Introduction

The Liao began from horseback and lived on horseback. Both empresses and imperial concubines were good at shooting, hunting, and military affairs. . . . This custom is unprecedented.

So reported the fourteenth-century chroniclers of the Liao dynastic history, the Liaoshi.¹ The Liao and Jin states, on China’s northeastern borders, were dominated by forceful, horse-riding, militaristic aristocracies of steppe and forest. Historically, the Liao (907–1125), founded by Kitan tribesmen, and the Jin (1115–1234), established by Jurchen tribes, were the first of four conquest dynasties that originated in inner Asia. Together they successively dominated the late imperial period, which included the Mongol Yuan (1264–1368) and the Manchu Qing (1644–1912). Each conquest carved out a larger portion of China, until first the Mongols and later the Manchus conquered all.

The women of the Liao and Jin conquest dynasties included not only Kitan and Jurchen but also the Han Chinese living under alien rule. Each group had its own history, customs, and distinguishing characteristics and claimed its own identity. One of the challenges encountered in this study was to distinguish among these peoples and discover their salient customs and practices in order to identify and differentiate between pastoralist and forest traits and to characterize the cultural contributions of the Han peoples as well as those of mixed Han identity, known as haner (sons of Han), living under conquest rule.²

What does examining the lives of Liao and Jin women contribute to our knowledge of China and East Asia? Even though the Liaoshi and Jinshi are
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included in the twenty-five canonical histories, they have traditionally been
deprecated by China scholars and consequently the women in their pages have
been largely ignored. Customs and traditions regarding gender that were es-
tablished during this period anticipate later social developments. Women liv-
ing under the conquest dynasties enjoyed agency and power; they forged their
own cultural identities. They are important for their own sakes and the stories
they tell. They were the true warrior women of Chinese history.

Bred and taught by warriors, Kitan and Jurchen women became warriors
themselves. They possessed an exceptional degree of agency, assertiveness, and
power, combined, perhaps surprisingly, with Confucian education, literacy,
and Buddhist piety. Agency included the ability to make their own decisions
about such matters as the selection of marriage partners or alternatives when
widowed. Power accrued to empresses who became regents for child emper-
ors and took over direction of the civil affairs of government and to women
in other positions of authority in military activities, political situations, or
circumstances involving ethical choices. Women living under the conquest
dynasties were discriminating in those aspects of Chinese culture that they
chose to adopt. Some women from states south of the Liao realm were cul-
ture bearers who brought Confucian learning to the northern regions. Those
of Chinese background living north of the border preserved their native cul-
tures within their homes, while many Kitan pastoralist women living in yurts
proudly followed indigenous lifestyles of herding. The Jurchen, by contrast,
rapidly assimilated Chinese culture, language, and literacy. The resulting ten-
sion between accommodation and preservation figures throughout the pages
of this work. These elements were crucial in shaping women’s identities.

The opening Liaoshi quotation goes on to single out empresses Ying-
tian, Chengtian, and Renyi as exemplars of warrior women. Empress Chun-
qin, better known as Empress Dowager Yingtian (878–953), assisted the first
Liao emperor, Abaoji (r. 907–926), in military matters and famously refused
to comply with the steppe custom of following in death. Instead she cut off
her right hand and placed it on the emperor’s coffin as a promise to join him
later. Thereafter, as regent, she dominated the selection of the next emperor
and commanded her own military division. Empress Ruizhi, better known
as Empress Dowager Chengtian (954–1009), ruled as regent for her son, Em-
peror Shengzong (r. 982–1031), for nearly thirty years and personally led Liao
troops to victory at the Battle of Chanyuan in 1004 against the Song. She
exerted great power both as a military leader and in administering the state. Renyi, the wife of Emperor Xingzong (r. 1031–1055), discovered and put down a rebellious plot against the emperor. She also accompanied him in battles. This list of exceptional women is not complete without the Jin-dynasty bandit-leader Yang Miaozhen (d. 1234?), who led troops for and against the Song, Mongols, and Jin at various points in the confused border wars in Shandong at the end of the era. Although from a Han Chinese family, she adopted the conquest identity. She is remembered as a traitorous villain in Song-dynasty sources and a heroine in Jin history.

