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Was Töregene Qatun Ögödei’s “Sixth Empress”?

I. de Rachewiltz

In 1955, Professor Ts’ai Mei-piao (Cai Meibiao) published for the first time, among other interesting documents of the Yuan period, the earliest known Sino-Mongolian inscription, dating from 1240.

The Mongolian text, consisting of only three lines, is purely formulaic, validating, as it were, together with the imperial seal, the contents of the Chinese text, which is an edict in thirteenth-century vernacular.

This Sino-Mongolian inscription has been the subject of three articles, by F. W. Cleaves (1960–61), myself (1981) and Ts’ai Mei-piao (1989).

The edict in question is to the effect that: (1) Tu Feng, Civil Administration Officer of Ch’in-chou, be appointed Commissioner-in-charge to oversee the cutting of the printing blocks of the Taoist Canon and the construction of a building for this purpose; (2) Tu Feng’s wife take over this charge, should Tu Feng lack the time to carry it out himself; and (3) no-one, regardless of whether it be the personnel of the apanage-holders’ administration or any other officials interfere with it. The edict ends with the formula “If one contravenes (this order), he shall be punished for his transgression. Respect this.” This warning is repeated in the Mongolian text.

The edict was jointly issued on the seventeenth day of the third month.

1 Ts’ai Mei-piao, Yuán-tái pai-hua pei chi-lu 元代白话碑集錄 (Peking, 1955), pl.ll. The character lu 路 in line 4 of the inscription has been inadvertently left out in the printed text on p. 7 of Ts’ai’s edition (no. 6), and the character 騷 in line 4 of the printed text is a misprint for 搽.


I consider the sentence to be rhetorical as it is common in this kind of edict, the form -situ does point to it, it expresses the possibility (Haenisch, Wörterbuch [zu Menghol un niuca toba'can, p.142]), the stem of the word being aldary, a variant form of aldal-. My tentative translation of the passage is as follows: 'If someone contravene this my command (word), should (might) he not be punished (by) the great power (of the forefathers)?' I should also add the following comment by Prof. Murakami Masatsugu 村 上 正 二 of Tokyo (in a letter dated 23 July 1981) on the expression aldary-situ of the second line rendered by Cleaves and myself as "punishable": "But concerning the term 挨答奚, I would rather refer to the Mongol term aldanggi which appears very often in the late Mongol laws and codes such as the Xalca Jirum and the Oirat laws and codes. In my opinion, aldanggi and anju have constituted the two main systems of the Mongol criminal punishments. As for the later term, as you are aware of, this term appears in the 黑skirts 事指 in the form 断案主 as the other term 挨答奚. And these terms also appear in the 元典章 ... in the form 断案主戶." For these two terms in the Hei-Ta shib-lueh, cf. Meng-Ta pei-lu und Hei-Ta shib-lueh Chinesische Gesetzenberichte über die frühen Mongolen 1221 und 1237. Nach Vorarbeiten von Erich Haenisch und Yao Ts'ung-wu übersetzt und kommentiert von Peter Olbricht und Elisabeth Pinks. Eingeleitet von Werner Banck, Asiatische Forschungen 56 (Wiesbaden, 1980), pp. 162, 164.

5 See the biography of Yeh-liu Ch'u-ts'ai (1189-1245) in I. de Rachewiltz, H.-L. Chan, C.-C. Hsiao and P. W. Geier, eds, with the assistance of the keng-tzu year, i.e. on 10 April 1240, by “The Yeke Qadun—Great Empress (Ta Huang-hou 太皇后)—who as before conducts the affairs of the Eastern Palace (tung-kung 東宮) by virtue of the Edict of the Emperor," and by “the Imperial Concubine(s) (jet-tzu 妃子).” The expression Yeke Qadun (= Qatun), lit. "Great Empress," means of course "the Greater (or Senior) Empress," i.e. the most senior among the emperor’s wives.

In 1955, Prof. Ts’ai identified this Great Empress with Töregene, the wife of Ögedei Qayan (r. 1229-41) who assumed the regency of the empire after his death (11 December 1241), and who held it until the great assembly (quriltai) of 1246 which elected her eldest son Güyük (1246-48) as the new qayan. It is known that in the latter part of his life Ögedei, because of alcoholism and ill-health, had lost interest in state affairs, and that Töregene had become increasingly involved in managing the business of government.

Prof. Ts’ai’s identification was adopted by Cleaves and myself. Indeed, I took advantage of this identification to propose an explanation for the otherwise puzzling designation in the later Chinese Yuan sources of Liu Huang-hou 六皇后 or “Sixth Empress” applied to Töregene. In view of the fact that Töregene was not the sixth wife of Ögedei but officially the second, this appellation has remained unexplained. Since she is referred to as Ta Huang-hou 大皇后 in the edict of 1240, I suggested that the character liu 六 was originally a scribal error for ta 大, and that the mistake was repeated uncritically by later historians.

