

Empress Dowagers on Horseback: Yingtian and Chengtian of the Khitan Liao (907–1125)

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ABSTRACT

Unlike their Han Chinese counterparts who were mainly sequestered to the inner quarters, many imperial Khitan women of the Liao 遼 (907–1125) were not only active in state affairs, but they even rode astride and led their own armies to fight on battlefield. This article aims to investigate the lives and political careers of Empress Dowagers Yingtian and Chengtian, who ruled the empire as de facto sovereigns on behalf of their husbands and sons for over fifty years, by focusing particularly on how they proved themselves as capable horsewomen and what strategies have they employed in order to gain access to power and to accomplish their ambitions. Such warrior women, exercising leadership and exhibiting personal bravery, drew their strength from their Inner Asian steppe traditions and therefore established themselves as another type of queenship in Chinese history.

KEYWORDS

Khitan, Liao dynasty, empress dowager, female regents, gender roles, China

‘The Liao lived on horseback. Both empresses and imperial concubines were good at shooting and riding. They always followed [the emperors] in military affairs and hunting. ... These customs are unprecedented’ (*Liaoshi* 遼史 71: 1207).

遼以鞍馬為家，后妃往往長於射御，軍旅田獵，未嘗不從。... 古所未有，亦其俗也。

This sentence concludes the biographies of imperial women in the Liao dynastic history compiled in the fourteenth-century, the *Liaoshi* 遼史 (History of the Liao).¹ Founded by the nomadic Khitan (Chin.: *Qidan* 契丹) tribesmen from the eastern Mongolian steppe, the Liao 遼 (907–1125) dynasty is characterised by a series of powerful empresses and empress dowagers, all determined and ambitious, who played a predominant role in the Liao court politics and even in military affairs in a conspicuous manner.

Despite the traditional Chinese view that imperial women should retreat from state affairs and never concern themselves with anything but the domestic events of the inner quarters, women involved in state politics, or even ruling as female regents on behalf of their progeny, was a time-honoured institution in China.² In total, the period of imperial China from 221 BC to 1911 AD has witnessed some thirty empress dowagers who served as de facto rulers of their dynasties and reigned as actual rulers (Yang 1960/1961). Compared to many native Chinese dynasties, including the Northern Song 北宋 dynasty (960–1127), the contemporary of the Liao, which produced nine female regents in only 166 years of its existence, it seems that Liao imperial women might not have been as unusual as the *Liaoshi* claims.³ However, in most Chinese dynasties, imperial consorts were normally given restricted access to power under the circumstances of national emergency, such as the illness or sudden death of the reigning emperor when no mature heirs were available.

The Liao empresses, on the other hand, did not have to wait for the development of such conditions to exert their influence. Many of them had already been powerful and shared the authority of the ruler with their husbands during the lifetime of the latter. Moreover, noble Khitan women were indeed unusual in terms of their martial activities. Many Khitan imperial women were capable administrators and vigorous military leaders. Although Confucian ideals of women engaged in learning, being loyal and giving sage advice to their imperial husbands were not absent in biographies of Liao imperial women, they were at the same time good at hunting and skilled at martial competence, which traditional Chinese standards for virtuous behaviour of exemplary women certainly do not condone (Zhao 1993: 111).⁴

As Patricia B. Ebrey has argued in her classic work *The Inner Quarters* (1993), these qualities of Liao imperial women become particularly unusual at a time when in Song China sexes were separated from childhood and women were increasingly becoming sequestered inside their homes. Although to Confucian historians such activities were absolutely unusual and unfeminine, espe-

¹ Although the *Liaoshi* was compiled more than two centuries after the demise of the Liao dynasty, it relied primarily on materials recorded by Liao historians, who are overwhelmingly, if not all, Han-Chinese. However, because the general limited sources and the fact that the whole compilation was completed in only eleven months, the *Liaoshi* suffers from internal contradictions historical inconsistencies. On the historical significance of and criticism on the *Liaoshi*, see Feng 1959.

² For a discussion of the warnings against female rulership in early China, see McMahon 2013a, 2013b: 15–17.

³ On the Song female regents, see Chung 1981.

⁴ For an English summary of Zhao’s arguments, see Yang 1960/1961: 50–51.



cially from the Song dynasties on, it is interesting to note that the Inner Asian neighbours of the Khitan, including the Xianbei 鮮卑, Tanguts, and Mongols, shared much in common in terms of the particular roles of women in military and politics. Women of nomadic societies, as cogently argued by Karl A. Wittfogel & Feng Chia-sheng (1949) and Keith McMahon (2013), were allowed considerably greater participation in political and military decisions than did their Han Chinese counterparts. Tracing the imperial marriages of the Khitan and Mongol, Jennifer Holmgren (1986a, 1986b, 1991) notes that nomadic women enjoyed relatively higher status both in the family and at court. and the stories of powerful empresses and dowagers of the Northern Wei 北魏 (386–589) of the Xianbei and the Turko-Mongolian regimes of Inner Asia, vigorously participating in military and political activities, are well illustrated in extensive studies (Holmgren 1983a, 1983b; Broadbridge 2018). The Liao imperial consorts, combining political assertiveness and martial skills as both horsewomen and regents, were no inferior and even more remarkable.

This article focuses on the two most exceptional Liao imperial women, Empress Dowagers Yingtian 應天 (878–953) and Chengtian 承天 (953–1109), who, despite the existence of their husbands and sons, ruled the vast Liao empire as regents with full authority. The inquiry, at its core, is devoted to an investigation of the lives and political careers of Yingtian and Chengtian, in particular to how they proved themselves as competent warriors and what strategies they have employed to administer the empire. Together with a number of other Khitan noble women, the empress dowagers, exercising leadership and exhibiting personal bravery, demonstrated that they drew their strength from their Inner Asian steppe traditions that were in many respects different from that of the sedentary agricultural Chinese society. Largely shaped by their specific socio-economic conditions of pastoral nomads, the political dynamics of elaborated Khitan imperial women thus present another type of female rulership in China's history.

