'elün, as Hö'elün remarried after her sons were grown, and Sorqoqtani did not.⁵⁶ Sorqoqtani

⁵⁶ Sheila S. Blair, *A Compendium of Chronicles: Rashid al-Din's Illustrated History of the World* (United Kingdom: The Nour Foundation and Oxford University Press, 1995), 83.

also has the other attributes of Great Mothers, including the lack of husband and powerful sons that she placed in power. Her legacy shows that being a mother was a more important role for a Mongol woman than being a wife, and it was for being a mother that women were most celebrated and had the most power in Mongol society and culture. Great Mothers, then, are more culturally respected than the other types that largely rest on the marriage relationship for access to power.

Political Wives

Great Mothers are the most respected of the cultural archetypes, but Political Wives often had a larger impact in their own time frames. Political actors were not always political through their marriage; Chinggis Khan's daughters with Börte were politically powerful because of their parentage. However, they exercised this power and influence through marriages that Chinggis Khan arranged. Overall, Political Wives are advisors to major decisions, but do not make decisions on their own.

While others also fulfilled this role, the best example of a Political Wife is Chinggis's senior and favored wife Börte. The first introduction to Börte took place when Temüjin was nine (using the birth date of 1162), as he travelled with his father Yisügei to Hö'elün's tribe in order to find Temüjin a bride.⁵⁷ Apparently, Yisügei had not communicated with his wife's family since he had kidnapped her. Temüjin's marriage into his mother's family could thus potentially have helped repair the relationship Yisügei's previous actions had broken. However, when Yisügei and his son came across the Qonggirat tribe, who did belong to the same larger clan as Hö'elün's tribe but were

⁵⁷ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 13.

not the tribe they sought after, Yisügei instead negotiated a marriage with the Qonggirat.⁵⁸ Börte's father, the leader of the tribe, introduced her as having eyes full of fire and a face full of light, the same description he used for Temüjin.⁵⁹ The same description being used for both children suggests that they met as equals.

Börte's father also discussed the role that women played in their tribe:

Since the days of old we [Qonggirat] have been protected by the beauty of our daughters, by the loveliness of our granddaughters, and so we've stayed out of battles and wars... We offer our daughters to sit by the Khan, and he places them on the throne. Since the days of old the [Qonggirat] have had khatun as their shields.⁶⁰

This passage can be read in a few different ways. It could be saying that Qonggirat women were offered as bribes to avoid war, using women as shields to avoid warfare. It could also be saying that Qonggirat women were politically powerful actors, using marriage as a tool to help protect their natal family. When the daughters were offered to the Khan, he "places them on the throne," and so in their marriages Qonggirat women became powerful.⁶¹ Börte's father had the expectation that Börte would become a ruler in whatever family she married into. Both the cultural conceptions of Political Wives and Hostage Wives are present in this quote and in the reality of the Eurasian steppes. Börte's actions as a wife and the skill through which she held an executive role in the empire suggests that at the very least she was capable of the skills necessary for the second interpretation. Broadbridge says that "her [Börte's] influence began immediately upon their marriage and continued uninterrupted until the moment in [CE] 1226 when he

⁵⁸ Kahn, 13.

⁵⁹ Kahn, 13–15.

⁶⁰ Kahn, 14.

⁶¹ Kahn, 14.

[Temüjin] chose one of her sons to succeed him as ruler. No other woman in Temüjin's life ever compared to Börte."⁶²

Upon her marriage, Börte presented a valuable black sable coat to Hö'elün, who allowed Temüjin to use it to create an ally in another clan leader, Ong Qan. This relationship did eventually turn sour, but in the early days of Temüjin's career, it was the most important political connection he had in steppe society. While Börte was not the one doing the politicking, it was her contribution that made this relationship possible. Political Wives are both political actors and structurally significant as symbols. Broadbridge and other Western historians tend to focus on the actor part of this role, in part because it is easier to ascribe women to wholly empowered or wholly subjugated narratives.⁶³ In reality, most women in all human societies past and present are both empowered in some respects and subjugated in others. In the Mongol context, Political Wives are seemingly agential and impactful as intelligent advisors and also used as status symbols to create networks. Börte plays a vital role in the empire, and this includes both making decisions and having possession of a valuable coat that was used by her husband to expand his political status.

The best example of Börte's influence is the way in which she convinced Temüjin to break with his sworn blood brother (*anda*) Jamuqa. The passage is important enough to revisit in more detail. In 1184 CE, Temüjin approached his mother and wife explicitly

⁶² Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 56.