In his 1987 and 1989 contributions, Prof. Ts’ai revised his earlier identification and, at the same time, tried to disprove my theory.

Ts’ai’s recent argument is that the Yeke Qadun who issued the edict is not Töregene, but Boraqin who, as we know from both the Yuän-shih and Raśid al-Din, was Ögedei’s first wife. Ts’ai claims that in 1240, when Ögedei was still alive, Töregene was his sixth wife, rather than the first one, also because the title “Sixth Empress” appears not only in the Yuän-shih, but also in other Chinese documents and inscriptions. Therefore, he claims, this cannot be a scribal error made by the compilers of the Yuän-shih. According to Ts’ai, Ögedei had six qatuns, most of whose deeds were properly recorded. They
were (in his order and Latin transcription): (1) Boraqcin, (2) Onhui, (3) Kerihi-huteni, (4) Mugai, (5) Jačin, and (6) Töregene. On the basis of the Chinese and Persian transcriptions, we can re-transcribe these names as follows: (1) Boraqčin, (2) *AIgqui (= Alyui), (3) *Kirgisteni, (4) Möge, (5) Jačin, and (6) Töregene.

Although Prof. Ts'ai indicates that his (4), i.e. Möge Qatun, may be the third or fifth qatun, his list, as it stands, is largely an extrapolation from several sources and is not supported by the bulk of the evidence—it is, in other words, a personal interpretation.

Let us start with the main Chinese source, viz. the "Tables of Empresses and Imperial Concubines" (Hou fei piao 后妃表) in the Yüan-shih. Under Ögödei (T'ai-tsung 太宗) five empresses and one concubine are listed as follows: (1) Empress Boraqčin of the Main Ordo (正官); (2) the Sixth Empress Töregene, who, in an editorial note appended to her name, is also designated as Naimajin, the feminine ethnocln of Naimain, meaning "the Naimain (= from the Naimain tribe)"; (3) the Second Empress *Alyui; (4) the Third Empress *Kirgisteni; (5) the Sixth Empress *Tunagina; and (6) the Imperial Concubine *Erkine.

Now, (5) can be eliminated from the list because it is simply a faulty transcription for Töregene, already entered as (2); and (6) is a concubine. Therefore, the revised Yüan-shih listing should be: (1) Boraqčin, (2) Töregene alias Naimajin, (3) *Alyui, and (4) *Kirgisteni. However, *Alyui is also called the Second Empress; *Kirgisteni, the Third Empress; and Töregene, the Sixth Empress. The name *Kirgisteni (< Pers. Qyrqytáni) is, like Naimain, an ethnocln meaning "the Kirghiz.

Juvainí does not mention Boraqčin, *Alyui and *Kirgisteni, but he mentions Möge as Ögödei's favourite wife, i.e. the one he loved most, and has much to say about Töregene as the qatun's able and forceful wife who assumed the regency after Ögödei's death. Juvainí ascribes her authority over Möge Qatun to two reasons: the fact that she was the mother of Ögödei's eldest son, and that she was shrewder and more sagacious than Mbgell (mihtar), the eldest of Ogodei's wives; (2) Tbregene was his second wife; (3) Cüčai –
Jujai was the third wife; and (4) Jačin was the fourth wife. The Mu’izz lists twelve wives, and the extant MSS do not always agree. Nevertheless, there is agreement about Boraqčin being the eldest, and Toregene the second of Ögödei’s wives. Thus,

(1) Both the Chinese and Persian sources list Boraqčin as the eldest qutun of Ögödei;

(2) Both the Chinese and Persian sources call Toregene Ögödei’s second qutun;

(3) Rašid al-Din on two separate occasions states that Toregene was “the eldest” of Ögödei’s wives;

(4) Only the late Yüan sources refer to Toregene as “the Sixth Empress,” and as Naimajin (“the Naiman”). The contemporary Chinese sources (first half of the thirteenth century) refer to her only as “the Empress” (buaŋ-bou, bou), witness the inscription on the “spirit-way stele” (shen-tao pei 神道碑) for Yeh-lü Ch’u-ts’ai 耶律楚材 (1189–1243) by Sung Tzu-chen 宋子貞 (1187–1267) composed in 1267, and the Yüan-ch’ao ming-ch’en shih-liieh 元朝名臣事略 by Su T’ien-chüeh 蘇天爵 (1294–1352), which although dating from 1329, quotes verbatim many early biographical sources. We can, therefore, assume that for the contemporary Chinese T’ai-tsung’s (i.e. Ögödei’s) “Empress” was Toregene.