THE KHITAN EMPIRE OF THE LIAO

When the once dominant Tang empire finally crumbled in 907, the Khitan, distant descendants of the Xianbei, took the historical chance to rise from the Xar Moron (Xilamulun 西拉木伦 or 西拉沐沦) valley and established their dynasty in north China. The Khitan soon controlled a broad swath of grasslands in north Asia. Yelü Abaoji 耶律阿保機 (872–926, reigned as Emperor Taizu 太祖 916–926) assumed the title of emperor in a formal ceremony in Chinese style in 916.⁵ At the time of their victorious attacks in the region around modern Beijing in 938, the Khitan, now under the reign of Abaoji's son, built up a hybrid multi-ethnic empire.⁶ In 947, the Khitan caused the fall of the Later Jin 後晉 (936–947) and finally gave their budding empire the name of Liao, the Chinese name of the most important watercourse (the Xar Moron) in their homeland.

⁵ The chronology of the Khitan before 930 is somewhat contradictory. On their early history, see Wittfogel and Feng 1949. For the predynastic and early dynastic history of the Liao, see also Twitchett and Tietze 1994: 43–57; Marsone 2011.

⁶ The founding ruler of the Later Jin (936–947) offered the so-called 'Sixteen Prefectures' (*Yan-Yun shiliu zhou* 燕雲十六州), the region stretching from present Beijing to modern Datong 大同 in Shanxi province, to the Khitan in exchange for the military support of the Khitan. During the campaign of Emperor Shizong 世宗 (r. 954–959) of the Later Zhou 後周 (951–960), two prefectures, Mozhou 鄭州 and Yingzhou 瀛州, were reclaimed from the Khitan. For the Khitan cession of the region, see Twitchett and Tietze 1994: 70; Mote 2003: 63–65.



In their effort to rule a multiethnic empire, which consisted of the peoples of Khitan, Kumo Xi 庫莫奚 (also known as Xi 奚), Mongol, Jurchen, Bohai 渤海, and Han Chinese, the Khitan created a new system of dual administration—the northern one was a nomadic military state ruled as a khanate consisting of its nomadic, pastoral, and mostly Khitan subjects, while the southern one was agricultural and sedentary, equipped with a civil government which ruled over the largely Han Chinese and Bohai population according to the model of the Chinese empire.⁷ To consolidate their rule, the Khitan had adopted some of the Chinese administrative practices but still consciously took effort to maintain their own traditions distinct from that of China's (Tao 2013: 58–60). For instance, large palace grounds were constructed in all the five Liao capitals in the Chinese manner, but throughout the years the Liao emperors, together with the central government, moved periodically along a circuit that followed seasonal hunting sites, known as *nabo* 捺鉢.⁸ Unlike their Han Chinese counterparts, the Khitan emperors and nobles continued their nomadic practice of touring their territory, living in yurts, and meeting the ministers in the tent much more than offering an audience in the palace.

ETERNAL MARITAL LINK BETWEEN THE TWO CLANS: THE YELÜ-XIAO INTERMARRIAGE

To protect the privileged status of the ruling elite in the government and society and to keep a clear demarcation between conquerors and conquered subjects, the Liao practiced exclusive endogamy and had the Xiao 蕭 clan supply all consorts to the imperial Yelü 耶律 clan.⁹ Abaoji, the first Liao emperor, later canonised as Taizu, married a woman who became Empress Chunqin 淳欽, better known as Empress Dowager Yingtian, and who, it is noted in the *Liaoshi* (71: 1199), descended from the Uighurs. The second emperor, Deguang 德光, later Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 927–947), married Yingtian's niece.¹⁰ At some point in the second or third reign of the Liao, the consort clan adopted Xiao as its name and since then the Xiao successfully secured an exclusive and permanent lien on providing principal wives for the imperial clansmen, including emperors.

Out of a total of twenty empresses listed in the biographies on empresses and consorts in the *Liaoshi*, only one was not a Xiao. She was the Han Chinese empress of Emperor Shizong 世宗 (r. 947–951), named Lady Zhen 甄 (*Liaoshi* 71: 1197–1208; *Qidan guozhi* 契丹國志, 13: 141). The Yelü–Xiao intermarriage that started with the dynasty founder was firmly institutionalised with the marriage of the fifth emperor, Jingzong 景宗 (r. 969–982), to Xiao Chuo 蕭綽 (also called Xiao Yanyan 蕭燕燕, better known as Empress Ruizhi 睿智 and Empress Dowager Chengtian; 953–1009), who was the granddaughter of Yingtian's paternal uncle (*Liaoshi* 71: 1201–1202). Thereafter, the peculiar Yelü–Xiao intermarriage was applied to all imperial spouses and contin-

⁷ For the demographic data of the Liao, see Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 52–58.

⁸ The word *nabo* is the Chinese transliteration of a Khitan word meaning 'moving residence.' On the *nabo*, see *Liaoshi* 31: 361; Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 436; Fu 1984: 90–92.

⁹ To be more precise, two branches of the Xiao clan, derived from the brothers of the first Liao empress, supplied almost all subsequent Liao empresses as well as the vast majority of spouses for the imperial princesses throughout the dynastic era.

¹⁰ Daniel Kane (2009: 5), however, points out that no Khitan language equivalent for the Chinese character corresponding to the name 'Xiao' has been identified in inscriptions. Instead, the names of individual clans appear, including Shulü 述律, which were 'apparently merged during the course of the dynasty' to create the Xiao surnamed clan. For a detailed study of the formation of the Xiao clan, see Cha 2005: 53–69.



