

**Editor's Introduction:** Diane Wolff in the introduction below provides historical context for her latest work *Fish Shoes: A Palace Drama* appropriate for middle school age readers and published on the Wattpad online platform. To read *Fish Shoes: A Palace Drama* in its entirety, visit the Wattpad website at <https://tinyurl.com/2p87bpv5>. The story is told in twenty-five episodes and is available at no charge. The author encourages readers to leave comments. The complete first chapter from the book, "The Princess and the Horse Race," is provided after the introduction.

## ***Fish Shoes: A Palace Drama* Historical Background and Chapter 1: "The Princess and the Horse Race"**

By Diane Wolff

In the thirteenth century, Europe knew nothing of the rise of a new imperial power in Asia. The Pope, the Holy Roman Emperor, and the Kings of Europe knew nothing about the Muslim political and commercial activities in Asia. The news of the Mongol conquests in Russia and the invasion of Hungary and Poland caused a reaction in Europe. They needed to know the intentions of the new invaders.

By contrast, Chinggis Khan (Genghis Khan) and General Subudei considered intelligence a priority. Before a campaign, Chinggis Khan and Subudei acquired maps and paid for informants and spies recruited in the region. The Arabs were known as superb mapmakers. Before the campaigns in the lands of Islam and Europe, the Mongol Empire was well-informed about the personalities of the rulers and the conditions for the army.

One cannot ignore the dark side of Mongol rule.<sup>1</sup> The Mongol conquests caused slaughter of civilian populations and the devastation of the countryside. It was a standard practice of Mongol warfare to drive civilian populations before the army when riding on a walled city, as a means of inducing the garrison to surrender the city without a war. It was a brutal but effective tactic.

The complaint of Muslim chroniclers was that "He made of a fertile valley a desert." While it is true that some areas took centuries to recover, Samarkand, the capital of the Shah of Khwarezm, was functioning well



"The Kingdome of China", one of the first English-language maps of China, by the English cartographer John Speed in 1626. It is a generally correct outline of Ming China, with many provinces labeled. "Xuntien alias Quinzay" corresponds to Beijing. Even though it had already been proven that Cathay was simply another name for China, Speed continued the tradition of showing "Cathaya, the Chief Kingdome of Great Cam" to the northeast of China. On his map, he placed Xandu (Xanadu) east of the "Cathayan metropolis" of Cambalu.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/26mjhwyu>.

enough to generate revenues and farm products within a short period of time after the conquest of 1221–1222.

Marco Polo spent three years in Bukhara thirty years after the conquests. In *The Travels*, Marco bears witness to the fact that this center of Islamic learning trade and civilization, was a functioning market town whose trade was not interrupted by the conquests, but by a dispute at the top of the Mongol world. This was something new, civil war between rival Mongol Khans.<sup>2</sup>

As Robert D. Kaplan says, “[The Mongols Empire’s] most compelling weapon was—despite the Mongols’ bloody reputation—not the sword, but trade: gems, fabrics, spices, metal and so on. It was the trade routes, not the projection of military power that emblemized the ‘Pax Mongolica.’ Mongol grand strategy was built on commerce much more than on war.”<sup>3</sup>

As the Mongols subjugated and sought to administer more territory, they required the assistance of foreigners. The Mongol court began to use the Muslims to rule the conquered populations, a growing need for Muslim expertise in trade, finance and crafts. They were entrusted with vast responsibilities and controlled by periodic purges.

To paraphrase Morris Rossabi, Muslims from Central Asia and the Middle East played an influential role in the national economy. They directed the financial administration of the empire and served as trade commissioners in the coastal cities of southeastern China. They also staffed the Bureau of Astronomy at the imperial court.<sup>4</sup>

As a buffer people, Muslims drew the hostility of their Chinese underlings and their Mongol overlords. Trade was the main motivation of the Muslims who settled in southeastern China—maritime trade. Khubilai Khan’s (Kublai Khan) maritime expedition against Japan in 1274 had ended disastrously.<sup>5</sup> The Muslim defector Pu Shou-keng, Superintendent of Maritime Trade at Chuan-chou, shifted his allegiance to the Yuan in 1276. He offered a naval force to the Mongols who had no true navy of their own. It was the beginning of a new era.