Many conquest-dynasty women adopted selected aspects of Chinese culture and Confucian ethics. For example, Changge, one of the women described in the chapter on virtuous women in the Liaoshi, used her literary skills to rebuff unwanted suitors and wielded moral authority when she accompanied her brother in exile, an example of loyalty. Other women were able to make independent contributions to Buddhist temples, indicating that they had sufficient independent income to manage their own resources and money. Still others were themselves well educated and brought up their children in the Confucian classics to become emperors and statesmen.

One of the main themes in this book is the interaction between the cultures of Kitan and Jurchen women and the culture of the Han Chinese living in Liao and Jin territory, examining how these cultures interacted in women’s realms and how each affected the other. In asserting agency and power and in their adoption of Chinese values or preservation of indigenous culture, Liao and Jin women to a large extent shaped their own identities. This book examines the ways in which women’s identities changed over time as they negotiated between cultures, adopting and adapting certain cultural characteristics while discarding others.

Gender roles were constructed differently among conquest peoples of the north compared with the Han population of the south. Historians have long recognized that women in steppe and pastoralist societies enjoyed more authority than their counterparts in the sedentary and urban settings of China. Marriage customs, female sexuality, and the fates of widows contrasted markedly with the conventional standards for feminine behavior in the Chinese realm. As early as the fifth century, one Chinese scholar noted that among the barbarians, “married women are chaste and virtuous; unmarried women are promiscuous and loose in morals.” Such behaviors were closely tied to steppe
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conventions regarding women. A seminal 1978 article by Herbert Franke identifies a number of the salient characteristics of Liaoyin, Jin, and Mongol women in the dynasties of conquest. Franke and later authors have noted that women in conquest dynasties had more autonomy and authority than women in neighboring societies. No seclusion was practiced, and women had public roles in military, government, and economic activities.

Scholars who examine marriage customs and widow chastity in the Yuan and Ming periods, for example, might ask whether the origins of these customs go further back, to the Liaoyin and Jin periods, where following in death and levirate marriage practices obliged women to turn to Buddhist retreat and chaste widowhood as alternatives. Discussions of marriage, tombs, and joint burials in the Song are similarly incomplete without considering Liaoyin and Jin examples. This study relates women’s individual stories and sets them in the social and cultural context of the period. Thus, the Liaoyin empresses Yingtian and Chengtian and the Jin heroine Yang Miaozhen are placed in the context of contemporary conventions regarding sexuality and widowhood for the first time here. The success of the Liaoyin and Jin empires lent legitimacy to Mongol rule in the thirteenth century and Qing rule in the seventeenth century. Women of the conquest dynasties are important for the ways in which they offer an alternative model of feminine history in China.

This study examines the unique characteristics of these women of the Liaoyin and Jin states in the context of social and gender history from the tenth through the thirteenth centuries, seeking to determine how such traits applied to individual women and how they negotiated between cultures to establish their own identities. Their attainments refute the conventional derogatory stereotypes, in evidence since the days of Sima Qian, that “barbarians” were inferior, illiterate, and primitive. In addition to feats of martial heroism, women were also singled out as role models and commemorated in biographies for honoring steppe customs. But at the same time, they were praised for their education, literary achievements, and Confucian ideals. Women of the conquest dynasties combined the wu (martial) side of steppe culture with the wen (cultural) side of Chinese tradition.

The women of the Liaoyin and Jin states populating the chapters of this book had identity and integrity in their own right and deserve to be better known. These women were energetic and respected participants in their own societies. Kitan and Jurchen women present a model for the famously elusive myth of
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the warrior woman. The customs Kitan and Jurchen women followed and the precedents they set were echoed in the succeeding conquest dynasties. Cultures in these different groupings were malleable and in constant change. Although indigenous culture might be established at birth or learned during childhood, women shaped their own identities through marriage, education, and religion, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes deliberately. As women of the frontier, they lived in the transient zones between societies and negotiated skillfully among steppe and forest customs and Han Chinese values.