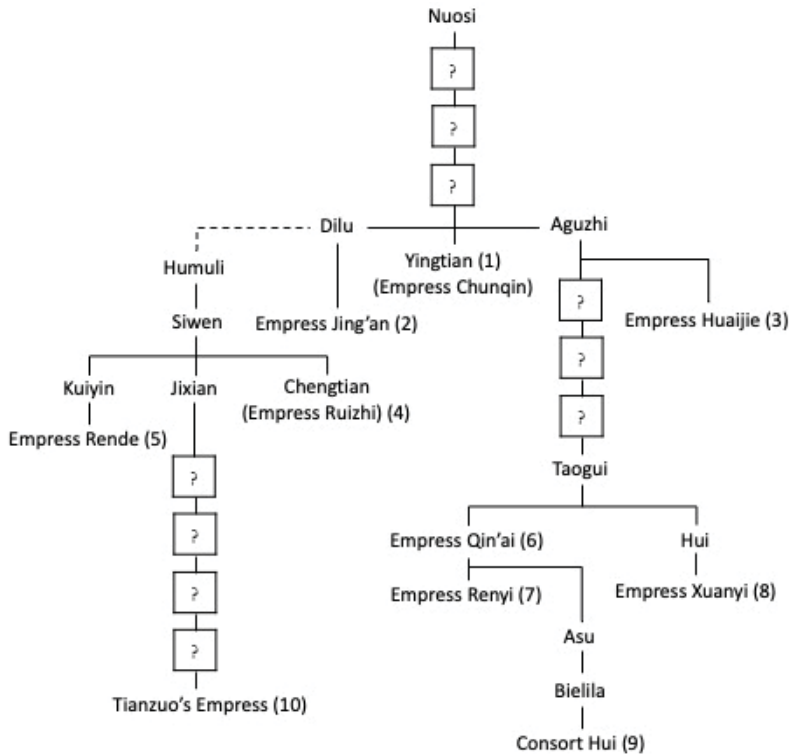


Figure 1: Structure of the Liao Imperial Consort Clan (Numbers in parentheses indicate the order of generation)

ued unabated until the end of the dynasty. In fact, except for Emperor Muzong's 穆宗 (r. 951–969) empress, whose genealogical position is unknown because of lack of data,¹¹ all of the Liao empresses were descendants of either Xiao Dilu 蕭敵魯 (d. 918) or Xiao Aguzhi 蕭阿古只, two half-brothers of the first empress (Fig. 1).

This model of exclusive intermarriage thus established and consolidated the bond between the imperial and the consort clans, providing the Khitan empresses and empress dowagers with particular political and military power. Through such marriages, the male relatives of the Xiao women were able to take part in palace and state politics, and gradually it also enabled these men to form a special privileged group of elites who enjoyed a legitimised share of the Liao authority. In this way, the Xiao women maintained close ties to hierarchies of their natal families and they represented the 'political and military interests of their clans' (Wright 2007: 332). Such ties were apparently visible in the cases of Yingtian and Chengtian, the most predominant two empress dowagers of the Liao.

¹¹ Although a very brief biography on Muzong's empress is provided in the chapter on empresses and consorts (*Liaoshi* 71: 1201), it is devoid of specific information except her father's personal name. Neither her childhood name nor her posthumous official title is recorded in her biography, unlike the rest of the empresses.



YINGTIAN: AN EMPRESS SACRIFICES HER HAND AND AFFIRMS HER POWER TO RULE

‘The Yikun prefecture ... was originally the territory of the Khitan Right Big Tribe. The prefecture was established by Empress Yingtian. A Uighur man named Nuosi lived there. His four-generation grandson was Rongwo Meili. He begot Empress Yingtian, the Shulü, who was married to Emperor Taizu’ (*Liaoshi* 47: 446).¹²

儀坤州 ... 本契丹右大部地。應天皇后建州。回鶻糯思居之，至四世孫容我梅里，生應天皇后述律氏，適太祖。

The entry in *Liaoshi*, which accounts for the only information about Yingtian’s genealogy, clearly indicates that Abaoji’s wife had a consanguineous relation with the Uighur. The empress’s ancestor Nuosi 糯思, a man of Uighur origin, lived in the territory of a Khitan tribe as early as five generations before Abaoji.¹³ Her Uighur heritage is reiterated in another *Liaoshi* record which describes that Yingtian’s Uighur ancestors had become parts of the Khitan tribal confederation a few generations earlier and her father, as many of Yingtian’s uncles, had served for the Khitan (*Liaoshi* 71: 1199; Xu 2005: 203).

Abaoji, determined to unite the Khitan confederation, made use of his marriage with Yingtian to secure the support of her Uighur relatives, whose backing was crucial to Abaoji’s success in establishing an imperial institution of primogeniture, in which eldest sons succeed their fathers. In the traditional Khitan practice of succession, also widely shared by many peoples of north Asian steppes, a khan selected by a council of elders served a three-year term, after which a new khan would be selected, an office to which Abaoji’s brothers all felt entitled (Holmgren 1986a: 47–48; Wright 2007: 326). In this system, the principle of patrilineal succession did not yet play a significant role in the process of selecting the next leader on both tribal and confederation levels. Instead, all of the direct descendants and collaterals of the chieftain were considered equally legitimate and qualified candidates, as demonstrated in the pattern of leadership transfer before Abaoji.¹⁴ It shall be worth noting that in such a system, all of the contenders for the title of khan were male, yet the success of any one of them depended on the support of others, who might be female. To offset the ambitions of his male relatives, Abaoji integrated Yingtian’s family relatives, including her brothers and uncles, into the Liao state administration and granted them leading offices and massive military powers.¹⁵

Yingtian’s career as a brave warrior woman began with her advice on military strategy for Abaoji during this time of transition. When her husband ascended to the khanship, Yingtian is said to have helped him with the removal of his political rivals within and outside his tribe to secure his position. When other chieftains of the Khitan confederation were brewing a plot to deprive Abaoji of his power, the future emperor sought his wife’s advice in strategy. ‘Following

¹² As Elina-Qian Xu (2005: 203) has pointed out, Meili 梅里 was the title of an official post of the Uighur.

¹³ See also *Liaoshi* 71: 1199 for similar records. On Yingtian’s ancestors, see Yang 2010: 10–12.

¹⁴ For instance, the first leader of the Khitan confederation, Mohui 摩會, active in 630s, seems to have had no relations to his successor Kuge 窟哥. When Li Jinzhong 李盡忠, one of Kuge’s grandsons, died in 696, the title of khan was claimed by his cousin Li Shihuo 李失活, who was succeeded by his younger brother, Suogu 娑固, from 716 to 730s. It was probably according to the same principle that Abaoji assumed the position in 901. On these successions, see *Liaoshi* 63: 952–955; Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 399–400; Holmgren 1986b: 37–55.