Khubilai Khan came to the throne in a contested election but wished to rule as a true Chinese emperor. He wished to embody the ideal relationship, that of benevolent ruler and sage minister, with loyalty as their bond and moral rule as their method. He had this relationship with Minister Liu, head of the Central Secretariat. He made a career of using Chinese methods to govern China.

Khubilai delivered Orders of Submission to the Southern Song Emperor several times. They were ignored. The Southern Song Emperor was a Han Chinese and presided over a brilliant culture and a new modern mercantile society. The South had not been ruled by foreign dynasties, as had the North. The idea was that the Mongol invaders were barbarians who had stolen the country.

By 1265, Khubilai had grown tired of being rebuffed by the Southern Song. His spies informed him that the Southern Song was in terrible condition. Khubilai decided that the time had come to go to war. General Bayan had been waiting for the conquest of the south to begin. He lost no time in developing a plan for the campaign. Bayan left court in command of the Yuan Army. He took troops and rode to Hunnan, a frontier area inhabited by tribes and wild beasts. He had initial success. In 1265, Bayan had his first major battle with the Song and captured 146 ships.

The city of Xiang-yang was the gateway to the Southern Song. The most important city in the South, Xiang-yang was a center of crafts, manufacture and trade, and had twelve smaller cities and villages incorporated into



A painting of Kublai Khan, as he would have appeared in the 1260s. Painted after his death in February of 1294, by the Nepalese artist and astronomer Anige. The painting is done in the Chinese portrait style.

Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/3anhy24h>.



Mongol cavalry pursuing their enemy. Fourteenth-century illumination from *Jami' al-Tasanif al-Rashidi* (*The Collected Works of Rashid*). Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/mwt8xk8v>.



A city under Mongol siege. From the illuminated manuscript of Rashid ad-Din's *Jami al-Tawarikh*. Edinburgh University Library. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/2fdanvs9>.

its outlying regions. Located at the confluence of two rivers, the Han and the Yangzi, it was the entrance to the heart of Song territory. Once Xiang-yang was taken, the South could be laid open in two directions.

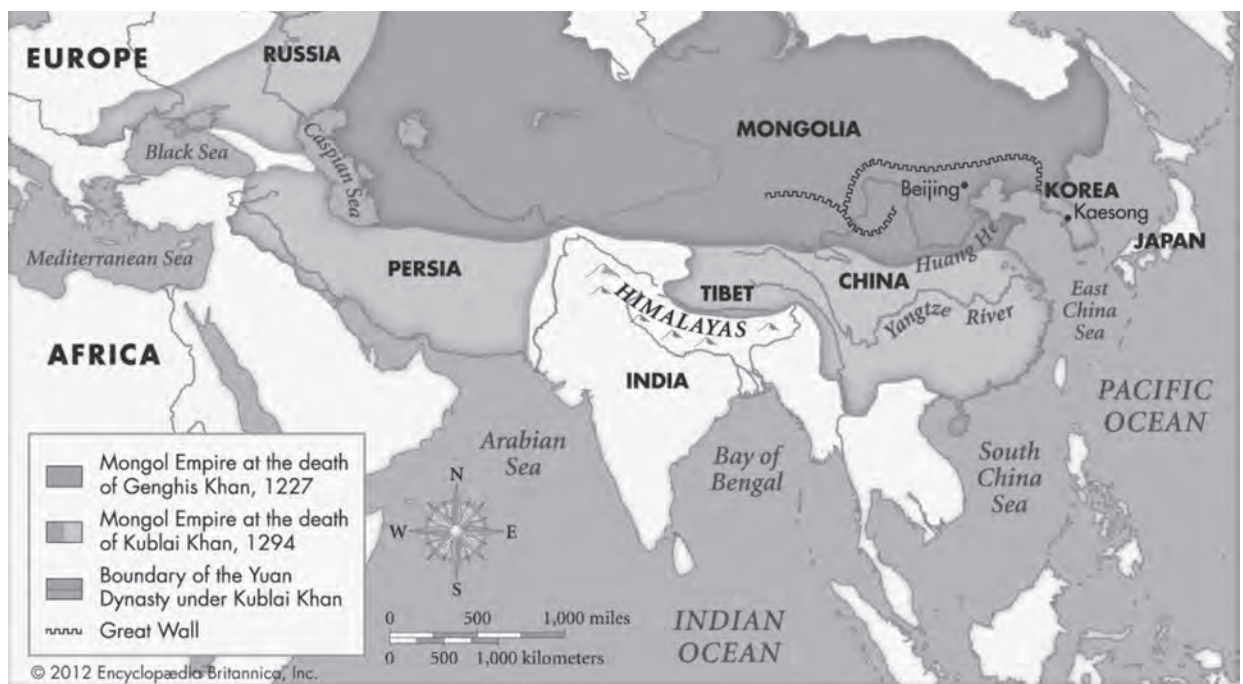
The occupants of the city rejected the Orders of Submission and in 1268, a siege began. No one could have predicted how valiantly the citizens would resist. The city could only be besieged from the North because mountains lay on that side. On the other three sides was a deep lake fed by rivers. This meant naval, not cavalry, battles. Song naval units continually attacked Bayan's troops from the rivers. Two years passed and still the invading troops were unable to breach the city walls.