⁶³ Broadbridge, 55–56; Jack Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens: How the Daughters of Genghis Khan Rescued His Empire*, First (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 42; May, *The Mongol Empire*, 2018, 18.

for political advice.⁶⁴ Börte answers before Hö'elün, saying that she thought “the time’s come when he’s finally grown tired of us...let’s tell our people to keep right on moving, and if we travel by night by daybreak the camps will be separated.”⁶⁵ Temüjin followed this advice, leaving Jamuqa behind in the night. The men eventually became rivals, and Jamuqa’s military defeat became the dramatic center of *The Secret History*.⁶⁶ Again, Temujin explicitly approached his female kin for advice, suggesting that this was an expected occurrence in their relationships, particularly with Borte’s boldness in speaking. He also does not qualify his acceptance of her advice as he does with other women who fulfill other roles.⁶⁷ The anonymous author of *The Secret History* centers this narrative in the mythic history, making it clear that this decision, made by a woman, was vital to the origins of Chinggis Khan.

Broadbridge argues that Börte must have stayed with Temüjin throughout the next military conquests, as her children followed natural spacing patterns that would result from breastfeeding children and having regular sexual relations with her husband.⁶⁸ However, before the break with Jamuqa, Börte was kidnapped by the rival Merkid tribe, leading to a daring rescue that was the first time Temüjin led a war band.⁶⁹ This kidnapping casted doubt on the paternity of Börte’s oldest son Jochi, possibly explaining why he was not the inheritor of the most senior leadership position despite being Temujin’s senior wife’s oldest son, the expected heir.⁷⁰ Still, Jochi inherited a quarter of

⁶⁴ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 138.

⁶⁵ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 42.

⁶⁶ Kahn, 109–13.

⁶⁷ Kahn, 42, 152.

⁶⁸ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 66–68.

⁶⁹ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 37–39.

⁷⁰ Kahn, 153.

Chinggis's kingdom, if not the quarter closest to the Mongol homeland. Regardless of his biological father, his mother was Börte, and Börte's children were the inheritors of the kingdom. This demonstrates the dual identity of Political Wives. Börte had significant power in raising her children, who were inheritors of the kingdom, but she was also used as a symbol for her sons—her male children—as they gained power. Thus, the Political Wife had influence on those in power, but she herself did not inherit a piece of the Empire on the Khan's death. Her daughters, while inheriting in different and less permanent manners than their brothers, did inherit parts of the Mongol kingdom directly from their father Chinggis Khan.

Weatherford focuses on the daughters of Börte as political players in *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*.⁷¹ He argues that Chinggis Khan behaved the same in arranging the marriages of all of Börte's children. Both the sons and the daughters were placed in politically advantageous marriages where the Khan's child was expected to rule. Thus, in Weatherford's opinion, "without [Chinggis] Khan's daughters, there would have been no Mongol Empire."⁷² Weatherford's argument is supported by *The Secret History*. For example, when marrying his daughter Checheyigen to Inalchi, the future leader of the Oirat tribe, Chinggis Khan said, "Listen, Checheyigen Aghai! Because you are the daughter of your Khan father, you are sent to govern the people of the Oirat tribe.... You should organize the Oirat people and control them!"⁷³ Chinggis also told his daughter to get to know her mother-in-law, and mostly ignored her husband.⁷⁴ The

⁷¹ Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 2010, 58–78.

⁷² Weatherford, xv.

⁷³ George Qingzhi Zhao, *Marriage as a Political Strategy and Cultural Expression: Mongolian Royal Marriages from World Empire to Yuan Dynasty* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2001), 70.

⁷⁴ Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 2010, 58.

expectation was for *Checheyigen* to rule, not her husband. The Khan also demanded that his future sons-in-law dismiss all previous wives, and only take a second wife after marrying one of the Khan's daughters and only with permission from Chinggis himself.⁷⁵ In other words, Chinggis ensured that his daughter would have no competition in her rule of the Oirat people, and did the same for his other daughters and the clans and tribes the daughters ruled through their marriages. The actions Chinggis Khan took both place *Checheyigen* as a ruler, but also acknowledged and deflect possible political barriers, including other wives. Clearly, Chinggis's daughters were important to him politically, enough so that he arranged all five marriages to put his daughters in power similar to the arrangement made for his daughter *Checheyigen*.

In another example, *Alaqa*, the middle daughter of *Börte*'s children, was the first political entity through which the Mongols eventually ruled non-steppe peoples. She was married into the *Öng'üt* clan, marrying at different times the leader, his son, and his nephew, although the order and identities are not entirely clear.⁷⁶ *Alaqa*'s control over the *Öng'üt* agricultural lands enabled her to supply the Mongol armies with horses and provisions as well as provide a "fortress built in enemy territory."⁷⁷ Another woman, *Al Altan*, the youngest of *Börte*'s daughters, was married to the *Idiqut* (leader) of the Uighur clan, who apparently begged for this opportunity.⁷⁸ Similarly to *Alaqa*, *Al Altan* enabled Mongol access to important oases and settlements. However, *Al Altan* was considered such a political threat that she was later put to death by *Töregene* in the empress's attempt

⁷⁵ Weatherford, 51.