The Setting and the Peoples

The inner Asian frontiers where the Kitan, baner, and Jurchen lived had historically been inhabited by many peoples, whose movements spanned hundreds of thousands of square miles. This zone was a middle ground where goods, services, language, and cultural artifacts were exchanged, modified, and returned to be assimilated in new forms, and where no single orthodoxy prevailed. The Liao and Jin territories included the steppes of Mongolia and the rolling plains and forests of Manchuria as far as the northern edges of the Korean kingdom of Koryo. The geography ranged from semidesert in the west to grazing pastures in the eastern areas, agricultural lands in the river valleys, and summer pastures in the mountains. In Sima Qian’s celebrated words, pastoralists in these regions “move their abode following the water and the grass.” Tribal peoples had contended over these lands and fought with one another for millennia. Borders were fluid and transient. As Owen Lattimore has observed, the inland borders of China can be visualized as a “series of frontier zones, varying in depth from south to north . . . and stretching away indefinitely into the plains and mountains and forests.” Conquest dynasties occupied, seized, fought over, defended, and extended their control over these lands. No Great Wall existed to fix a border in the tenth to twelfth centuries, as it would in the Ming dynasty. People spoke in colloquial terms of “north of the mountains” or “east of the [Liao] river” or the “Yan-Yun” (referring to two of the famous Sixteen Prefectures) but not of “within” or “beyond” a wall.

These lands had been home to the Xiongnu in Qin and Han times, were taken over by the Xianbei, occupied by the Kitan and Jurchen, and by the Mongols and Manchus in centuries to come. Kitan tribesmen had been active
since Tang times. By the tenth century, tribal peoples included the Huihu, Kitan, and Xi in many separate tribes in the western territories, and the Moho, Wugu, Nüzhen, and others in the eastern regions. The Kitan in particular were exquisitely sensitive to distinctions between clans, tribes, and states; the Liaoshi lists over three hundred nations and peoples that sent tribute missions to the Liao court—more than in any other dynastic history. Tribute states included Song China, Japan, Korea, and even Persia.\footnote{18}

In these societies, both men and women rode horseback, lived in easily portable yurts or tents, and herded livestock, living off their flocks and herds. They moved across the rivers, valleys, mountains, and grasslands, contesting for control of grazing rights and sometimes invading the agricultural territories to the south. Pastoralists and forest dwellers belonged to a broad stratum of outsiders the Chinese disparagingly called barbarians. But this term is an inadequate translation for a more nuanced set of expressions, which identified outsiders according to north, west, east, or south. Horse-riding pastoralists from Mongolian and Manchurian lands were “westerners” (hu). Few Chinese dynastic histories recorded the actual names of such tribes or their affiliations, an omission signifying Chinese disdain. Song envoys routinely used the disparaging term lu (caitiffs) when referring to them.\footnote{19} Conversely, persons of Chinese background living in the frontier zone adopted many aspects of the conquest people and came to be seen by their compatriots to the south as no longer fully Chinese. They were variously known as Han, or banren (Chinese), fan (foreigners), or baner to the Kitan, Jurchen, and Song alike, depending on their geographic origins and cultural identity, and thus indicating their subordinate status vis-à-vis the conquerors.\footnote{20}

The identities of conquest peoples were as shifting as the landscape. Different groups sometimes merged or made alliances, while at other times these same groups were in conflict. People adapted to cultural and environmental conditions, variously reacting against Chinese states to the south or embracing Chinese culture. Always there existed a tension between indigenous cultural characteristics and accommodation to “the other.” The process worked in both directions as Kitan and Jurchen women embraced different aspects of Chinese culture and the Han and baner residents in the conquest states accommodated to the culture of their rulers and became more “barbarized.”

Distinctions between the Kitan and Jurchen are perhaps best illustrated in terms of their successors. The Kitan were related linguistically to the later
Mongols, who founded the Yuan dynasty, whereas the Jurchen were the direct ancestors of the Manchus, who established the Qing dynasty. Language is an important cultural indicator, and insofar as it can be reconstructed, the Kitan language, known mainly from stele inscriptions, had no close cognate language. Some words were similar to those in Middle Mongolian, and many loanwords from Chinese have been found. Joseph Greenberg groups Kitan with the Mongolian branch of the larger Altaic language group. Thus, both in language and in their pastoralist lifestyles, the Kitan resembled the Mongols, although the degree of such linguistic connections has not been established. In addition to his work translating Kitan inscriptions, Daniel Kane has also identified a variant of Chinese employed by the haner residents in Liao territory and by members of the Liao court he calls Liao Chinese. Chapter 2, which investigates Liao daily life, also examines aspects of these languages in greater detail.