As for Toregene’s epithet Naimajin, we know from the Secret History of the Mongols and, independently, from the Persian sources (including the Mu’izz), that she was not a Naiman, but a Merkid lady. We shall return to Toregene’s puzzling appellations later.

In our inscription, we read that the Great or Senior Empress, who issued the edict together with the Imperial Concubine(s) (unfortunately unidentified), was conducting the affairs of the Eastern Palace (tung-kung), “as before, by virtue of the Edict of the Emperor.” We do not know either the contents of this edict. About the term tung-kung, Cleaves noted that although this term is normally used with reference to the Crown Prince, “it is clear that, in this instance, it refers to the ordo or “palace” in which Toregene resided.” For his part, Prof. Ts’ai is of the opinion that the ordo in question is the Great Ordo (ta-kung 太宮), i.e. the First or Principal Ordo (ti-i kung 第一宮, cheng-kung 正宮), to which Boraqčin belonged. There is, however, no documentary evidence that here tung-kung = ta-kung or cheng-kung. By the same token, it is also not obvious that, as Cleaves states, the tung-kung was Toregene’s ordo, his inference being based entirely on the assumption that the Great Empress was Toregene, an inference on which Prof. Ts’ai has subsequently cast serious doubt.

In my view, the term tung-kung should be understood in the way it was regularly used in China, and of which many examples are found in the Yüan

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17 Mu’izz al-Ansâb, Aligarh MS. A, 77 (corr. 78) and 78 (corr. 79); MS. B, 77 (corr. 75) and 78 (corr. 76). For these two MSS, which are not identical, see A. A. Rézvi, Catalogue of the Persian manuscripts in the Maulana Azad Library Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, revised and edited by M. Ahmad, Aligarh, p. 49, nos. 195–6: Mu’izz al-Ansâb fi sbâjarat il-Ansâb.

18 Whereas the London (British Museum) MS. of the Mu’izz lists (39) Toregene as the second wife of Ögödei, the Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale) MS. (39) lists Moge as the second wife of Ögödei Qan. I am much obliged to Mr Shimo Hiroshi 志茂敏 of the Tōyō Bunko 東洋文庫 (The Oriental Library), Tokyo, for kindly supplying the photostats of the relevant folios of the Paris and London MSS of the Mu’izz, and for providing also a typed transcription of the former.

19 “Chung-shu-ling Yeh-lü Kung shen-tao pei” in Su T’ien-chüeh 蘇天爵, Kuo-ch’ao wen-lei 國朝文頥 (Ssu-pu ts’ung-k’an ed.) 57, 20b (buaŋ-bou, bou), 21a (bou [twice]), 21b (buaŋ-bou, bou); Yüan-Kuo 國-ch’ao ming-ch’en shih-liieh (Ch’in-yü-shu-t’ang ed.) 57, 20b. As for Toregene’s puzzling appellations later.


China. There is no doubt in my mind that the Mongol empress who made the donation to the Taoists was also the one responsible for the edict of 1240. As we learn from Raśid al-Dīn, so it could have been either of them whose "affairs" were being conducted by the Great Empress at the qagan's behest. But which empress was the Yeke Qadun of the edict? I think we can exclude the "eldest" qatun, Raśid Qūn, because, as stated earlier, she is not even mentioned by Juvainī, and Raśid al-Dīn refers to her only once. She had no children from Ogodei and may have been dead by then. Toregene is the best candidate because she was the mother of Güyük, whom she strongly supported, and the grandmother of Śiremūn; she was also very influential at court, and her position at the time was so strong that when Ogodei died the following year, Raśid speaking of her calls her twice the "eldest" qatun. This seems to confirm that Raśid was no more; and we know from Juvainī that, at the time, the power of his favourite wife Mōge was purely nominal, effective authority being already in Toregene's hands.

In view of all this, I think that by 1240–1241 Toregene had actually become the senior wife, or Yeke Qatun, moving in rank from No.2 to No.1 (which would also explain why in the Yūan-shīb table quoted above, the third empress Abyūr is called "the Second Empress," and the fourth empress Kirgistenī is called "the Third Empress": as the second emperor Toregene had moved from second to first place, the next two also moved up one grade from third to second, and from fourth to third respectively), thus justifying Raśid's designation of mibtar and buzurgtar.

In support of the identification of the "Great Empress" of the inscription with Toregene Qatun, I should also invoke the very contents of the 1240 edict. This, as we have seen, is concerned with the printing of the Tao-tsang or Taoist Canon. Now, we know from Li Tao-ch'ien 李道謙 (1219–ca. 1288) that in 1234, under T'ai-tsung (Ogodei), the "Empress" (Huang-hou) donated a complete set of Taoist scriptures (Tao-ch'ing 道經) to Yin Chih-p'ing 尹志平 (1169–1251), the successor of Ch'iu Ch'u-č, the house organ, alias Ch'ang-ch'ün 長春, as head of the Ch'üan-chen 全真 sect in north China. There is no doubt in my mind that the Mongol empress who made this donation to the Taoists was also the one responsible for the edict of 1240. Li Tao-ch'ien's source is the stele inscription for Yin Chih-p'ing composed by I Kou 叡敏 (i.e. I T'ang-tso 弘敏), soon after Yin's death in 1251. As we have seen, the designation of "Empress" in this period was applied only to Toregene among Ogodei's wives.