⁷⁶ Weatherford, 54.

⁷⁷ Weatherford, 57.

⁷⁸ Weatherford, 59.

to consolidate the power of Ögedei, Chinggis Khan's successor.⁷⁹ The other daughters of Börte and Chinggis Khan also served in similar roles in political marriages, but fewer sources and less research are available concerning their exact roles. Börte and then her daughters functioned as both embodiments of alliances and as political agents. This political power was through relationships to men as both husbands and fathers, but the women still had some political avenues through which they could make decisions for themselves and their personal status, as well as the status of both males and females in their political spheres of power.

For example, Börte and her daughters held political power, but mostly behind the scenes. To the people they ruled, they were not the actual ruler. This status was the most important qualification for Political Wives—they were wives, not simply political beings. They were allowed to offer advice to their husbands that was often followed, but they were not ruling. Even Checheyigen, Chinggis's daughter that ruled the Oirat tribe, as well as the other daughters who were told by their father the Khan that they were to rule, had access to that power over those particular people only due to their father's status and because of their marriages, as well as the power to take control because of the orders of their father. The difference between Political Wives and Domineering Rulers, the next cultural conception of women from the historical sources that I discuss, is this mediating influence of a man in the power that a Political Wife held.

⁷⁹ Blair, *A Compendium of Chronicles: Rashid al-Din's Illustrated History of the World*, 121.

Domineering Ruler

Of the three women who ruled the Mongol Empire, two can be categorized as Domineering Rulers; the third, Sorqoqtani Beki, was depicted as a Great Mother, and so is not included in this type. This role shares some aspects with a Political Wife, in that the power held by Domineering Rulers was somewhat mediated by men, but Domineering Rulers stand out because they rule directly. Many modern sources call these women the “Empress-regents,” because each was nominally ruling for a son as a regent.⁸⁰ While they were regents, it is also accurate to call each of them “empresses” (*khatuns*), and their political value and executive power were acknowledged by a title derived from the power that Mongol men held in that same position. Of course, a regent was different in Mongol culture than a non-regent. For one, the women (as well as male regents) were ruling in the name of someone else. Power was not accessed through the individual themselves, but through a relationship to a male. This is similar to defining women as only wives and mothers, therefore restricting the agency of women. In the medieval Mongol context, authority must come from a male name, and a male line of relationship to Chinggis Khan. This did not mean that these empresses were not exercising formal political power, just that the power they were wielding was not inherent to their status, but to their relationships to males, particularly Chinggis Khan. Regardless of these important qualifications, it is still appropriate to refer to Töregene, Sorqoqtani, and Oghul-Qaimsih as empresses. While each did not rule directly in her own name, each made proclamations, established laws and taxes, and wielded executive authority publicly instead of serving only in advisor positions.

⁸⁰ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 165.

Töregene, the wife of Chinggis Khan’s successor son and the first of these empresses, is the best example of a Domineering Ruler. She “was shrewd, capable, and determined (some say domineering).”⁸¹ When she was captured along with her sisters during war, she was the wife of the Merkit leader, but was given to (or chosen by) Ögedei, Chinggis Khan’s second son with Börte and the emperor after the Khan’s death. While she was a junior wife, she had five sons with Ögedei, including his favored heir Köchü (who died young), and through this became powerful.⁸² In other words, she began as a Hostage Wife, but because of her relationship to her son, she was able to gain significant political power. Ögedei was an alcoholic, leaving Töregene, particularly after the death of his senior wife, to run the kingdom.⁸³ When Ögedei died, Töregene quickly moved to consolidate power against the other wives and political rivals in favor of her second son, Güyük. The Persian historian Juvaini said in CE 1252-1253 that “until a *quirilitai* was held, it was she that should direct the affairs of the state.”⁸⁴ A *quirilitai* was a gathering to elect the next Khan, where only the high class (mostly those related to Chinggis) voted.⁸⁵ Juvaini specifically calls Töregene “a very shrewd and capable woman”, and that it was her machinations that led to her being put in charge.⁸⁶ While she was intelligent, she was also described as a bad leader for raising taxes above justifiable levels in order to support her own goals.⁸⁷ Winning a *quirilitai* often involved the potential heirs bribing the voters, which was why Töregene raised taxes so high—she had

⁸¹ Broadbridge, 165.

⁸² Broadbridge, 157.

⁸³ Broadbridge, 168; Rachewiltz, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 72.

⁸⁴ ‘Ala-ad’Din ‘Ata-Malik Juvaini, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, trans. John Andrew Boyle, vol. 1 (Massachusetts, USA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 243.

⁸⁵ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 140.

