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Book Review: Women of the Conquest Dynasties: Gender and Identity in Liao and Jin China

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Women of the Conquest Dynasties: Gender and Identity in Liao and Jin China
2011. Linda Cooke Johnson. Hawai'i, University of Hawai'i Press.
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Reviewed by Elmé Vivier¹

Between the 10th and 13th centuries, the north-eastern region of China constituted a “frontier zone” where diverse cultures, languages and goods intermingled and “where no single orthodoxy prevailed” (xxi). The two conquest dynasties of this time were the Liao and Jin, established by the Kitan and Jurchen tribes respectively, both of whom were predominantly pastoralist and militaristic.

In *Women of the Conquest Dynasties*, Linda Cooke Johnson examines the lives of the Liao (Kitan) and Jin (Jurchen) warrior women as they negotiated the tension between ‘self’ and ‘other’ which characterised both inter-cultural and gender relations. One of the main themes of the book is the ways in which these women managed the often contesting cultural norms between the Kitan and Jurchen, on the one hand, and the Han Chinese on the other. Accommodation and preservation, Johnson argues, “were crucial in shaping women’s identities” (xviii). Interestingly, it is precisely in the selective adoption of new customs alongside the preservation of indigenous (Kitan or Jurchen) practices and values that Johnson locates the power and agency of these women (xix).

Structurally, Johnson undertakes a synchronic exposition of the Liao and Jin feminine ideals (Chapter 1), of the daily experiences of Liao and Jin women (Chapters 2 and 3), and of specific practices and institutions defining the lives of Liao and Jin women (Chapters 4-7). Sources include historical and other literary texts, archaeological excavations of tombs and temples, and prominent art pieces, amongst others. This ensures the scope, breadth and reliability of Johnson’s understanding of the period. One of the strengths of the book is the way in which the author uses these diverse sources to reflect on the complexities of cultural identity and cross-cultural engagement. Both narrative contradictions and parallels across sources reiterate the shifting landscape of identity. Johnson also takes into account the hermeneutic role of the author/artist who is sometimes an ‘outsider’ (in terms of time and place) and thus conveys as much about the subject (Liao and/or Jin society) as about his own society’s views thereof.

The general argument of the book resonates with one particular artwork, a Jin-dynasty scroll from around 1200 called *Wenji gui Han* (xxvii). The painting depicts the legend of Wenji, a Han Chinese woman who was abducted and taken to the steppes where she was “forcibly married to a barbarian chieftain” (xxvi). Although despondent, Wenji eventually adapts to her new situation and builds a family. In the painting, Wenji is returning home (in this case to the sinicized Jin capital), although she must leave her two sons behind. This legend appears in the History of the Latter Han Dynasty, later poems and paintings, of which the Jin painting is one example. To the Chinese, Wenji’s story is one of loyalty. But in the Jin painting Wenji is dressed in Jurchen warrior attire and is riding a horse, thus affirming the warrior culture of the Jin and their values of courage and good horsemanship (xxvii, 171). Johnson identifies Wenji as a “culture bearer”. Indeed her story and its double message encapsulate the book’s primary motif and

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Johnson employs her as a point of reference. In various ways, the many women that she examines reflect the story of Wenji.

The book begins with an examination of the historical accounts of exemplary women provided in official dynastic histories. The purpose is to show how feminine virtues defined by the Kitan and Jurchen either cohered with or incorporated the values of other cultures. In the history on Liao women, five noble women are presented. They are praised for their literacy and education, their filial devotion, and their observance of the steppe tradition of following their husbands in death (committing suicide). The latter constitutes a common Liao tradition, whilst the study of the Classics reflects Confucian values. In the Jin history, women are honoured for displaying martial skills and widows are praised for committing acts of suicide, either to honour their husbands or to preserve their own chastity in the face of possible rape. Again, both indigenous custom and Confucian virtues are at play. For Johnson, these historical texts reveal the societal integration between the warrior cultures and Confucian customs, as well as individual selectivity in negotiating between them. Thus she finds in these examples evidence of women's agency and the ability to act on their own behalf (22).