¹⁵ On Yingtian’s relatives who served in the Liao administration, see Holmgren 1986a: 45–49.



his wife's strategy; Abaoji set a trap for his enemies, inviting them to a conference at a salt lake to discuss salt revenues. At the end of the banquet, and 'when the wine began to take effect, hidden soldiers came forth and killed all the tribe chieftains' (*Xin Wudaishi* 新五代史 72: 886–887: 用其妻述律策 . . . 酒酣伏發，盡殺諸部大人; Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 142). In doing so, Abaoji succeeded in eliminating the opposition and in securing his hold on the khanship.

Yingtian gained a reputation of sharp mind and strategic planning when she accompanied Abaoji during his military campaigns. She participated in the campaigns herself and frequently offered criticism and advice during negotiation. When Abaoji was 'making ready to lead the army into battle,' as *Liaoshi* records, 'the empress always planned together with him' (*Liaoshi* 71: 1199: 行兵御眾，后嘗與謀). Moreover, Yingtian put together a military force of her own by sustaining her own *ordo*, a military administrative domain of certain districts and tribes, with 13,000 households attached, which consisted of both the tribal and Han Chinese population and generated 5,000 mounted horsemen directly under her command.¹⁶ In addition, she maintained another special cavalry of as many as 200,000 soldiers selected from Khitan tribes and Han Chinese and Bohai captives (*Liaoshi* 46: 738; Hansen 2013: 280).¹⁷

These armies were likely to have been mobilised when she was in charge of holding the defence of the empire in an event of a foreign attack, or during a domestic crisis when her husband was engaged in other military actions abroad. When, for instance, Abaoji was away from the capital pacifying the Tangut tribes in 916, some of the Khitan tribes took advantage of his absence and rebelled. They underestimated, however, the ability of the empress who was left with the responsibility of the defence. Yingtian predicted their attack and was fully prepared. When the enemy struck, she led out her personal army and successfully put down the rebels captives (*Liaoshi* 35: 401; Twitchett and Tietze 1994: 68). Through a series of similar victories, Yingtian managed to use her familial connections and her military command to secure her husband's claim to the throne.

Yingtian's exceptional military qualities were celebrated during the Liao, she also participated in court audiences by receiving foreign envoys together with her husband and advising him on imminent political and military issues. Her authority in the Liao court was recognised in an open and visible manner, unlike that of her counterparts in the native Chinese Song dynasty, where an imperial consort or an empress-dowager sometimes attended the court audience behind a screen. In general, a Han Chinese emperor would not meet a foreign envoy with his empress sitting beside him.¹⁸ Thus, when an envoy of the Later Tang 後唐 (923–936) visited the Liao in 926, he encountered Abaoji and Yingtian sitting on facing couches, something that would have been impossible for her Han Chinese counterparts (Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 538; Mote 2003: 45).

In addition to direct presence at court, Yingtian was also good at discovering talented men, both Khitan and Han Chinese, and recommending them for higher offices in the administration. It was she, for example, who first recognised the quality and integrity of Han Yanhui 韓延徽 (d. 959), later one of the most important Han Chinese administrators in the cabinet of Abaoji. Originally sent to the Khitan court as an envoy, Han was detained because he refused to make an obeisance to Abaoji, which angered the emperor. Observing Han closely, Yingtian remonstrated

¹⁶ The name of her *ordo* is 'Prolonged Peace Camp' (*Changning gong* 長寧宮), see *Liaoshi* 31: 365, 35: 402–403; Franke 1980: 25.

¹⁷ The army was named 'Shushan' 屬珊 because it was as 'precious as coral.' Wittfogel and Feng considered this figure from the *Liaoshi* too large to be true. Instead, they suggest only twenty or thirty thousand, see Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 521, note 217.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the use of curtain or screen on court, see McMahon 2013a: 195–197; 2016: 11–13.



with Abaoji, explaining that Han's loyalty was worth being praised and rewarded as a quality of a sage. She further advised him to treat Han with respect and to employ him, which Abaoji heeded (*Liaoshi* 74: 1231). Her judgment and recommendation turned out to be very helpful. Han, together with other Han Chinese officials who joined the Khitan government, developed an effective and appropriate administration system in order to govern the enlarged territory populated by various conquered peoples, particularly the large number of Han Chinese farmers. He also devised a program of offering various incentives to encourage people to settle in the uncultivated frontier regions, thus greatly increased the population and revenue (*Liaoshi* 74: 1231; Twitchett and Tietze 1994: 63–64).

Yingtian's most spectacular moment came when Abaoji suddenly died in 926 on his way back to the capital after conquering the kingdom of Bohai (698–926). This was during a time when the idea of lineal transmission of the leadership based upon the principle of primogeniture had not been widely accepted by Khitan aristocrats. Almost all of Abaoji's younger brothers were still alive and were, according to nomadic traditions, also entitled to ascend the throne. The new dynasty that her husband and she had fought hard to consolidate was faced with serious risks of another internal crisis. Under this circumstance, Yingtian was determined to protect the claims of her own children to the throne from the potential challenges from the fraternal and collateral relatives of Abaoji. After collecting the armies and personally escorting the funeral procession back to the mausoleum, she refused to be buried with her Abaoji, as the Khitan custom demanded. Instead, she resolutely cut off her right hand and placed it in the coffin of her deceased husband (*Liaoshi* 71: 1200; Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 543). After that, she immediately took over the conduct of government and military and ruled as de facto ruler until the succession dispute was settled.

Although the eldest son of Abaoji, Bei 倍 (900–937), was officially appointed as heir apparent as early as 916, the empress had no desire to honour her deceased husband's wish. In what the later Chinese historians called an outrageous manner, she meddled in the imperial succession and claimed the authority to pick a successor herself. Against Abaoji's original will to establish their first son, Yingtian favoured her younger son, Deguang, and wanted him to become the next emperor. While imperial succession was being delayed by disputes for almost one year after Abaoji's death, it appears Yingtian carried out a purge on a large scale to eliminate Bei's supporters at court, often under the pretext of 'sending messengers to the deceased emperor' (*Qidan guozhi* 13: 141–142). In this context it is also certainly suspicious that all three younger brothers of Abaoji died shortly before and after his death in the fall of 926, although historical records do not offer any clear clue as to how they died.