The Jurchen originated as hunters and fishers in the eastern Manchurian forests, combining herding with basic agriculture in a semisedentary lifestyle. They emerged as a major force in the eleventh century. The Jurchen language stemmed from the southern Tungusic branch of Altaic and was the direct precursor of Manchu. The Kitan and Jurchen peoples differed in respect to agriculture, urbanization, burial customs, hairstyles, dress, and degree of adoption of Chinese culture, but in other respects, such as mounted warfare and marriage practices, they were quite similar. The Kitan maintained and celebrated their pastoralist traditions to the end of the dynasty. They adhered to customary governance by tribal aristocracy in the Northern Circuit but maintained a separate, Chinese-style administration for the Southern Circuit, which was made up of the Sixteen Prefectures obtained from the Latter Jin state. The Jurchen, by contrast, followed Bohai and Chinese traditions and rapidly evolved into a Chinese-style state—so rapidly that the fifth Jin emperor, Shizong, instituted a revival effort to capture the old Jurchen vigor and language, a topic discussed in chapter 3.

Modern historians have sometimes used the term “ethnicity” in describing the tribal groups of inner Asia. There is a danger, however, in using a modern construct to describe a premodern society. “Ethnicity” invokes indigenous, immutable qualities such as ancestry, environment, tribal affiliations, customs, religion, clothing and hairstyles, and language. But the term has modern overtones relating to race and can be pejorative, implying that ethnic
groups are inferior or more primitive than a more “civilized” group. In the ever-shifting landscape and malleable identities covered in the present study, this term is too broad and too static. Distinctions among these peoples and between the northern and southern residents of the Liao and Jin states were subtle, transient, and too elusive to be captured by the term “ethnicity.” A more flexible and nuanced approach using the general term “culture” better serves the needs of the present examination. Following the lead of the chapters on tribute states in the Liaoshi, the steppe peoples are called by their proper names.

“Culture,” a term that occurs frequently in this study, is often taken to involve acquired aspects of Han Chinese culture, among which are literacy and philosophy and can include religious beliefs and customs. “Culture” is used in this sense in the current study but also in a broader sense. It can include both inherited and acquired aspects; it can be constructed and is easily transferable. It is both integral to a given people or society and highly mutable. Kitan women’s culture, for example, could encompass steppe practices such as following in death and levirate while also embracing selected aspects of Confucian learning and ethics. A woman like Concubine Xiao, whose story is told in chapter 1, could be adept at riding and hunting and at poetry and painting at the same time without being exceptional.

At a time when in Song China the sexes were separated from childhood and women were increasingly becoming sequestered inside their homes, as shown in Patricia Ebrey’s classic work The Inner Quarters, Liao and Jin women were hunting from horseback and conducting military campaigns. In spite of the acceptance of certain Confucian moral virtues, women in the Liaoshi chapter on exemplary women (lienü) were singled out for following their husbands in death, and heroines described in the Jinshi chapters were also honored for their military leadership and personal courage. Liao and Jin women shared some customs, including bride-price payments in lieu of dowries and levirate for widows. Judging from their tombs, Kitan women maintained pastoralist traits throughout the dynasty. Jin society, however, readily adopted Han culture, a process that was greatly aided by Jurchen leaders who married acculturated women from the former Bohai state. But the chapter on feminine virtue in the Jinshi nonetheless honors martial women who defended cities and raised the flags of fallen male leaders; indeed, the bandit-leader Yang Miaozhen was considered a heroine. Kitan, Jurchen, and
Han women each mediated between cultures in different ways. Many of these traits passed into the Mongol and Manchu cultures. The birth of a girl was not a matter for regret in Liao and Jin society, in which daughters carried no dowries but were married out in return for generous gifts from the new spouse and his family. The prominence of women in the Liao period is marked by the large number of elaborate tombs in which a woman is the only occupant or the more important member of a couple.