Xiang-yang did not fall. Instead, the city became celebrated as the major symbol of Song resistance. It became a thorn in Bayan's side. It also began a new era in Mongol warfare and naval battles.

Bayan cut off the city from the rest of the Song state. He had warships and transport ships on the river but was unable to stop the Song Navy. Mongol ships were smaller in number and of lesser quality. On many occasions, the Song Navy—because of its skillful navigation of the rivers—ran the Mongol blockade and resupplied the city. Xiang-yang would have been starved out without these timely replenishments of men, arms and food.

By 1270, after years of supplying rice, boats, men and material in an effort which had so far proved fruitless, after the loss of 1,000 men, the escape of Song troops on 1,000 paddle wheel boats, repeated dispatches of troops from the north, and the reinforcements of Song Army regulars arriving from east of the city by river, a defector came over to the Mongol side.

The defector went to the Mongol commanders in the south, turned over his weapons, and demanded to speak to Khubilai Khan. General Bayan sent him north to Xanadu.



By the late-thirteenth century, the Mongol Empire covered some nine million square miles of territory. The largest contiguous land empire in world history. Source: *Britannica.com* at <https://tinyurl.com/3c99zp6z>.

Previously, the Mongols had never thought of competing for the sea-going trade. Khubilai ordered the defector to design vessels for his navy. Once the war was over, Khubilai Khan would have a merchant fleet. The trade in the local seas was all in the hands of Muslims—Arabs, Persians, and also Indian Muslims. On the maritime Silk Road, the Muslims were coastal rather than open ocean sailors. They traded with Java, Burma, Sumatra, Arabia, India and Africa. It was a profitable trade. No Chinese ships sailed the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. Yuan China could compete for the trade if it had ships and a merchant fleet. The Supreme Khan embarked upon a massive program of shipbuilding.

The Koreans had a lively trade in Southeast Asia and were known as excellent sailors, pilots and shipbuilders. A man born to the horse, Khubilai decided to build a navy on Korean soil and in the process gave orders to cut down much of the forested areas of Korea, big timber forests.

The Korean Campaign is the least well known of the Mongol campaigns, probably because Korea is a small country and conventional maps of the Silk Road do not include Japan and Korea. The Mongol Empire waged nine campaigns against Korea, beginning in the 1230s. The focus of most scholars has been on the west; particularly, China's overland connection with the Eastern Mediterranean.

Mongke was Khubilai's older brother and was Supreme Khan before him. As emperor in the 1250s, Mongke invaded Korea seven times.

Ultimately, after a great deal of death and destruction, the Mongol Army occupied the country. The old King surrendered but took refuge on an island. Mongol troops were unable to capture him. Mongke demanded that the King send Crown Prince Chongyeol, then a young man, to Khubilai's court as a hostage: This was Mongol statecraft. Chongyeol would guarantee the king's good behavior, meaning the king would not rebel and he would pay his tribute. Khubilai received the young man into his household and the two developed a bond over time, waged in the opening campaign against the Southern Song in southwest China.

Why did the most powerful army of the Middle Ages attack Korea? The answer is simple: revenue. Korea was rich from trade in timber, luxury items and manufactured goods. Renowned as builders of ships, Korea engaged in a lively maritime trade with Japan and the nations of Southeast Asia. They had a presence in the trading towns of Southern China. Korean merchants connected to the Indian Ocean and Afro-Eurasian trade networks. The goods ranged from ordinary to luxury items: Japanese perfumes, medicines such as ginseng, ceramics, silver, silk, brassware, ink-sticks, musical instruments, scissors, spoons, candle snuffers and more. Korea was strategic. It ruled two provinces of Manchuria, whose nomad horsemen represented a potential threat as adversaries to the Yuan.