⁸⁶ Juvaini, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 1:240.

⁸⁷ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 177.

to bribe the other members of the *quirilitai* in order for her son to be elected.⁸⁸ Her reputation in Mongolian history to the present is that of a cruel tyrant, bent on retaining as much power as possible at the cost of her people.⁸⁹ Interestingly, despite this harsh reputation, she is also known for her relationship with a common-born woman named Fatima.

Fatima, given the title Khatun by the historian Juvaini, was originally taken into captivity and presumably worked as a slave for a time.⁹⁰ While not much is known about her origins, she was likely Arab and/or Muslim. She “claimed to be of the race of the great *sayidds*” i.e. she claimed to be descended from the Prophet Muhammad, but she was also known as a liar.⁹¹ She was able through “shrewdness and cunning” to rise from slavery to be “a procuress in the market.”⁹² Both Juvaini and *The Secret History* compare Fatima to Delilah, a biblical character whose actions were clever but ultimately evil, including seducing a man (Samson) to take away his physical power.⁹³ Like Delilah, Fatima eventually became the confidant of powerful people, particularly Töregene Khatun. This relationship was so important that Töregene protected Fatima from the court, almost ruining her relationship with her son, her conduit to power.⁹⁴

Fatima and Töregene’s relationship is described as intimate.⁹⁵ Fatima “had constant access to the ordu of Töregene” and was “the sharer of intimate confidences and

⁸⁸ Juvaini, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 1:240.

⁸⁹ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 165–67.

⁹⁰ Juvaini, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 1:1:245.

⁹¹ Juvaini, 1:245.

⁹² Juvaini, 1:1:244-245.

⁹³ Judges 16 (King James Translation)

⁹⁴ Juvaini, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 1:1:245.

⁹⁵ Juvaini, 1:245.

the depository of hidden secrets.”⁹⁶ This relationship afforded Fatima great power. She was “free to issue commands and prohibitions” to the court and kingdom.⁹⁷ One possible interpretation of the relationship, particularly considering Fatima’s eventual death for witchcraft, is of a sexual and/or romantic relationship. Accusations of bewitching are often associated with sexual acts, and Fatima was described in sexual terms as well in the comparison to Delilah.⁹⁸ Her death, ordered by Töregene’s son Güyük, also centered around gender and sexuality. “Her upper and lower orifices were sewn up...and [her body] thrown into the river,” after she was tortured for a confession.⁹⁹ Of course, this interpretation is not the only one. For one, categorizing relationships in a dichotomy of romantic and platonic is perhaps a Western conceit that does not fully describe how a woman (or man) in the Mongolian context would view relationships. It’s completely possible that intimacy means deep friendship between Töregene and Fatima. Friendship is not less than sexual relationships.

Another possible argument against a romantic and/or sexual relationship between Töregene and Fatima is the relationship between Chinggis Khan and his blood brother (*anda*) Jamuqa. This relationship is described in similar terms to Töregene and Fatima’s before the Khan abandons Jamuqa in the night. Temüjin and Jamuqa pledged to “love each other forever.”¹⁰⁰ While this intimacy can be read in a similar way to Töregene and Fatima’s, in that it opens a possibility of a romantic relationship between Chinggis Khan

⁹⁶ Juvaini, 1:245

⁹⁷ Juvaini, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 1:245.

⁹⁸ Vern L. Bullough, “Heresy, Witchcraft, and Sexuality,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 1, no. 2 (1976): 183–84.

⁹⁹ Juvaini, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 1:246.

¹⁰⁰ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 41.

and Jamuqa, this seems less likely between the men than the women, particularly because of the method of Fatima's death.

Regardless of whether she was involved in a romantic or platonic relationship, Fatima was important to Töregene. Female friendships are almost as rare as lesbian couples in Mongol historical accounts, and Töregene, along with other conquered women, likely needed a companion to confide in. Ultimately, the accusation that led to Fatima's execution was of witchcraft because the accusers felt she could not have held the power she did without superhuman means.¹⁰¹ Thus, she was killed for the crime of having too much power. Fatima could have been targeted for myriad reasons, including her non-Mongol ethnicity as well as her gender. However, the method of her execution suggests anger about her sexual capabilities. Although both Töregene and Fatima were meant to be under the rule of Güyük, they were not actually controlled by him, and so became a threat to society. Political Wives also had political power, but it was always mediated through their husbands and fathers, and so Political Wives were acceptable in medieval Mongol culture, unlike the unmediated power seemingly exercised by Töregene and Fatima. Domineering Rulers are women who have too much power, were too unmediated by men, and thus they had to be punished for the power they wielded. Fatima was tortured and killed, and Töregene likely died only a few months later.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Juvaini, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 1:246.

¹⁰² Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 192.