Chapters 2 and 3 explore Liao and Jin women's daily lives as can be gathered from tomb artefacts, murals and some extant art works of the period. Kitan tombs generally portray a pastoralist lifestyle. Many of the tombs display a single female occupant or a prominent female alongside her partner (34). Chambers are donned with murals and artefacts confirming the centrality of horsemanship and military activity, as well as various household items. The burial customs preserved in these tombs also suggest a mix of religious values, often a combination of Buddhist or Daoist rituals with tribal shamanistic ceremonies such as animal sacrifice (39). According to Johnson, these tombs confirm the extent to which the tasks and responsibilities of Kitan women overlapped with those of men. The tombs also memorialise the traditional values and customs of the steppe pastoralists.

Chapter 2 further contrasts the daily activities and roles of Kitan women with that of *haner* women. The *haner* (Han Chinese living under Liao rule) were considered subordinate to the Kitan and were thus subject to various forms of discrimination by the Liao state. Interestingly, the tombs of elite *haner* families reveal the ways in which the *haner* also negotiated the tensions between the two cultures. These show how *haner* women in particular preserved and passed on Han Chinese customs and values. For example, pastoralist and horse-riding elements of the Kitan are confined to the outer chambers and juxtapose the more feminine and domestic features of *haner* culture displayed in the inner chambers (48-9).

For Johnson, *haner* women clearly had less agency than Kitan women, spending much more time fulfilling domestic duties. And yet, it is precisely the *haner* women who "acted as culture conservators in preserving Han culture in the home" (48). Paintings from within various *haner* tombs distinguish between a central female figure dressed in traditional Chinese silks on the one hand, and the servants and children in Kitan-style clothing on the other. Since *haner* men are shown combining the two styles, Johnson argues that the cultural heritage of the *haner* was maintained through the women of the household. "In this respect too these women echo Wenji, who preserved her Han culture under demanding circumstances" (49).

But Johnson does not further expand on the possible reasons of this role of *haner* women, and the reader is left wondering. Is it perhaps because they remained primarily in the home and were thus protected from the public space that *haner* women were able to retain their culture more fully? If *haner* men had to partake in public life, did they experience the tension between cultures more strongly and thus had to better accommodate both? Although addressing these questions may fall beyond the scope of this text and drawing such inferences is indeed difficult, some preliminary discussion on these questions would contribute to the broader themes of the book.

The daily lives and activities of Jurchen and *haner* women living under Jin rule is the focus of Chapter 3. In general, the Jurchen were more sedentary than the Liao and intermarriage between the Jurchen and other cultural groups was common. This ensured rapid assimilation of Chinese culture within the daily lives and identities of the Jurchen (67). Again, *haner* tombs from the period show a kind of role reversal between ruler and ruled, with *haner* women in Chinese styles depicted as upper class, and their servants appearing in Jurchen attire. *Haner* men also appear in a mixture of styles similar to the Liao period (78). Literary sources indicate that Jin women enjoyed a degree of agency as they were free to consult with their husbands on political matters and to appear in public and participate in parties (65). However, Johnson concludes that Jin women may have had less agency and power than Liao women, especially in shaping their identities (79).

In Chapters 4 and 5, Johnson examines the attitudes towards women in Jin and Liao societies in terms of sexuality, marriage and widowhood. The warrior women of this period enjoyed sexual freedom and a degree of choice in marriage. The groom and his family were required to pay a “bride price” for both the betrothal and the wedding. This contrasted with the Chinese practice of the bride’s family paying a dowry, and thus Jurchen and Kitan women were considered assets rather than burdens to their families. However, once married the woman and her children would essentially become the property of the man and his family. Chastity was not a prerequisite for marriage and abduction marriage was common, as was the exchange of women across societies as a form of diplomacy (96). Although the author does not explicitly discuss the implications of this practice, this may be one of the reasons why women in particular experienced the tension between cultures and the pressure to adapt and preserve the customs and values of each.

Interestingly, divorce and remarriage after divorce was accepted and common practice among the Liao and Jin, yet widows were held to strict rules regarding remarriage. The options available to widows were primarily to follow in death or to remarry within the family (levirate remarriage). Over time, chastity and Buddhist retreat also became more common (111-2), another sign of the selective adoption of the values of the ‘other’. The author notes that it is not clear to what extent women were able to make their own decisions, especially with regards to widowhood (120).