Khubilai Khan's second daughter, The Princess Supreme, offers an example of marriage as Mongol statecraft. The story of a sixteen-year-old girl becoming the Queen of Korea, caught between her father's commands and her husband's protection of his people, with divided loyalties between her father and her husband, takes place against the backdrop of the important events of the thirteenth century. The young characters in her story are about the same age as middle schoolers. The young adult reader has a basis of comparison with the lives of the characters such as Marco Polo and the Heir Apparent, Khubilai's son Jinggim. Historical fiction has the ability to bring the human drama to life and draw the student into the human dimensions of a sweeping epic. It brings the past alive and shows its relevance to contemporary times. The story provides many topics for lively classroom discussion. ♦

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON THE MONGOL EMPIRE

- Broadbridge, Anne F. *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Favereau, Marie. *The Horde: How the Mongols Changed the World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap, 2021.
- Henthorn, William C. *Korea: The Mongol Invasions*. Forgotten Books, [www.forgottenbooks.org](http://www.forgottenbooks.org), 2012.
- Kahn, Paul. *Secret History of the Mongols*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.
- Rossabi, Morris. *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Weatherford, Jack. *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*. New York: Broadway Books (Reprint), 2005.
- Zhao, George Qingzhim. *Marriage as Political Strategy and Cultural Expression: Mongolian Royal Mongolian Royal Marriages from World Empire to Yuan Dynasty*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008.

## Khubilai Khan's second daughter, The Princess Supreme, offers an example of marriage as Mongol statecraft.

## NOTES

1. Chinggis Khan's warfare had an elementary logic all its own. He never left an enemy population behind the advancing front lines of his army. His Chinese minister Yeh-lu Chu-tsai tried to reform the worst of these practices, beginning with the Western Campaign. He used the argument that leaving the vast numbers of dead brought about epidemics of battlefield diseases. He also argued that it was far more profitable to tax the population than to annihilate it. Igor De Rachewiltz, "Yeh-lu Chü-tsai (1189–1243): Buddhist Idealist and Statesman," in *Confucian Personalities*, Arthur Wright and Denis Twitchett, eds. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 189–216.
2. Leonardo Olschki, *Marco Polo's Asia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1960), and D. S. Richards, ed., *Islam and the Trade of Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970).
3. Robert D. Kaplan, *Revenge of Geography. What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2013).
4. Morris Rossabi, "The Muslims in the Early Yuan Dynasty," in *China under Mongol Rule*, John D. Langlois, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 258.
5. Diane Wolff, *Taifun: Khubilai Khan Invades Japan by Sea*. Book one of the Silk Road Series (forthcoming). See <https://tinyurl.com/2f5tx7pa>.

DIANE WOLFF is the author of the forthcoming *Silk Road Series: The Heirs of Chinggis Khan*. She is also the award-winning author of *Chinese Writing: An Introduction* and three other books about Chinese history and culture. She is a widely published reviewer on Asian art and culture.



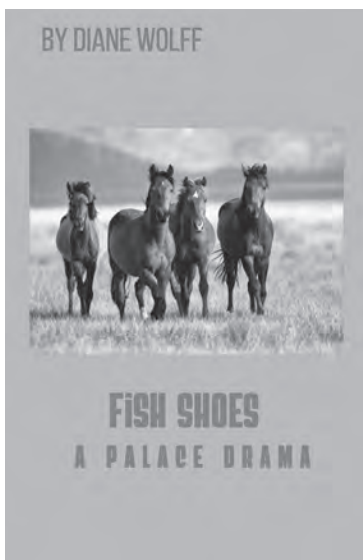
Detail from *Kublai Khan on a Hunting Expedition*. Painted in the year 1280 by the Chinese court artist Liu Guandao. The scroll is located at the National Palace Museum, Taipei. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/3ewe3jk4>.

## Fish Shoes A Palace Drama

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<https://tinyurl.com/2p87bpv5>.

By Diane Wolff



Diane Wolff.

### CHAPTER 1

## The Princess and the Horse Race

**T**he Princess Supreme stood beside her scruffy Mongol pony. She was sixteen and had dark hair braided with strands of turquoise. She was dressed in riding clothes: a tunic, pleated trousers, and leather boots.