Hostage Wives

While women could exercise power and autonomy as mothers and political advisors, not all women had these opportunities. In each of the previously defined roles, women accessed power through their relationships with men, but sometimes men denied this relationship and thus blocked a female's access to political influence and improvements in her social status. Unlike the women discussed previously, it was more common for women to lose power in marriage, particularly in the case of women taken as hostages. These women, either ransomed or captured, present the dark side of noble marriages. Even Chinggis Khan, who promoted his daughters and changed laws to protect women, possessed (and the word is possessed) Hostage Wives.¹⁰³

Börte was the Khan's senior wife and retained control over the main *ordus*, but he had multiple wives, although he did not take a second wife until after Börte was done having children, perhaps in CE 1196.¹⁰⁴ Börte was a partner in his endeavors, but the wives that followed fulfilled a different role. The captured women were the physical embodiments of political alliances established through the transfer of a woman, and in Chinggis Khan's case, they represented conquered people. Anne Broadbridge points out that these women's lives and legacies are largely ignored by scholars, but that they played a pivotal role in the empire.¹⁰⁵ Some of these wives ran their own camps (*ordus*), the domestic duty of a married women, but others were junior wives in Börte's or other's

¹⁰³ Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 2010, 94–95.

¹⁰⁴ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 67–68.

¹⁰⁵ Broadbridge, 73.

camps. William of Rubruck, a Flemish monk sent by King Louis IX of France to the Mongols, describes a long line of *gers* oriented East-West, each of which would have housed a wife and her children.¹⁰⁶ None of the wives had as many children as Börte's nine, but most did have children, suggesting that while Chinggis did not spend as much time with any one of them as he did with Börte, he did spend some time with most.¹⁰⁷ All of these wives except Börte were princesses or high-class women, and so their relegation as junior wives was a symbol of a nation-in-hostage status to the Mongols. It also represented a huge loss in the managerial talents that these women would have been trained to hold in their natal civilizations, another casualty of war.¹⁰⁸

The Kereit princess Ibaqa was the first of the known conquered wives. The Nestorian Christian Keriet tribe was led by Ong Qan, Temüjin's ally in the 1190's when Temüjin helped Ong Qan reclaim the Kereit throne.¹⁰⁹ In 1202 CE, Temüjin proposed a marriage between Qojin, and Ong Qan's grandson, and a marriage between Börte's son Jochi and Ong Qan's daughter. This kind of cross-relationship was common and one of the strongest possible bonds between steppe families, and it would have been a completely respectable thing to propose. So when Ong Qan turned it down, the relations between the Keriet and Mongol tribes quickly deteriorated to the point of war, ending with Ong Qan dead and Temüjin doing what Ong Qan had feared—ruling over the Kereit.¹¹⁰ Ibaqa was the eldest daughter of Jaqa Gambu, Ong Qan's younger brother or

¹⁰⁶ William of Rubruck, *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World, 1253-55, as Narrated by Himself, with Two Accounts of the Earlier Journey of John of Pian de Carpine*, trans. W. W. Rockhill (London: Hakluyt Society, 1900), 188, 304–5.

¹⁰⁷ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 74.

¹⁰⁸ Broadbridge, 75–76.

¹⁰⁹ Broadbridge, 77.

¹¹⁰ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 80.

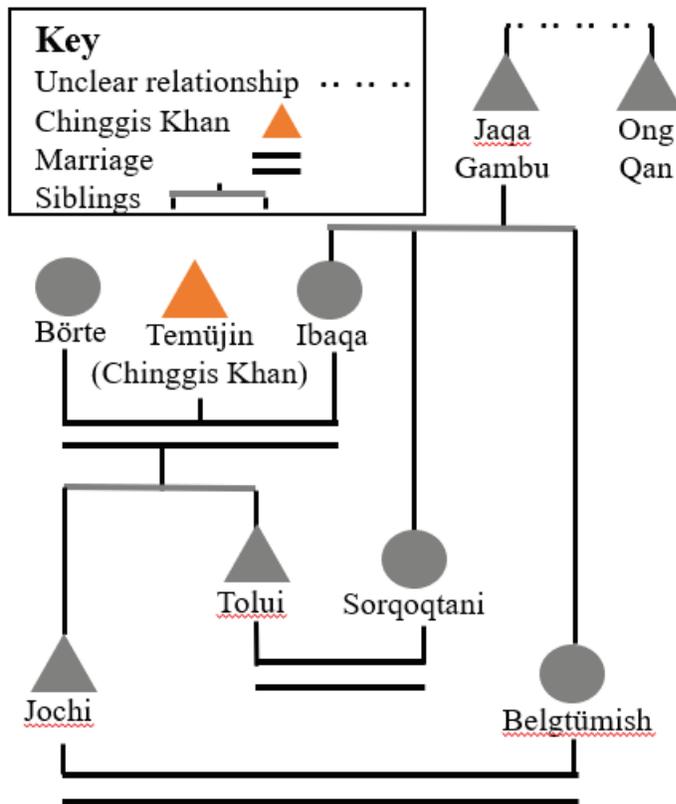


Figure 3
Keriat-Chinggisid Relationship

Created by the author with information from Broadbridge, *Woman and the Making of the Modern Empire*, 81.