Women crossed geographic and cultural borders simply by living in place while borders shifted or through marriage or abduction. Marriages between Han and Kitan, Kitan and Xi during the Liao, or between Jurchen and Bohai were designed to secure allies and advance political ambitions. Meanwhile, many Han Chinese from border states such as the Latter Tang and Latter Jin joined the Liao and served loyally. When southern women married northerners, they, like the legendary Lady Wenji, brought with them the Han literary culture. Confucian philosophy and other customs of the “civilized” south were transferred to the north—although, it must be emphasized—selectively.

Culture Bearers

The martial skills for which Liao and Jin women were celebrated invite comparison to the celebrated tale of Mulan, a girl who fought in the army while concealing her gender. Although numerous variations exist, including today’s Disney version, in the original tale, Mulan was a woman of the borderlands. She fought for a khan, not an emperor, and after the war was over, the khan rewarded her with a fast camel to ride home. Appealing though this image may be with its reference to steppe customs, it does not seem to have been relevant in the Liao and Jin periods. For one thing, Mulan of the story disguises herself as a man rather than adopting a military persona in her own right. Instead, the inspirational tale at this period was that of the late-Han-dynasty heroine Wenji, which has long been recognized as symbolic of Chinese relations with alien pastoralists. I have found no references to Mulan in Liao or Jin materials.

Wenji’s story comes from the chapter devoted to exemplary women in the *Hou Hanshu* (History of the Latter Han Dynasty). Named Cai Yan, she was the daughter of a Han-dynasty scholar and court official, and she became
known as Wenji (Cultured Lady) for her education and literary skills. During the chaotic political situation during the last years of the dynasty, the Xianbei of the northern frontier repeatedly raided inside the passes. On one such raid Wenji was abducted, carried off to the steppes, and forcibly married to a barbarian chieftain. Desperately miserable and bewailing her fate, she wrote she “wished to die, but found no way.” Although she mourned her homeland, she eventually became reconciled to her fate and bore two sons to her chieftain husband. Twelve years later, she was ransomed and returned home but was forced to leave her sons behind. She mourned their loss even more bitterly: “my spirit shattered, my mind crazed.” Back in Chang’an, she wrote, “Home, I found my family all gone. . . . I felt as if my life had ended.”

To the Chinese, Wenji was a heroine who never wavered in her loyalty to China, and her story was celebrated in paintings and poems throughout successive dynasties. The Wenji legend was revived in the eighth century by the Tang poet Liu Shang and again in the Song in a poem by the famous statesman Wang Anshi (1021–1086). In pictorial representations of the poems, tribesmen in the nomad camp where she was taken strongly resemble contemporary Kitan. Wenji enthusiasm reached a new high in the twelfth century, when the Song empress dowager, who had been captured by the Jin at the fall of the northern capital, was allowed to return to the Song court—giving rise to more paintings and poems recalling Wenji’s story. Clearly, for the Song the main motif of the Wenji story was her loyalty and eventual return.

To the horse-riding pastoralists of the northern frontiers, however, the Wenji story had a different meaning. Wenji and women like her mediated between the two worlds of the steppe and China. A short Jin-dynasty hand scroll depicting Wenji’s return is illustrated in figure I.1. The scroll is dated between 1200 and 1209 and was executed by a Jin court artist, painted in color on silk. In the painting, Wenji is shown on her way back to the capital accompanied by servants in Jurchen costume. She is portrayed as a middle-aged matron riding with the ease of experience and a firm foot in the stirrup. The wind that forces the other figures in the work to shield their faces is welcome to Wenji, who alone faces it without protection. The Wenji of this painting is a heroic figure, emotionally and physically courageous. She was also a mother who had been forced to leave her two sons behind. Her loss is poignantly suggested by the foal accompanying the lead mare; even so lowly a creature as a horse could bring her child with her while Wenji was alone. Courage—as well
as good horsemanship—were qualities that characterized Liao and Jin heroines, as shown in the succeeding chapters.