The rank of Princess Supreme was superior to every other princess at court. She was called Princess Supreme because she was the daughter of Khubilai Khan, the ruler of a vast empire that stretched across the world. Her father was the richest and most powerful man in the world. The whole court knew that she was her father's favorite.

She was waiting for the Crown Prince of Korea to join her for the horse race. Her name was Jinguk.

She whispered in the ear of her pony whose name was Speedy: "We will be racing my future husband. We must win the race."

The future King of the fabled land of Korea, with its timber and sailing junks that traded with the island kingdoms of the Pacific, was to be her husband. Her father Khubilai Khan was the mightiest Emperor in the world. He had commanded her betrothal and she was to marry the Crown Prince and go to live in a palace in Korea.

Her half-brother Jinggim judged the race. Jinggim was seventeen, a model son who performed every duty set by his father.

She saw Jinggim enter the racing ground and waved. With him was his friend, the European Marco Polo.

Jinggim greeted Jinguk with a kiss on the cheek. He was the Heir Apparent on whose shoulders the future of the empire rested.

She looked over her brother's shoulder and saw her prince in the distance.

She flashed a smile and waved to the lords and ladies in the stands who were dressed in silks that shone in the sun.

The Princess's great-grandfather was Chinggis Khan, the founder of the empire; The Conqueror, who said that he was Beloved of Heaven and destined to rule all peoples.

The Princess thought that she was Beloved of Heaven. Her ambitions for ruling were not so grand.

## Teaching Asia in Middle Schools

Every year in late September, a great court ceremony was held on the Emperor's birthday.

All four khanates [regions ruled by the heirs of the founder of the empire, Chinggis Khan, and the tribute states—governments of conquered states forced to pay the Mongols valuable presents] came to court with congratulations and lavish gifts.

The stands around the racecourse were filled with representatives of all the nations who came to court to pay tribute: envoys and ambassadors from great and small countries. There were Russian princes from the domains of the Golden Horde, Turkish atabegs (nobility) from the Khanate in Central Asia, and Arab sheikhs from the Ilkhanate in Persia. Mongol nobility came from the steppes, from Manchuria and Mongolia.

The representatives of the tribute nations came: Koreans, Burmese, Annamese, and Tibetans. They came with delegations and their retinues: wives, concubines, serving women, and male staff, dressed in their finest.

On the grand occasion of the Emperor's birthday, the horse race was the favorite entertainment for the day.

Wandering musicians entertained the crowd as the stands filled up. Tumblers, jugglers, and acrobats astonished the on-lookers with their feats.

Later in the day, the best archers and wrestlers would compete. When the sun was high in the afternoon, there would be a display of hunting with eagles. The world of the Mongol Empire had come to court and they had to be entertained.

The racecourse was set up on the vast hunting ground, a several miles ride from Shangdu, the imperial city. Off in the distance, the Princess Supreme could see the city wall. It was forty feet high and eighteen miles on the perimeter.

On the corners were the turrets where weapons were stored and the archers manned the ramparts. Beyond lied the curved eaves of the magnificent building, the Imperial Palace.

The Imperial Palace boasted a zoo with animals from all over the empire and a botanical garden with specimens from all over the world.

Some of the older nobility, the traditionalists, resented Khubilai Khan building a palace in the civilized world. They thought the empire should be ruled from the steppes. A round felt yurt should be the seat of government. They were The Horde, a moveable empire. They were not people who lived in fixed buildings, even if the buildings were palaces.

The Princess Supreme took her father's side. She thought her father was a visionary and could see the future. Influenced by high-ranking Chinese officials, he told his daughter that a vast empire could not be governed from horseback, even if it had been won on horseback.

Ruling the empire in wisdom became the grand passion of his life. The Khan was proud of his daughter. She was like him. She shared his vision.

The atmosphere was festive. Flags of all the nations decorated the stands. The imperial cooks set up fifty outdoor grills and the smell of the roasting meats drifted over the grounds. Lavish tables of food and drink were set out—grilled meats from imperial herds, sheep, goat, yak were served on skewers. A group of musicians played lively dance tunes. Wandering singers performed throat-singing, nomad ballads from the steppes.



Detail from "Kublai Khan's Court," from the French *Livre des merveilles*, ca. 1410–1412.

Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/3xebkmuc>.