within the Mongol court, as each of the sisters had control of a significant dowry and entourage. This was exemplified by Sorqoqtani later becoming the empress. Whether intentional or not, Temüjin's renunciation of Ibaqa weakened this powerful network by limiting the access to himself. Temüjin as Chinggis Khan was the greatest source of political power in the Mongol Empire, and so because he renounced Ibaqa, the Keriat

uncle. She was married to Temüjin, her sister Begtütmiş married Chinggis's son Jochi, and a third sister, Sorqoqtani, to Tolui, another son (see Figure 3). Ibaqa was remarried to Temüjin's follower, Uru'ut Jürchedei, in 1206 CE after only a few years.¹¹¹ Ibaqa was the only wife Temüjin ever renounced.¹¹² The network of Keriat women would have been powerful even

¹¹¹ Kahn, 120.

¹¹² Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 82.

sister's access to direct power was limited to relationships to Chinggis Khan's sons and followers.

The next of the Hostage Wives mentioned by name in *The Secret History* are Yisü and Yisügen, the Alchi Tartar sisters.¹¹³ Broadbridge establishes that many historians of Mongolia assume that a woman had the same political goals as her husband.¹¹⁴ However, especially in the cases where they were taken from their families by force, women had complex loyalties to both the men who they were married to and their natal families. The Tartar sisters exemplify these complicated loyalties. The Tartars were a constant rival tribal group to the Mongols. Temüjin finally conquered them in 1202 CE, after which he decided “to kill every man taller than the linch-pin on the wheel of a cart.”¹¹⁵ He then took the Tartar princess Yisügen as his wife. On their first night together, she told him that if he wanted to care for her, he should marry her sister Yisü, “who is a much better woman than” Yisügen.¹¹⁶ Chinggis challenged her, asking if Yisügen would be willing to give up her place in the seniority of wives for her sister, which Yisügen agreed to do.¹¹⁷ The Khan's soldiers found Yisü with her husband, who ran away (and was later found in the camp and killed).¹¹⁸ When Yisü was brought to Chinggis, Yisügen “remembered her promise. She stood up and gave her place to her sister, then sat down below her in the love of wives.”¹¹⁹ Yisügen's loyalty was to her sister, not to herself or to her husband. Later, the sisters asked for two young Tartar boys to serve them in Yisü's

¹¹³ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 66.

¹¹⁴ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 75.

¹¹⁵ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 66.

¹¹⁶ Kahn, 66.

¹¹⁷ Kahn, 67.

¹¹⁸ Kahn, 67.

¹¹⁹ Kahn, 67.

kitchen, protecting the boys from worse living conditions as conquered enemies at the sister's expense.¹²⁰ The sisters expended political capital in protecting their birth clan, not in advocating for their own condition. They protected their birth clan even as they were married to the man who killed all their relatives. *The Secret History* does not examine the lived experiences of these women, but it is likely that the marriage was somewhat traumatic.¹²¹

Yisü and Yisügen (particularly Yisü) are presented as intelligent and capable women when they move to protect the few remaining members of their tribe and consolidate power. In one instance, Yisü offered advice to Chinggis, telling him that he needed to choose a successor, to which Chinggis replies, “Even though she’s only a woman, what Yisü says is quite right.”¹²² This event may appear to have been Yisü fulfilling the role of a Political Wife, but her condition as a Hostage Wife was still distinct from the other roles of Mongol women previously identified in this study. Chinggis Khan had proved in the past that he didn’t have a problem taking advice from women such as his mother or Börte. He takes their advice without having to save face by first insulting them. With Yisü, he recognized the advice as worthwhile, but he only accepted it after invalidating the woman who gave it as *only* a woman. It is also likely that this phrase is not a direct quote from Chinggis Khan, but instead the recollections and mythology recounted to the anonymous author of *The Secret History*. The statement may better represent how the Mongol court felt Yisü should be addressed than how she

¹²⁰ Blair, *A Compendium of Chronicles: Rashid al-Din’s Illustrated History of the World*, 159, 162.

¹²¹ There isn’t specific evidence for this with Yisü and Yisügen, but other Hostage Women, particularly Terken Khatun, are described as distraught. Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 100.