Wenji is depicted in Jurchen attire, with a fur hat, ribbons, a belted jacket, skirt, pantaloons, and high boots. She wears the Jin imperial color yellow (now faded). By the date of the painting, the tribal or “raw” Jurchen had become so peripheralized and alien in Jin society that they could stand in as the “barbarians” who had abducted Wenji. As art historian Susan Bush has pointed out, the painting may have been intended as a moral exemplar for women in the imperial household. Wenji’s depiction as a mounted warrior woman reflects the martial roles for women in Liao and Jin cultures, while the implicit messages she bears, loyalty and filial piety, can be understood with reference to the twelfth-century Jin state, which in this representation allegorically represented the Han state, the epitome of a civilized Chinese cultural entity, to which the Jin considered itself equivalent.

The Wenji tale resonates with the women discussed in this book on a number of levels. As a woman who crossed boundaries from civilized China to pastoralist society and back, Wenji was a culture bearer and paragon of Confucian virtue. Her kidnapping parallels the Kitan and Jurchen practice of abduction marriage (a topic discussed further in chapter 4). She anticipates Lady Chen in the Liaoshi chapter on virtuous women, who came to the Liao from the Latter Tang state, and Lady Zhen, who was “obtained,” or abducted, from the Latter Tang capital by a prince who would become the Liao emperor.

Fig. I.1. Wenji gui Han, section 1. Permission of the Jilin Provincial Museum, Changchun.
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Shizong (r. 947–951), later becoming his empress. Wenji’s literary skills were embodied in Changge, a Kitan noblewoman, who wrote poetry and prose and advised government officials, and by Concubine Xiao, who composed literature and paintings that were displayed in her home. Concubine Xiao was also a skilled horsewoman who “excelled at hunting . . . who always held her shot until certain of hitting her prey.” These women negotiated between cultures and adopted selected aspects from Han culture to create new identities.

Contents

The chapters that follow examine women’s daily lives, marriage and sexuality, the choices open to widows, warrior women, and aspects of education, religion, and even the romance of one prominent empress. The first chapter begins, however, at the end of the story by examining models of virtuous women described in the Liao and Jin dynastic histories, whose exemplary behavior reflected contemporary social expectations. But these formal dynastic chronicles were compiled by Yuan historians in the mid-fourteenth century, two to three hundred years after the events and people they describe. Thus, these brief biographies were compiled at a time when values for feminine behavior might have been more heavily influenced by aspects of Confucian culture. For example, the biography of the virtuous woman Changge praises her for voluntarily accompanying her brother in political exile. Her devotion is a clear example of Confucian filial piety. But her epitaph, preserved elsewhere, omits this passage, although it agrees on the other points of her life. Perhaps the best course is to consider that the dynastic histories describe not individuals but behaviors that were admired among the conquest peoples.

Chapters 2 and 3 address the daily lives of Liao and Jin women, distinguishing between Kitan, Jurchen, and Han, each of whom embraced a different culture. The formal histories are silent on matters of daily life, but archaeology in the People’s Republic over the past thirty years has provided a wealth of materials, especially from the monumental underground mausoleums in which the Kitan elite buried their dead. Archaeological reports reveal many aspects of daily life, ranging from household artifacts to wall paintings representing contemporary persons and events, and including even the remains of the deceased as an object of study. Certain very rich archaeological resources,
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such as the tomb of Princess Chenguo, tomb number 1 at the Kulunqi cemetery of the Xiao family—which contains a wall painting depicting the marriage of an imperial princess—and the tomb of an unnamed lady at Yemaotai are discussed in this volume for the first time in the context of women’s history. In addition to the tombs of the Kitan, burials of persons with Han surnames contain a wealth of information on the daily lives of the Han and haner living under Liao and Jin rule.

The Jurchen, discussed in chapter 3, lacked a monumental tomb tradition, and the few Jurchen burials that have been excavated are no more than rectangular graves containing few artifacts and no wall paintings. The imperial Jin tombs located outside present-day Beijing, which might have contained more information, were systematically destroyed in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Jurchen daily life must therefore be reconstructed largely from literary sources and extant temple or scroll paintings. Tombs of people with Han surnames, however, offer more information; though smaller than Liao tombs, haner tombs contain artifacts and paintings, which reveal aspects of daily life, including clues to social class and depictions of tea in both Buddhist and secular settings. Interestingly, such tombs from the end of the Jin period contain representations of dramatic performances that anticipate theatrical developments in the Yuan dynasty.