Safe Conduct Pass (Paiza) with an inscription in Phakpa Script from the late thirteenth century. The type of script—used early on to write the Mongol language—is named for its inventor, Phakpa (1235–1280), the Tibetan monk and scholar who served as the imperial preceptor for the Mongol court during the reign of Khubilai Khan (1215–1294). The inscription reads, “By the strength of Eternal Heaven, an edict of the Emperor [Khan]. He who has not respect shall be guilty.” The form of the pass (paiza), with its animal mask decoration, is similar to that of a Tibetan mirror for reflecting evil.  
Source: Image and description, *The MET* at <https://tinyurl.com/yjw3wj9k>.

Jinggim was secretly proud of the Princess, but he loved to tease her. “Why don’t you let your future husband win this time? If you offend his pride, will he go through with the wedding?”

The Princess masked her annoyance. “Absolutely. He admits to me that I am the better rider. If he wins, he wins fair and square. If I win, I win the horses. I have a beautiful herd of Akhal-Tekes. You know they are the most prized horses in the world, the Horses of Heaven. The Crown Prince is not sorry about it. Ask him yourself if you don’t believe me.”

“I believe you.”

She turned her attention to the European. “How nice of you to come, Marco. Enjoy yourself. This is the best occasion of the year.”

Marco replied, “I’m sure I will, Princess. Since coming to Cathay, I am struck with the magnificence of the court. I am lucky to be in the employ of the most fabulous emperor on earth. This is a kingdom of wonders and I have seen only a tiny bit of it so far.”

“My father has given you a very great honor, the Golden Tiger badge. No European has had it before.”

Marco had been appointed a personal envoy of Khubilai Khan because he could speak the languages of the court. As an emblem of his position, the Khan gave Marco a golden *paizi*, a golden tiger badge that Marco wore around his neck.

“Yes. To keep the Khan informed, I am to travel by the post-roads. It is the fastest way through the empire. The badge gives me authority.”

Marco could stop at any of the post-stations, get a fresh mount, eat warm food and have a clean bed to sleep in.

Jinggim was a relentless tease. “Maybe the Prince just lets you win. He is older than you are. You have the advantage of youth.”

The Princess said, “Don’t show your ignorance. My horsemanship is excellent. He doesn’t let me win.”

“How old is he?” asked Marco Polo.

“Thirty-nine,” said Jinggim. He shot a skeptical look at Marco. The Princess answered from a lofty place of superior wisdom. “My mother advised me that an older man with responsibilities will give me guidance. The Empress Chabi manages the women’s court and she says that I will come to respect the Prince’s maturity.”

Marco changed the subject. “How many times has he lost?”

“Two,” said the Princess.

“He has already given you twenty horses?” Marco was surprised. His merchant’s brain did a quick calculation. “They are very valuable. A very expensive wager. He must love you.”

“Yes,” said the Princess, sensing that Marco was an ally. “He does love me. He is not an ordinary person. Prince Chong welcomes a challenge. He knows that I would not respect him if I had to lose on purpose. Besides, I love to win.”

“You seem sure of his affections,” Jinggim said.

She reprimanded him. “Don’t give Marco the wrong impression, Jinggim. Prince Chong has been living in the capital since he was a young man. We grew up together. We are like siblings. We are good friends, too. My father regards him as a son.”

Marco was a guest and did not voice an opinion. He took in the conversation between the brother and sister without comment.

## Teaching Asia in Middle Schools

Jinggim explained to Marco, “My father arranged this marriage because he wants his grandson on the throne of Korea. In the past, our army invaded his country. They rebelled against us. They were strong, but not strong enough. We made war on them for twenty years.”

Jinguk said, “I have promised Prince Chong. When he becomes King, he will restore order and renew the land. I will do my part to bring peace. Our father does not want to send armies to Korea again. The expense is ruinous and a waste.”

Jinggim said, “I am just having fun with you. Don’t take my teasing to heart. Our father is proud of you. He arranged your marriage because he places faith in you. We all do.”

The Princess was satisfied that she had won the argument. Prince Chong rode up on a Mongol pony. His Master of Horses led a herd of Akhal-Tekes, the thoroughbreds with gleaming coats that were several hands taller than the Mongol war horses. They were his wager for the race. He handed over the Akhal-Tekes to Jinggim.

He looked stylish in his Korean tunic. A small smile crossed his mouth when he saw Jinguk and in that smile, she read his affection. He behaved toward Jinguk in a reserved manner, with respect, for theirs was a marriage that would end decades of war between their countries.