After standing opposite his mother for months after the death of his father, Bei probably recognised that he was left with little option but to comply with his mother's will, knowing that his military power was no match for hers, especially after having lost most of his strong supporters. He finally gave in to the pressure at the end of 926, declaring that he would voluntarily give up his claims in favour of his younger brother since 'both domestic and foreign are subjects to him' (*Liaoshi* 3: 28: 中外攸屬). Deguang became the new emperor, who then honoured his mother with the new title of empress dowager. After the abdication, Bei still retained his title and authority as Prince of Dongdan (*Dongdan wang* 東丹王) until he fled to the Later Tang in 930.

Throughout Deguang's reign, Yingtian acted as the most important figure in state affairs. Deguang, although officially the emperor, was particularly obedient to his mother in both political conducts and domestic affairs: important policy decisions were never made without Yingtian's approval; when Yingtian became ill, Deguang refused to eat and waited personally on his mother by



the bedside; a commemorative stele was erected to honour Yingtian's merit and her birthday was announced as a national holiday, on which large state celebration was organised (*Liaoshi* 3: 29).

When Deguang suddenly died on his way home from a military campaign in 947, Ruan 阮 (918–951), the eldest son of Bei, who had accompanied his uncle, was immediately established as emperor by a number of imperial clansmen and generals in front of the deathbed of Deguang in the military camp (*Liaoshi* 5: 63; Cha 2005: 94–95). When Ruan returned to the capital, however, he met strong opposition from his grandmother, Yingtian. Outraged at the news of his ascension to the throne without her consent, she refused to approve of him as the legitimate successor. After the army led by her youngest son, Lihu 李胡 (911–960), was defeated, Yingtian, now in her late sixties, personally led her *ordo* troops and camped by the river bank, across from which Ruan and his army were stationed. After several months of confrontation, a peaceful settlement was finally reached with the mediation of Yelü Wuzhi 耶律屋質 (916–972), the new emperor's kinsman and his most trusted adviser (Yang 2010: 177–179).¹⁹ Facing fierce opposition of the majority of the imperial clan, Yingtian had no choice but to acknowledge Ruan, now Emperor Shizong, as the new legitimate ruler, while the emperor promised that no retribution would be carried out.

Although Yingtian did not manage to manipulate the imperial succession for the second time and died in exile in 953 at the age of 75, her assertive courage and military competence were truly unprecedented. The compilers of *Liaoshi* thus remarked in her biography, half complimentarily half critically, with a sentence stating that she was 'austere and imposing, resolute and decisive, and a brave strategist' (71: 1199: 簡重果斷, 有雄略).²⁰

CHENGTIAN: AN EMPRESS LEADS AN ARMY TO DEFEAT THE SONG

The political competence and military skills the first Liao empress dowager exhibited were followed by other Liao imperial women. The empress of Deguang, Yingtian's niece, also headed civil and military branches of government with equal confidence and authority (*Liaoshi* 71: 1200; Johnson 2011: 126). But few would dispute that the second most assertive imperial woman of the Liao was Empress Dowager Chengtian. She came from the illustrious branch of the consort clan, namely that of Xiao Dilu, half-brother of Yingtian. Appointed by Emperor Jingzong, her father, Xiao Siwen 簫思溫 (d. 970), was both the northern prime minister and northern chancellor, two of the most influential posts in the Liao administration. She was elevated to empress shortly after her father's appointment and gave birth to six of Jingzong's eight children, including the future Emperor Shengzong 聖宗 (r. 982–1031).

Already during Jingzong's reign, Chengtian aided the emperor in managing government affairs, accompanying him to the front on occasion and staying in charge of affairs of the state during his many absences. The latter half of Jingzong's reign was marked by a series of hostile battles along the border and the emperor was frequently ill. Often, the officials and generals all went to Chengtian first to discuss important issues, and once a decision had been made, they then informed the emperor so that the policies could be promulgated in his name (*Qidan guozhi* 6: 59–60). When Jingzong was unable to direct sporadic warfare, it was Chengtian who, 'as the actual ruler of the Khitan, made all the decisions' (*Qidan guozhi* 6: 59–60: 以女主臨朝, 國事一決於其手).

¹⁹ For biographies of Yelü Wuzhi and Lihu, see *Liaoshi* 77: 1255–1256 and 72: 1213–1314, respectively.

²⁰ McMahan 2013b: 258, citing *Liaoshi* 71: 1199.



As Jingzong's ailment took a turn for the worse on a hunting trip in early 982, Chengtian followed the advice of her most trusted Han Chinese minister, Han Derang 韓德讓 (941–1101), to employ various protective measures such as sending back numerous princes to their original residences, stripping them off of their military commands, and detaining their wives and children in the palace as hostages (Holmgren 1986a: 79). In doing so, she successfully destroyed 'the coalition of paternal uncles, cousins and other relatives' (Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 403). Prior to his death, Jingzong even issued an edict allowing her to use the first-person singular pronoun *zhen* 朕, which was normally exclusively used by emperors (McMahon 2013b: 261). In accordance with the posthumous edict left by Jingzong, the 11-year-old Shengzong was declared emperor and his mother, Chengtian, was named as regent.

When Chengtian took the reins of the Liao empire, she had just turned thirty years old. However, she was already well versed in the affairs of government since she had been attending court audiences and issuing policies on behalf of her husband during the last few years of his reign. In order to establish her authority as regent, Chengtian performed several successive 'rebirth ceremonies' (*zaisheng yi* 再生儀) for herself. Normally, the 'rebirth ceremony', which involved the burning of a special building that the ruler entered in order to be reborn, was a rite limited to emperors when assuming the throne. But extant records show that Chengtian took part in at least three such ceremonies between 984 and 986 (Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 259).²¹

Chengtian knew that participation in mythical ceremonies was not enough to consolidate her regency. Shengzong was the first Liao emperor who ascended the throne well before reaching adulthood. Thus Chengtian was particularly concerned about her young son's future. Following the strategies of Abaoji, she pushed the reform of tribal administration by employing both lower ranking members of the Yelü clan and Han Chinese officials for high offices. To further firm up the imperial authority and curb the power of Khitan aristocrats, she implemented a series of measures to change the tribal administration system by bringing semi-independent tribal nobles under direct state control. For instance, many Khitan tribes were reorganised to be incorporated into local administrative units and the tribal titles of their chieftains, *lingwen* 令穩, were renamed as prefectural commanders (*jiedushi* 節度使) subjected to direct supervision of the central government (*Liaoshi* 13: 148; 33: 388–393).