Some women are exemplary in the ways in which they reinterpreted customary practices, often contributing to the eventual transformation of social values. One example is of Empress Dowager Yingtian who cut off her hand instead of following her husband in death. However, Johnson still finds evidence of women abandoning certain practices while still following other established conventions. Thus the question, still relevant today, arises: is one free if one consciously chooses to follow tradition? That Johnson identifies *selective* adaptation and preservation of values suggests that she may respond in the

affirmative. Indeed, it seems to be precisely in their capacity to identify and select particular values and pathways that each woman styles herself and her culture in small but unique and significant ways. A related question is also raised in the conclusion, namely how to measure the many freedoms enjoyed by Liao and Jin women given the restrictions simultaneously placed upon them? These questions reiterate the difficulties in situating individual agency and adaptation within larger processes of societal change.

Chapter 6 focuses on three remarkable warrior women who exemplified military prowess, political astuteness and sexual assertiveness. These individual stories reiterate the Liao and Jin virtues discussed in Chapter 1, as well as the selective negotiation between the martial values of the steppe and forest and the Confucian values of the Han. Importantly, the author here notes that an “intrinsic problem” with her study is the lack of information on lower-class women (139). Although reliable sources of information may be unavailable, the author continuously raises such thought-provoking questions but does not speculate as to possible scenarios. For instance, Liao and Jin armies may have comprised a large female section, which would suggest that martial skill was an important cross-cutting skill. Although this is simply speculation, an expert contribution to such a discussion could contribute to the intrigue of the narrative whilst taking into account the complexity and inconclusiveness thereof.

Education, religion and romance comprise the chapter on private affairs. Both women’s education and religious devotion, Johnson argues, further illuminate the ways in which women negotiated between different value systems. Being educated meant knowing the Chinese language and studying Chinese classics. That scholarship was highly valued in both Liao and Jin states thus indicates the extent to which these societies, in varying ways and degrees, adopted certain Han Chinese institutions. With regards to women’s education, Kitan women enjoyed much more equality in education than Jurchen women. The former were educated alongside men whilst the latter were educated separately in accordance with Confucian practice (148).

Historical evidence also shows a significant role and interest of women in religion. Elite women made donations to Buddhist construction projects which, the author argues, indicates “that women could bestow money and material property in their own names and that they had both the will and the independent agency to do so” (151).

Finally, the story of the romance between Empress Dowager Chengtian and her Grand Councillor Hann Derang is discussed. Although this story remains an issue of scholarly debate, Johnson argues that if one takes into account the cultural context of Liao society, its flexible attitudes regarding women’s sexuality, the strict expectations of widows, and the agency and assertiveness shown by imperial women, then the story is indeed plausible. However, she also acknowledges that the story has been recorded by men from the Northern Song period and thus may be imbued with their own cultural values and critiques (161). The author thus raises a final and important issue, namely the lack of women’s scholarly, artistic and personal accounts (162).

In the concluding chapter, the issue of the lack of women’s voices is again raised. Although some poems are attributed to female authors, according to Johnson we have no way of being certain of the authors (180). However, she still concludes that the concept and role of gender was “constructed differently in the Liao and Jin states than in [the more patriarchal] Song China” (179). “These women offer an alternative model of womanhood” (*ibid.*), and specifically one in which women possess greater independence,

agency and political and martial skill. Johnson further suggests potential causal links, admits critical omissions, and raises some of the pertinent questions elicited by her exploration of Liao and Jin warrior women.

The conclusion also provides a chronological account of the individuals discussed throughout the book, noting how each negotiated the tensions between indigenous and Han Chinese cultural values. Although a bit repetitive, this approach allows for a comparative analysis of the women in order to trace broader, societal patterns of preservation and adaptation. According to Johnson, “the more macho and martial conduct of conquest-dynasty males allowed female identity to develop in more independent, martial, and assertive ways” (176). She also wonders as to the extent to which the manners of the warrior women in the north may have motivated stricter management of girls and women in the Song and Ming periods (181).

Overall the book is a rich source of information on three centuries of Liao and Jin rule. Johnson incorporates individual stories within the larger social narrative and addresses a vast array of pertinent cultural elements, from the role of language and the use of public space to the relationship between attire and class distinctions. Any reader is assured a better understanding of feminine history and identity in China. Although this review does not do justice to the exemplary individuals recognized in this book, the author provides a superb account of their stories, illuminating their personal agency in both thought and action, as well as the broader social contexts and processes in which they lived. It also illuminates the ways in which identities form through a confrontation with the other and in a process of self-affirmation and self-negation.

Women of the Conquest Dynasties is likely to appeal to readers from diverse fields of study, including history, art history, Chinese studies, gender studies, cross-cultural studies, as well as archaeology, anthropology and ethnography.