¹²² Kahn, *The Secret History*, 152.

was actually addressed by her husband. This is because Yisü was not a Political Wife, even if she had the skills to be one. She had to be represented in a particular way in order to justify her hostage status. She was clearly talented; while every woman had their own *ger*, only women who proved to be able to organize and control people and animals were given the charge of an *ordus*, a complex of *gers* and people.¹²³ Yisü and Yisügen were put in charge of an *ordus*, and so they were trusted to control not only other women but lower-class men.¹²⁴ Even with this recognized inherent skill and therefore value, Yisü was still a Hostage Wife, and so was not as respected as Börte, a Political Wife.

Wives from other nomadic polities included the Merkit Qulan and Naiman Gürbesü. Both the Merkit and Naiman confederations were powerful polities that controlled large amounts of wealth and people, and both were defeated by Chinggis Khan. Qulan was a hostage before she was a wife, but impressed Chinggis by boldly speaking for herself when the Khan was suspicious that his follower may have raped her before giving her as a wife to Chinggis.¹²⁵ She said that “if he’ll examine my maidenhood” he’ll find that she was still a virgin, which Chinggis found to be the case.¹²⁶ It is interesting that virginity seemed valued here, considering that Gürbesü, another Hostage Wife, had been married twice before and had already born children.¹²⁷ This passage with Qulan also explicitly marks women as possessions, as Chinggis’ follower that delivered her says that upon finding “beautiful women and virgins...powerful geldings and mares...I say to myself, ‘These are the possessions of my

¹²³ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 15.

¹²⁴ Broadbridge, 85.

¹²⁵ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 106.

¹²⁶ Kahn, 106.

¹²⁷ Kahn, 93–94.

Khan.”¹²⁸ While horses were certainly important and valuable possessions, this passage still reifies women as something to obtain and possess instead of humans that act for themselves. In contrast to the virgin Qulan, Gürbesü was married to two of the Naiman khans (first the father, and then the son through a Levirate marriage), although her origin is unknown.¹²⁹ She clearly had talent in the bureaucratic skills necessary for the senior wife of the Naiman khan at the time of his death, and so she is a good example of talent being wasted or destroyed through war, as she never helped organize and rule the empire as Börte and other wives did under Chinggis Khan.

There were also wives from conquered sedentary empires. In general, Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Empire seemingly valued nomadic peoples much more highly than the wealthier sedentary civilizations. This prejudice against sedentary people extended to the Hostage Wives, as nomadic women tended to be treated much better than sedentary women when captured or sold into marriages with Mongol noblemen. The first of the imperial conquests was a Tangut princess, Chaqa. Her father the King became the vassal of Chinggis, sending tribute that included his daughter.¹³⁰ She is not mentioned as having had any sort of political role or her own *ordus*.¹³¹ Another conquered wife was Princess Qiguo. Her name is not known, only her title.¹³² Like Chaqa, she seems to have had no influence on the empire but did become a well-respected hostess later in life.¹³³ The last known imperial wife was Terken Khatun, the mother of the Khwarazm-Shah ruler.

¹²⁸ Kahn, 106.

¹²⁹ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 89–90.

¹³⁰ Kahn, *The Secret History*, 148–49.

¹³¹ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 93–94.

¹³² Broadbridge, 94.

¹³³ Blair, *A Compendium of Chronicles: Rashid al-Din's Illustrated History of the World*, 148.

Again, her actual name is not known, as Terken was a title. Juvayni describes her as powerful and possibly tyrannical in her role as the queen mother.¹³⁴ Of all the Hostage Wives, it was Terken Khatun that likely had the largest and most traumatic change of circumstances with her marriage to the Khan. Chinggis executed all of her grandsons and her granddaughters were distributed as spoils among his men.¹³⁵ She went from ruling an empire to living in probable poverty and grief.¹³⁶ If Börte and Hö'elün gained power and influence with Temüjin's rise, these women lost power, and at the very least, were in a potentially traumatic relationships with the conqueror of their peoples. Chinggis' sons and other family member also had many wives who had even less power than the wives of Chinggis Khan.

The archetype of Hostage Wife is one of a woman that was sacrificed for her people, or the last remnant of her people. Her physical body was used as a receptacle of Chinggis Khan's, or another man's power, and she, more than any other woman, was a possession. This role is also defined by having split loyalties to herself, her natal family, and to her husband's family. Like the other roles women played in Mongol society, there were aspects of this condition in many, if not most, women's lives. However, this specific type of woman was set apart by her presentation as a hostage, an identity that superseded even her familial connections. While her biographical information was sometimes recorded in Mongol court histories, her value was placed entirely on their physical condition of being a hostage.

¹³⁴ Juvaini, *The History of the World-Conqueror*.

¹³⁵ Juvaini, 1:497.

¹³⁶ Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 100.