During the last decade of the tenth century, Chengtian issued new policies to liberate Xi tribesmen from their bondsmen status and allowed them to live separately.²² Many of them chose to reside among the Khitan, so the Xi very quickly became thoroughly assimilated. As the population of Xi tribesmen declined, the Xi chieftains lost their semi-autonomous status and gradually gave up their tribal leadership in exchange for Liao administrative offices (*Liaoshi* 13: 148; Twitchett and Tietze 1994: 97–98). To the Liao, who at that time were striving to promote Khitan tribal unity, the incorporation of the Xi was of particular importance as in this way, the Xi tribes, which had often resented the Khitan conquer and revolted during the first Liao reigns, were pacified and became integrated into the Khitan state. With the tribal matters settled, the Liao could concentrate more on the wars with its neighbours, the Song in the south and Koryo in the north.

Throughout Chengtian's regency, a number of tax-related edicts were issued to improve efficiency and accuracy in collecting taxes. Until the late 990s, the sedentary Han Chinese living around modern Beijing were bearing the responsibility of generating almost the entire Liao rev-

²¹ On the 'rebirth' ceremony, see also *Liaoshi* 53: 879–880.

²² For the Khitan policies on the Xi tribes and the development of their relationship, see Liu 2014: ch. 2, 3.



enue, including corvée labour. Hoping to alleviate the burden of the masses and avoid unnecessary exploitation, she ordered an equitable taxation law to be established in 994 (*Liaoshi* 13: 145).²³ Chengtian frequently encouraged agriculture and, on a number of occasions, exempted or reduced the taxes and duties on famine-struck regions (Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 338–339). She also abolished the practice of making the common people pay for the wages of government officials. Instead, they were to be paid directly from the state treasury (*Liaoshi* 14: 1535). By placing the officials on the direct payroll of the government, not only could she prevent some greedy local officials from abusing their subjects but she could also enhance the authority of the sovereign.

In tandem with her efforts to improve state revenue and to centralise the power, attention was given to the legal system too. Since the beginning of the dynasty, the Liao followed the principle of a dual legal system which aimed at different populations, nomadic and sedentary. The Khitan were subjected to tribal customary law while the Tang code (*Tanglü* 唐律) was applied to Han Chinese and other sedentary populations. Disputes between Khitan and sedentary subjects were invariably ruled in favour of the Khitan (Franke 1992: 118–120).²⁴ But in 994, Chengtian ordered that any Khitan who had committed one of the ‘Ten Abominable Offences’ (*shìè* 十惡), cited in the Tang code, were now to be punished according to Chinese law (*Liaoshi* 61: 939; Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 231, note 30).²⁵ Although still considerably limited, this was the first formal declaration of legal equalisation in the Liao.

Throughout Chengtian’s regency, she was eager to listen to her Han Chinese advisors at court to better understand the needs of her sedentary and agrarian subjects, who formed the overwhelming majority of the entire Liao population. It is even asserted that Han Derang became the most powerful figure in the empire next to the emperor because of his illicit relationship with the empress dowager. In the embassy account written during his diplomatic mission to the Liao in 1008, the Song envoy Lu Zhen 路振 (967–1014) provided a lively account of Chengtian’s exceptional romance with Han, noting that the two sit together in open manner and even a son was born (*Chengyao lu* 乘輶錄 15).²⁶ Although her relationship with Han was viewed as against the Confucian norms, this should be taken as a positive evidence of her exceptional agency and self-determination. Despite her active measures toward Chinese-style institutions and policies, she remained a traditional Khitan ruler by reserving the key military offices to Khitan aristocrats from the two ruling clans. She also reused the time-honoured strategies introduced by the first Liao empress to secure her absolute authority by promoting members of her natal family to prominent posts. Her brother Xiao Jixian 蕭繼先 (d. 1010), who had hereditary claims in the office through his father, was appointed the northern prime minister in 986. Chengtian arranged the marriage between her brother and her eldest daughter, Princess Guanyinnü 觀音女. In 1001, she also proclaimed her own niece, daughter of her younger brother, as empress of Shengzong (*Liaoshi* 14: 156, 71: 1202; Cha 2005: 106).

²³ However, it is not clearly understood what ‘equitable tax law (*junshuifa* 均稅法)’ means in the *Liaoshi*. Whether its purpose was to obtain equalisation of the taxes levied on different classes of population or to make the taxes more equitable for the common people, eventually the attempt was a failure. When the Jin conquered the Liao, a decree was issued to equalise the Liao taxes for they ‘were levied unequally.’ See also Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 339, note 42.

²⁴ On the Liao legal system, see Takigawa and Shimada 1943.

²⁵ For a detailed study of the ‘Ten Abominable Offences,’ see Johnson 1973: 17–18 and 61–83.

²⁶ The same text appears in *Quan Liaowen* 全遼文 12: 360–361. A translation of Lu’s account is provided in Wright 2005: 186. On the alleged affair, see *Qidan guozhi* 13: 130–132; Luo 1985. For a discussion of records and opinions expressed by Song diplomatic envoys sent to the Liao, see Tao 1983; Hargett 1985; Tao 2013: 104–108.



During her regency, Chengtian proved herself as a capable administrator, but her most celebrated capacity was as military commander who defeated the Song army, for which she can ‘claim a unique position in Chinese history’ (McMahon 2013b: 261). Like Yingtian, she held her own *ordo*, which could provide a standing cavalry of 10,000 horsemen (*Liaoshi* 35: 404; Franke 1980: 25–26). Four years after Shengzong’s ascendance to the throne, the Song emperor and his generals launched a large-scale invasion of Liao territory in 986. Trying to take advantage of the 15-year-old Liao emperor, the Song expected an easy victory. The young mother, now aged 34, steered chariots and rode personally with the Liao army and utterly defeated the Chinese. The dowager captured about one hundred boys, whom she ordered emasculated, adding to the group of Liao eunuchs (Johnson 2011: 129).