Chapters 4 and 5 investigate aspects of betrothal, marriage, and widowhood, beginning with premarital sexuality, which earned Kitan and Jurchen women a reputation for promiscuity. Marriage patterns are examined, with attention to both major and minor forms of marriage. Conventions pertaining to widowhood and chastity are the subject of chapter 5. Beginning with the ancient steppe custom of following in death, it examines the practice of levi-rate remarriage and other options that slowly developed for widows, including chaste widowhood and retreat into Buddhist sanctuaries.

Chapter 6 explores the lives of warrior women, focusing on the Liao empresses Yingtian, Chengtian, and the Jin-dynasty bandit-leader Yang Miaozhen. The primary sources from which these stories are drawn are often quite vivid and have the ring of authenticity. Women were warriors in both the Liao and Jin periods, but their activities varied according to cultural identity. While Kitan and Jurchen women led armies and fought battles, women with Chinese names defended their honor in more personal ways. Chapter 7 is devoted to a discussion of women’s private affairs dealing with education, religion, and ro-
mance. It addresses how women were educated and explores women’s involvement in Buddhism and ways in which they contributed to Buddhist institutions. Private histories and Song reports allude to an affair between Empress Chengtian and her chief minister, Hann Derang, that lasted for nearly thirty years, until her death. Examination of this romance in the context of women’s sexuality and the constraints on widows, plus new archaeological discoveries, suggest that the rumors may well have been true.

The concluding chapter returns to a chronological analysis and examines the changes in Liao and Jin women over the three-hundred-year span of this study. It is not a history of steadily increasing sinicization, as earlier historians have implied, but rather a history of negotiation in which some aspects and values of predynastic life were maintained and aspects of Chinese culture, such as certain Confucian ethics, were adopted. It is also a story of the tensions between cultures. Moreover, the story widens or recedes much as the geography of Liao and Jin territories expanded and contracted historically. At the very end of the Jin period, just when we might expect to see increasing if not full adoption of Chinese characteristics, a warrior woman–bandit-general emerges to carry on the martial tradition of Kitan and Jurchen women.

Dynastic histories, private histories, travel accounts, literary works, epitaphs, and archaeological materials all contributed to the research informing this book. Each source has required different degrees of caution and interpretation. The facts that emerge show women’s lives in the Liao and Jin states to have been extraordinarily rich. Imperial Liao and Jin women enjoyed high status and many privileges unknown in the south. There is no evidence of foot binding. Women rode astride, hunted, and, on occasion, led armies. They appeared openly on the streets and were not sequestered in the home. In short, women’s lives in the north contrasted in many ways with those led by their southern sisters in Song China. But were Liao and Jin women truly unprecedented?

Note on Romanization

Chinese names and terms are given in pinyin romanization throughout this book. However, “Kitan” is used for the name 契丹 rather qidan because it has been shown to be the closest equivalent to actual pronunciation. On
the other hand, the generally accepted term “Jurchen” is used instead of the pinyin nüzhen 女真 and “Mongol” rather than menggu 蒙古. To differentiate between Han 漢, the title of the Han dynasty (used as shorthand for things Chinese and the Chinese people), and Han 韓, a surname, the surname is spelled Hann. I have used Uygur rather than the Chinese hui 回. One problem that continually crops up in studies of Chinese women is how to handle their surnames. Unmarried women were usually referred to using both given and family names without a suffix. Married women did not assume their husband’s surname but kept their natal family name followed by the suffix shì 氏. I have chosen to simply keep the Chinese terminology, shì, rather than attempt to insert the anachronistic “Mrs.” or “Miss” or the unwieldy “née.”

A Brief Survey of Liao and Jin
Geography and History

A short outline of Liao and Jin history is useful in situating the synchronic discussion in the chapters that follow.

