

Linda Cooke Johnson. *Women of the Conquest Dynasties: Gender and Identity in Liao and Jin China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. 254pp. ISBN 9780824834043 (hardcover).

Women of the Conquest Dynasties engenders a synchronic analysis of the multi-layered lives and socially constructed identities of the women, “deprecated” and “largely ignored” by China scholars (p. xviii), who enrich the pages of the *Liaoshi* (Official History of Liao) and *Jinshi* (Official History of Jin). While the introduction delineates the purpose, central focus, and outline of the book, the conclusion provides a chronological, comparative counterpoint to the remaining seven concurrent, topically-organized chapters. With explicit attention to reliable primary and secondary sources provided, these chapters focus on the different issues surrounding conquest-dynasty women’s lives over a three-hundred year period. Issues covered in the substantive chapters of the work include daily lives, sexuality and marriage, widowhood and chastity, and exemplary and warrior women. The volume’s key contributions are explicit comparisons between Liao, Jin, Han, and *haner* (of mixed Han ethnicity) women; alternative interpretations of primary and secondary sources to fill research gaps in these women’s lives; and the application of a social constructivist lens to the ways these women selectively employed forest, pastoralist, and Chinese customs to agentially forge their own cultural identities. These key contributions will be of broader interest to scholars of Chinese history, of China studies, of gender and comparative gender studies, of Chinese archaeology and anthropology, and of women’s studies.

The first and sixth substantive chapters discuss women who stood out as worthy of notice: exemplary and warrior women. Drawing from multiple sources containing *lienü zhuan* (Biographies of Exemplary Women), Chapter One examines the didactic function of women’s lives in these accounts, the precedents of virtuous women in earlier accounts, and the ways women exercised agency in their negotiating between “Han Chinese values and values of the steppe and the forest” (p. 3). As in Chapter Six, the Confucian Chinese ideals of women as virtuous mothers and as culture bearers are combined but also in tension with the Liao and Jin ideals of women following (husbands) in death and martial leadership. As with the diverse women highlighted in Chapter One, the differences among the feminine virtues of the warrior women in Chapter Six also may be dependent on ethnicity and class status. Finding precedents for the martial actions of women of the Liao and Jin periods in the histories of the Song, Yuan, and Xixia states is a key focus of Chapter Six. Investigating the lives of Empress Yingtian and

Empress Dowager Chengtian, both of Liao nobility, and Yang Miaozen, a Jin dynasty warrior woman, the chapter suggests the differences in histories, for example between the *Songshi* (Official History of Song) and *Jinshi* accounts of Yang Miaozen, reflect the context dependence of women's idealized virtues. Yang Miaozen "behaved like a Liao-Jin conquest woman" (p. 138). Whether she lived up to a given set of cultural or moral standards was a more context-related issue.

Chapters Two and Three offer a detailed reconstruction and cross-chapter comparisons of the daily lives of Liao, Jin and Han or *haner* women. Drawing from pictorial and archaeological evidence, Chapter Two demonstrates the importance and high status of women in Liao life and the keeping of traditional pastoralist customs. The tomb wall depictions of daily life that show life on the frontier with limited intrusion of Chinese culture are in contradistinction to Song dynasty paintings of "barbarian," "generic," perhaps "stereotypical" tribesmen devoid of the vibrancy contained in the tomb murals. Chapter Three relies more on literary sources than archaeological ones given their scarcity. Chinese cultural influence spread rapidly among the Jin elite, so expectations of women contained both Jurchen (or traditional forest) and Confucian ideals of feminine virtue. Han acculturation is more evident in Jin than in Liao contexts so actions of Jurchen women, such as excessive drinking with men at feasts, was in greater tension with Chinese morality, so "the daily lives of Jin women varied according to whether they embraced Han, *haner*, or Jurchen culture" (p. 77). The Jin Dynasty saw a rise in companionate marriage, but Jin women may have had less independent agency in comparison to Liao women.

Chapters Four, Five, and Seven delineate the more intimate details of women living under the Liao and Jin rule. In terms of sexuality and marriage (Chapter Four), Liao and Jin women enjoyed a degree of sexual latitude prior to marriage, but became the property of their husband and his family upon marriage. This practice shocked Song dynasty visitors, as did the presence of women in public. Liao and Jin women did not bind their feet, but abduction and wife stealing was practiced under the conquest dynasties, most particularly among the Jin. Marriage customs varied among the women living under Liao and Jin rule, but after marriage the control of women's sexuality was as crucial as in Confucian custom. The Liao and Jin practiced polygamy and both observed exogamy in marriage. Over time, both the Liao and Jin came to follow the Chinese practice of one wife and one or more concubines, rather than multiple wives. In terms of widowhood and chastity (Chapter Five), Liao and Jin women negotiated among the mix of

steppe, forest, and Confucian customs. For instance, Kitan widows facing the practice of following in death, looked to the Chinese practice of not remarrying and staying in their homes to raise their children. In contrast to the strictness of behavior expected of widows, the Liao and Jin were lenient on issues of divorce and remarriage after divorce. Moreover, the increase in the number of Han Chinese women in cities during the Liao and Jin times may have meant more opportunities for Kitan and Jurchen women to become chaste widows or Buddhist nuns to avoid their own less appealing traditions.

Chapter seven addresses the private issues of religion, education, and romance. Despite the high status, respect, and leniency afforded to Liao and Jin women in some matters, education and religion were still private for them. If women were educated, they knew Chinese and also became desirable in marriage. Chinese education was more fully developed under the Jin than the Liao. While Liao and Jin women were syncretic in their religious practices, Buddhist practices show the importance of faith in their lives and the ability to make donations in their own names, an aspect of female agency. Buddhism also emphasized the saving of female, not just male souls. Finally, an analysis of Empress Chengtian and Hann Derang's romance supports this tale's telling as historical and not just fabricated; the tale's aspects also fit with the Kitan practices on sexuality and marriage discussed in previous chapters. This final analysis seems a bit out of place with the format of the other chapters, but is in keeping with the book's overall focus. Readers might have appreciated more comparative aspects across chapters, as demonstrated by Chapters Two and Three. However, this suggestion in no way detracts from the volume's detailed analysis, painstaking construction of daily life, significant research contribution, and reinterpretation of historical sources in order to illuminate the liminal context of women's lives under the conquest dynasties.

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