Her most glorious act came in the summer of 1004, when the Liao launched a full-scale attack on the Song. Emperor Shengzong was personally commanding the campaign, yet few would doubt that it was Chengtian, now over 50, who was the person in charge of the Liao cavalrymen fighting ‘the bloodiest battle of the entire war’ (Wright 2005: 68).²⁷ Encamped about 150 kilometers north of the Song capital of Kaifeng, the Liao troops stopped at the northern side of the Yellow River. Reluctantly, the Song Emperor Zhenzong 真宗 (r. 997–1022), marched northward to meet the Liao at Shanyuan 澶淵, the first large city across the Yellow River.²⁸ Zhenzong wanted to stop the bloodshed, and the Khitan had stretched so far from their home base that risked having supply lines cut off. Fearing an escalation of the war on both sides, the emperors of the Liao and Song finally reached on a peace treaty in January 1005. To end the war, the Song agreed to accept that the Liao was given a superior position over the Song, since the treaty stated that Chengtian was ritually recognised as the junior aunt of the Song emperor. In addition, an annual indemnity payment that amounted 200,000 bolts of tabby weave silk and 100,000 ounces of silver (ca. 3,730 kilograms), termed a military compensation, was offered to the Liao. Because of the successful treaty, the large portion of the expense in constructing the Liao Central Capital was covered by the hefty payment received from the Song (*Liaoshi* 71: 1202).²⁹ It seems safe to presume that the negotiation was finally sealed by Chengtian, although no source notes that she was personally involved. The importance of Chengtian in the Liao court was also recognised by the Song, as the first Song tributary envoy in 1006 was officially commissioned to congratulate the empress dowager, not the emperor.

For almost three decades until her death in 1009, the Liao empire was ruled by Chengtian and the Khitan horsemen served under her command. The dynastic history of the Liao, *Liaoshi*, praises her as ‘an enlightened ruler who understood the art of governance and was always willing to listen to advice, thus officials all swore loyalty to her’ (*Liaoshi* 71: 1202: 后明達治道，聞善必從，故群臣咸竭其忠). But to her son, she was a strict and autocratic mother. When her emperor-son committed something wrong, she would berate him in front of his ministers, even after he was a grown man. Denis Twitchett and Klaus-Peter Tietze come to the conclusion that ‘while Chengtian was alive, there was no question of who was ultimately in control’ (Twitchett and Tiet-

²⁷ On this battle, see *Qidan guozhi* 13: 143–144.

²⁸ The name of the city is pronounced in modern Chinese as Chanyuan. However, the earlier pronunciation of the character 澶, as recorded in the *Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典 (Kangxi Dictionary), is ‘shan’. Although ‘Chanyuan’ has appeared more frequently in recent scholarship, most authoritative works still use ‘shan’, including Twitchett and Tietze 1994, Schwarz-Schilling 1959, Mote 2003, Wright 2005. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who provides information on the issue.

²⁹ On the progress of the war and provisions of the treaty, see Schwarz-Schilling 1959; Tao 1988; Lau 2000: 213.



ze 1994: 90). The reign of Shengzong was not only the longest of all Liao emperors but also a period in which the Liao reached its political, cultural, and military peak. The success of Shengzong's reign combined his openness to advices and the relatively peaceful environment created by the Treaty of Shanyuan. However, there is little doubt that Chengtian was the main source of power.

Chengtian began her career as a warrior under the tutelage of Jingzong. But as the empress dowager, she became by all measures one of the most successful of all the Liao empress dowagers, next to Yingtian. This is reflected in the fact that throughout the Liao, except the emperors only four more extraordinarily powerful individuals from the imperial household had established their personal *ordo*. Among them, Yingtian and Chengtian were the only two women, whose *ordos* were maintained separate and independent from those of their husbands and sons.

OTHER KHITAN NOBLE WOMEN: ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The story of Khitan women actively involved in political and military affairs, however, did not end with Chengtian. For instance, Xingzong 興宗 (r. 1031–1055) once organised a large feast to congratulate his mother, Empress Qin'ai 欽哀 (d. 1058), for hunting a bear (*Liaoshi* 19: 226). In 1066, Emperor Daozong's 道宗 (r. 1055–1101) mother also killed a bear on her hunting tour. To honour her feat, Daozong distributed a great amount of money to his officials. Later in the same year, she went hunting again, this time killing a tiger. Excited about his mother's hunting skill, Daozong invited the officials to a large feast and asked them to write poems to celebrate the event (*Liaoshi* 22: 264–265).

One of Chengtian's elder sisters, Hunian 胡輦, who was married to Prince of Qiguo 齊國, was a fine warrior woman. After her husband died, she pledged to be remarried to a foreign slave named Talan'abo 撻覽阿鉢. Together with Talan'abo, she personally commanded an army of 300,000 soldiers to defend the western frontier and had many victories (*Qidan guozhi* 13: 142–143; Luo 1985: 162). The political skills and military vigour of Liao imperial women are also to be observed in Empress Renyi 仁懿 (d. 1058), wife of Shengzong and mother of Emperor Xingzong. Once she discovered a rebellious conspiracy and informed the emperor. When the rebellion broke out, she personally led the guards to defeat the rebels (*Liaoshi* 71: 1204). When the Song army surrounded the Liao Southern Capital in today's Beijing in 1123, the last Liao empress dowager, known as Consort De 德, commanded the remaining Liao army against the Song forces (*Liaoshi* 30: 352–353; Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 427).

That the Khitan noble women were not confined to the inner quarters and were involved riding and combating was also testified by the equestrian equipment discovered in tombs of female occupants. The tomb of Princess Chenguo 陳國 (1000–1018), niece of Shengzong, and her husband at Naiman Banner in Inner Mongolia yielded two complete sets of horse-riding gears, ranging from saddles, cruppers, bridles, halter, and stirrups, all lavishly made of silver and decorated with gilded patterns. Although it is unlikely that these artifacts were actually used during her lifetime, as the metal was extremely thin and thus considerably brittle, one of the sets must have belonged to the princess, because their measurements are relatively smaller than the other set, which were probably reserved for her husband. Next to such equipment, the princess was also wearing a pair of riding boots made of gold-gilded silver (Neimenggu wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 1987: 9–11).³⁰

³⁰ On Princess Chenguo, see Liu 2007: 98–101.