As I have shown, Toregene was officially, for most of the time, the second

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23 Cf. the occurrences of this term (and its usage) in the Yūan-shīb as listed in Tamura Jitsuzō 田村實造, Genshi gozō shusei 元史語彙集成 (Kyoto, 1961–63), vol.2, pp.1187b–1188a.
24 Cf. History, p.251 and n.14; Successors, pp.19, 120, 121, 170, 180.
25 See History, p.240: "Chaghatai and the other princes sent representatives to say that Toregene Khatun was the mother of the princes who had a right to the Khanate"; p.251: "But of all the sons of Qa'an [i.e. Ogodei—L.R.] Güyük was most renowned for his might ...; he was the eldest of the brothers ..."; Successors, p.120: "But Toregene Khatun and some of the emirs objected, saying that Güyük Khan was older [than Śiremūn—L.R.]". The emphasis is mine. Clearly, in the case of Güyük versus Śiremūn, seniority was the overriding factor.
27 In Successors, p.18. Neither her tribe nor her parentage are known.
28 See above, n.15.
29 History, p.240. Furthermore, from Sung Tzu-ch'en's *spirit-way stele* of Yeh-čhiu Ch'ü-ts'ai (see above, n.19), 20b, we learn that in March–April 1241, when Ogodei fell seriously ill, it was Toregene who "summoned (召) Ch'ü-ts'ai and asked for advice." It is, therefore, not surprising that C. D'Ohsoun should write, with regard to Ogodei's wives, that "la première de ses femmes en rang était Tourakina." See his Histoire des Mongols, depuis Tchinguiz-khan jusqu'à Timour Bey ou Tamerlan, vol.2 (La Haye & Amsterdam, 1834; repr. Tientsin, 1940), p.99.
I suspect that the 'Kirgisti' of the Yüan-shih may, in fact, be the epithet (like Naima-)in of the third qatun Čučai-Jujai of the Mu’izz.

I wish to propose now a new interpretation of the source material which may explain the origin of both the incorrect designations of Töregene in the Chinese documents.

The Mu'izz lists Küčülder Qatun as the sixth wife of Ögödei, and specifies that this lady was a Naiman, daughter of a Naiman chief called Temür Buqa Tegin. Here we have Ögödei's sixth qatun who is also a “Naima)in”—a fact which is too striking to be dismissed simply as a coincidence. What happened, I now believe, is that decades later, when the officials of the Department of National (Mongol) History (Kuo-shih yuan 國史院) were gathering material on the early Mongol rulers, much of the archival sources had already been lost as the result of the transfer of the court from Qara Qorum to Ta-tu (Peking) and the subsequent conflict between Qubilai and Ariq Böke. Thus, the early court events at Qara Qorum were poorly documented, a fact which is reflected in the inferior quality of the official records of the reigns of Ögödei, Güyük and Môngke in the “Basic Annals” (pen-chi 本紀) of the Yüan-shih. Somehow or other, there must have occurred at the time (i.e. in the latter part of Qubilai’s reign) a confusion in the records concerning Ögödei’s wives which accounts for the errors already noted in the genealogical table of the Yüan-shih, as well as for a contamination of Töregene with Küčülder, so that the former, while still listed as the second empress, was additionally (and incorrectly) designated also as both “the Sixth Empress” and “the Naima (Naima)in”—appellations which pertained only to Küčülder. Ultimately, the confusion may have arisen from a Chinese document in which the character ta “great” was incorrectly written (or read) as liu “six,” as I suggested in my 1981 paper, but this is only one possibility. There is no doubt, however, that this mistake must have occurred in the latter part of Qubilai’s reign or during that of his successor Temür Öijeitii (Ch’eng-tsung 成宗, 1295–1307). Such a confusion may also have been facilitated by the fact that Mongolian ladies could have more than one name, and that it was quite common to bear a name which was originally an ethnicon.

In conclusion, I wish to say that I could not have written this paper without having had access to the Aligarh MSS of the Mu’izz al-Ansâb which both complement and supplement the Paris and London MSS, and for this I am very grateful to my late friend Dr Athar Abbas Rizvi who first catalogued them and brought them to my attention. It is my fervent hope that a thorough study of the various MSS of the Mu’izz al-Ansâb be undertaken by scholars interested in Mongolian history.