The Qidan and Xi tribes became prominent during the Tang dynasty, when some emperors married princesses out to tribal chieftains in order to keep the peace. The Liao state was established in 907/916 by its first emperor, Abaoji, at the end of the Tang period. Although 907 is the traditional date for the establishment of the dynasty, it probably marks Abaoji’s accession as the Kitan ruler, although the state was not fully established until 916. The primary capital, Shangjing, was established early in the dynasty. In 938, Liao territory expanded with the acquisition of the celebrated Sixteen Prefectures on China’s northern borders (later reduced to fourteen) in forfeiture from the short-lived Latter Jin state, thus extending its southern reaches into modern Hebei and Shanxi provinces and including the site of modern Beijing, where the Liao built their capital Nanjing (Southern Capital; modern Beijing), which presided over the Southern Circuit. This city was more poetically known as Yanjing, after the ancient state of Yan in that region. The territory of the Liao state was organized into circuits, modeled on those of the Tang dynasty, each with its own capital. The capital of the Eastern Circuit, Dongjing (modern Liaoyang), was incorporated during the reign of the third emperor. The Liao government consisted of two parts. The four northern circuits, centered at
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Shangjing, were ruled by the emperor and preserved the pastoralist way of life with large principalities (fiefdoms) handed out to the Yelü and Xiao nobility. The Southern Circuit, in contrast, had a Chinese-style administration, headed usually by a Liao prince. It functioned as a bureaucracy and collected taxes.

Liao armies, led by the redoubtable Empress Chengtian and her son, Emperor Shengzong, defeated the Song in 1004/5, and the resulting treaty of Chanyuan, signed in the first month of the new year (February in the Western calendar), stabilized the border. The capital for the Central Circuit, Zhongjing, was constructed in the early eleventh century, and the Western Circuit capital, Xijing (modern Datong), was established in 1044, completing the capitals and circuits of the Liao state.\footnote{51}

The Jin originated with Jurchen tribes in eastern Manchuria, north of the Bohai, who became their allies in the conquest of the Liao. Jin armies, led by the first emperor, Aguda (r. 1115–1123), with help from the Bohai and the Song, conquered the Liao in the early twelfth century. The Jin then turned on their former Song allies, took the Southern Capital in 1127, and between 1123 and 1142 completed the conquest of the northern half of Song China. The Bohai remained staunch allies and were incorporated into the Jin state. By 1142, when a truce line was finally established at the Huai River, the Jin state included modern Hebei, Henan, Shanxi, and Shandong provinces, parts of Shaanxi, and even some of modern Jiangsu. It also included a large Han Chinese population in these territories. Unlike the Liao, which had two separate governments for the two regions, the Jin government, at Zhongjing, administered both Jurchen and former Song territories.

The Jin maintained circuits along lines similar to those of the Liao. The original Supreme Capital in the Shangjing Circuit, located in modern Heilongjiang province, was soon neglected in favor of the Central Circuit capital, Zhongjing, which had replaced the Liao Southern Capital on the site of present-day Beijing and became the state’s administrative center. In addition, the former Song capital at Kaifeng became the Jin Southern Capital, and the Western Capital was located where the Liao Western Capital, Xijing, had been. The Supreme Capital was briefly revived under the fifth Jin emperor, Shizong, as part of his effort to recapture Jurchen culture.

The Jurchen who lived in the southern regions acculturated rapidly to Chinese culture and customs. Under the first four emperors, the Jin state extended its borders to include much of northern Korea and deep into the
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Chinese south but gave up territory to the Xi Xia state in the west. Jin armies suffered a stunning defeat by the Song in 1160. The fourth emperor was deposed and killed as a result, and his successor, Shizong, undertook a campaign to revive Jurchen culture and, with it, Jurchen military prowess. This effort, although ultimately unsuccessful in stemming the tide of sinicization, left important remnants that would ultimately link the Jin to their descendants and successors, the later Manchus. One such souvenir is the painting of Lady Wenji accompanied by Jurchen warriors. The Jin state was attacked by the Mongols under Chinggis (Genghis) Khan as early as 1211, and sporadic attacks persisted, eating away chunks of Jin territory until 1230, when the Mongols, under the sons of Chinggis Khan, invaded en masse. The Jin finally capitulated in 1234. The Jin imperial cemetery lies outside modern Beijing.