More horse-riding gears used by Khitan women were found in tombs around the Liao Eastern Capital in today's Liaoyang. In the tomb of an elderly noble woman at Yemaotai 葉茂臺 in Liaoning province, probably a member of the Xiao clan, the occupant was buried with equestrian implements of a saddle, a stirrup, a bit, and a rein, all decorated with gold and crystal (Liaoning sheng bowuguan 1975: 27). The tomb of an unknown female at Qianchuanghu 前窗戶 in Liaoning was furnished with about 120 pieces of equestrian gear of bronze gilded with silver, along with three weapons—two short spears and a full-sized sword (77 cm long). In addition, a crystal axe head and an iron arrowhead were also placed on the chamber ground.³¹ In tomb no. 4 at Qinghemen 清河門, also in Liaoning, a female occupant of exalted status was unearthed with a pair of boots and a set of stirrups that were relatively small in size (Li 1954: 1880–1891). Probably these have been particularly manufactured to fit the female riders. It is in this sense interesting to observe that hitherto no Han Chinese women have been found with the horse-riding equipment.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: AN ALTERNATIVE PATTERN OF QUEENSHIP

From these cases, we may venture to draw a general pattern of the Liao imperial women. While motherhood and family background were undoubtedly key factors for women's advancement to power in all dynasties, Chinese or non-Chinese, the most extraordinary characteristics that set Liao imperial women far apart from their Han Chinese counterparts is their martial qualities. Khitan elite women were not confined to their inner quarters and expected to pursue only sedentary activities. In contrast, many of them, as their husbands and sons, were excellent archers, hunters and horse riders.

To their Han Chinese contemporaries, the activities of Liao female regents—hunting, commanding armies, and participating in state politics—were not the culturally expected virtuous qualities of an empress dowager. Nine empresses served as regents during the Northern Song and many of them even brought about major changes of policy during their regencies. For instance, Empress Dowager Gao 高 (d. 1093), mother of Emperor Shenzong (r. 1067–1085), assumed power when her son fell ill in 1079 and completely reversed the reforms initiated by Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1085) after Shenzong died in 1085.³² But they were neither directly involved in military affairs nor fond of vigorous activities such as hunting. Instead of relying on their natal relatives, as the Liao empresses did, Song empress regents tended to exercise power alone and only very few relatives of Song dowagers obtained important offices, thus significantly reducing their impact on state administration. This is mainly because institutional restrictions and criticisms from the officials made it very difficult for Song empresses to place members of their natal families in key positions (Chaffee 2001: 23–25; Hinsch 2016: 122). Even Empress Dowager Liu 劉 (969–1033), the first and most authoritative regent in Song history, could not dismiss the opposition of her ministers and 'constructed conscientious ways of staying within the boundaries of what could be allowed' (McMahon 2013a: 206).

³¹ The occupant of the tomb, dating to the early eleventh century, was identified as a female who probably died at the age of 40. On the burial objects, see Jin 1980. The excavation report speculates that the occupant was a noble shaman.

³² On Empress Gao and other Song regents, see Chung 1981: 7–24.



During the same period, however, many Eurasian realms witnessed a series of forceful women in power and active in military affairs. Empress Dowager Liang 梁 (d. 1099) of the Tangut Xi Xia 西夏 kingdom (1038–1227), for example, ruled as regent for her three-year-old son and personally led troops into a conquered Song city in 1082 (Dunnell 1996: 71–72). Through the 1200s many Mongol empress dowagers assisted their husbands and sons in military affairs and commanded armies. It is well-known that Töregene Khatun (d. 1246), wife of Ögedei Khan (r. 1229–1241), managed the succession of his son for Güyük Khan (r. 1246–1248), much like Yingtian, and ruled the empire as regent (Fletcher 1986: 26–28). Sorghaghtani Beki (d. 1252), Khubilai Khan's mother, even fought vigorously for her sons against their rivals (Mote 2003: 189; McMahon 2013a: 211). In twelfth-century Georgia, the sonless King Giorgi III (r. 1156–1184) solved the problem of succession by crowning his daughter, Tamar (r. 1184–1213). Commanding troops herself, she prevailed against rebels and religious patriarchs and became the most eulogised monarch in Georgian history (Rayfield 2012: 103–117). The Christian Melisende (r. 1131–1161) ruled as Queen of Jerusalem between the death of her father in 1131 and her death in 1161, reportedly defeating her husband's attempt to obtain power and, when her son came of age, refusing to yield him (McMahon 2016: xxxi). In Mughal India, Radiyya Bint Iltutmish (1205–1240), who ruled as sultan of Delhi from 1236 to 1240, was said to have discarded her female attire, emerged from purdah, and allowed herself to be seen in public riding on an elephant (Jackson 1998: 189).

It seems not too fetched to argue that the period from the 11th to the 13th centuries marks a peak of influential female regents across Eurasia, a time when the pastoral nomads from the Inner Asian steppe rose to power in various parts of the vast Eurasian continent. In this sense, the activities of Khitan women were quite foreign to the Confucian Chinese of the Song, yet, they were not unique in Inner Asian traditions and could hardly be described as unprecedented as the *Liaoshi* claims. However, the activities of the Khitan imperial women thus represent another pattern of queenship different to that of the agricultural sedentary societies. To the Han Chinese, the activities of the aforementioned nomadic Khitan women and their non-Chinese neighbours, riding astride and leading armies on battlefields, would hardly qualify them as paragons of virtue in any Confucian sense of the term. From the perspective of the Han Chinese, hunting and military was strictly a male domain. But for nomadic peoples such as Khitan, these were deeply embedded in their tradition. In pastoral nomadic societies, men were the absolute masters, but when they were away at war, the women then took responsibility for the home, herds, and flocks. It thus seems a natural requirement for women to possess certain skills of riding, hunting, and fighting. The particular model of the pastoral nomadic society, in which women enjoyed a greater share of economic and administrative authority than they did in sedentary societies, might have made women in positions of authority 'more palatable to nomads than to the sedentary Chinese' (Wright 2007: 331). When they became members of the ruling class, they were then not confined to domestic affairs but involved actively in state politics and warfare when needed as the cases of the strong empress dowagers Yingtian and Chengtian have amply demonstrated.



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