Conclusions

Revisiting Ratchnevsky and May, there has been a tendency for modern scholars to ignore the contributions of women to the founding of the Mongol Empire and misinterpret their roles whenever women are mentioned in the medieval texts. This paper has demonstrated that the story of the Mongol Empire was not and cannot be told without women. Hö'elün raising Temujin, or Börte advising the eventual break with Jamuqa, or the three regent empresses establishing the function of governance were all vital to the Empire, and *The Secret History* presents them as such. Hostage women like Yisü and Yisügen or Gürbesü may not have been as recognized as powerful political agents like some of the other elite Mongol women, but through their physical presence the Hostage Wives also maintained a multiethnic empire. Both the actions that the women took and how they were represented in *The Secret History* fulfilled specific aspects of Mongol femininity and provide an example of the proper types of femininity for ancient non-elite women as well as modern Mongolian women.

Essentially, each of the roles are different routes of accessing and exercising power. Domineering Rulers have unmediated power, and so were punished by the existing male systems of power, but the other three cultural-historical types I have identified each access political freedom and are restricted from this freedom in various manners, including through their (male) children and husbands. As I have shown, a Great Mother primarily gained respect through her self-sacrifice and control over her male children, a Political Wife advised her husband, and a Hostage Wife had limited power over her husband, usually obtained through sacrifice, used to protect her original family and people. In addition, the types do not overlap; actions taken by the woman as

well as their social positions might suggest a different type, but they are treated fully as one type. Yisü was not a Political Wife, and so Chinggis Khan denigrated her while taking her advice, and Sorqoqtani Beki was a Great Mother, even though she ruled as an empress, and so she was not a Domineering Ruler.

There are correlations between the medieval Mongol and modern Mongolian roles women played and play today. Mongolian women today have equitable education and health, but do not participate in national politics at anywhere near equitable rates, which may be related to the types of women who had political power in the medieval accounts and cultural paradigms, or even the difference between culture and national politics.¹³⁷ In order to demonstrate a clearer connection, however, research on the long-term histography and social memory of the Mongol past needs to be done. Nevertheless, there are interesting indicators that may connect the power routes of ancient Mongol women to modernity. Regardless of the connection to modern Mongolians, it is undeniable that the Mongol Empire was founded through and with contributions from significant women, and that these contributions were lauded by the historical documents. To ignore this fact is to not only ignore individual contributions, but to misunderstand *The Secret History* and Mongol gender roles.

¹³⁷ World Economic Forum, “The Global Gender Gap Report 2018” (World Economic Forum), accessed November 13, 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2018/>.

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The 2018 World Gender Gap Report produced by the World Economic Forum ranked Mongolia number 1 out of 149 countries for gender equity in health and survival.¹ In fact, in Mongolia, women have slightly better health prospects than men. In comparison, the United States was ranked 71 and Germany was ranked 85 in the same category.² However, Mongolia was also ranked 109 out of 149 countries for gender equitable political empowerment.³ For example, in the 2016 elections, 17.1% (13 of 76) members of parliament were women, the highest since the Mongolian democratic revolution of 1990.⁴ As these statistics demonstrate, the conditions and lives of women in modern Mongolia are complicated beyond simple empowerment/oppression models. While modern times and the beginnings of the Mongol Empire are separated by 800 years and significant cultural changes, the image and cultural identity of modern Mongolia is still highly influenced by the Mongol Empire. Thus, understanding the lives of these modern women should include understanding ancient women in the early Mongol Empire (13th-15th centuries). Modern construction, music, art, and government are all directly and explicitly impacted by, and reference, the Mongol Empire.⁵ While technologies, language, and culture have all changed in the intervening time period, the identity of

¹ World Economic Forum, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2018.*, 2018, 10, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf.

² World Economic Forum, 10.

³ World Economic Forum, 189–90.

⁴ “Women in Parliaments: World Classification,” accessed December 7, 2019, <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.

⁵ “Sükhbaatar Square | Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia Attractions,” accessed January 31, 2020, <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/mongolia/ulaanbaatar/attractions/sukhbaatar-square/a/point-of-interest/434858/357066>; “Chinggis Khan: Art of Mongolia - Ganoksin Jewelry Making Community,” Ganoksin, accessed January 31, 2020, <https://www.ganoksin.com/article/chinggis-khan-art-mongolia/>; “The HU - The Great Chinggis Khaan Lyrics | AZLyrics.Com,” accessed January 31, 2020, <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/hu/thegreatchinggiskhaan.html>; “Mongolia Delays Launch of \$500-Million Airport until 2019 - Reuters,” accessed January 31, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mongolia-airport/mongolia-delays-launch-of-500-million-airport-until-2019-idUSKBN1ET0QH>; “Genghis Khan Statue Complex – Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia - Atlas Obscura,” accessed December 7, 2019, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/genghis-khan-equestrian-statue>.