Khubilai Khan had made a good match for his daughter. Prince Chong had demonstrated his bravery in war. He had come to the household of Khubilai Khan as a hostage. Not treated as a prisoner, but as a family member, meant to insure the good behavior of his father, the King of Korea.

During the war between the Mongol Empire and Korea, the old king had been trapped on an island for years. His troops had fought gallantly to keep the Mongols from taking their country. For decades, they had resisted the greatest war machine in the world.

Military success was the way to respect in her world. Chong and Khubilai Khan had been comrades-in-arms in campaigns in the wilds of southwest China in the opening battles of the campaign against the Southern Song.

The Prince attended the lavish court banquets thrown by her father and was a favorite among the nobility.



Alkhai-Tese is a Turkmen horse breed from Turkmenistan. The shiny coat of the breed led to their nickname, “Golden Horses.” They are taller and more streamlined than the Mongolian horse. Source: © Shutterstock. Photo by Olga\_i.



The Mongolian horse is the native horse breed of Mongolia. The breed has been essentially unchanged since Chinggis Khan’s time. Their strength, speed, and stamina were key factors supporting the thirteenth-century conquests of the Mongol Empire. Source: © Shutterstock. Photo by Yerbolat Shadrakhov.

### CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

2023

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**The 2023 Buchanan prize will be awarded to the author(s) of the work at the AAS Annual Meeting in Boston, Massachusetts on March 16 - March 19, 2023.** The prize includes a \$1,000 monetary award and a one-year membership to AAS. **Submissions are due November 1, 2022.**

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Mosaic Portrait of Marco Polo at Genoa, from *The Travels of Marco Polo*, Volume 1 (of 2) by Marco Polo and Rustichello of Pisa. Source: Project Gutenberg at <https://tinyurl.com/4jdcctpc>.

They loved Chong's stories of fighting the Japanese pirates that attacked the coastal cities and towns.

The Empress was especially fond of him when he told the court that his country had no prejudice against women rulers. He described for the Empress the ceremonial robes of Queen Seondeok, the first woman to become Queen in Goryeo. He said that court seamstresses would make garments for Jinguk in the Korean style and unrolled a scroll painting of the Korean queen wearing a high-waisted dress with brocade tassels and a gold crown with decorations of deer antlers."

"Why the deer antlers?" the Empress asked.

"The antlers represent the shaman's ability to bridge the sky and earth worlds," said the Prince.

The Empress said, "You have shamans? So do we."

"We are a good match in many ways. At our court, we have shamans, Buddhists, and Daoists."

"This is what Khubilai and I strive for. You will be in harmony with each other and with the people."

Many of the young girls at court called Chong an old man behind the Princess's back, but she ignored the gossip. Theirs was to be a marriage of state. The ages of the Princess and Prince meant nothing. Treaties would be signed. Agreements would be made. Her father's armies would leave Korea. Her officials would come and run the government.

The older court women told her that she was lucky, for in the days of The Conqueror Chinggis Khan, a princess might be wed to a nomad prince and go to live in a tent and not in a palace at all.

Princess Jinguk turned her head at the flurry of trumpets and thunder of drums.

Her father, Emperor Khubilai Khan, entered the racing ground. He was accompanied by Empress Chabi and Noble Consort Two.

The three young people went to greet the Emperor.

Khubilai Khan wore hunting clothes for the occasion. Before he took his throne, he made a speech. The music and dancing died down.

"Welcome all to my birthday celebration. Thank you all for coming. The hospitality of the empire is yours."

Khubilai Khan took a cup of koumiz [a strong alcoholic drink] from an attendant and poured it on the ground. "To the Ancestors." It was an old ritual from the shamans on the steppes. He was honoring his nomad past.

The three repeated after him, "The Ancestors." A cheer went up from the delegations.

"Good luck and have a good race," the Emperor said to his daughter. "Display the great talent of horsemanship that distinguishes us from the world."

The two contestants took their places on the racetrack. Jinggim intoned the rules and the riders mounted. Jinggim waved the starting flag. The two contestants gave their horses spurs. Jinguk and Chong leaned into their mounts, urging them on.

The Princess sprang into the lead and the horses rode hard to the far end of the course.

They rounded the far end of the course and rode into the home stretch. The Master of Horses waved the signal flags. The Princess won by a nose.

The two came back to the starting gate.

Crown Prince Chong laughed and wiped his face with a scarf. “Good contest. I am happy to lose to a superb athlete. Take the horses. They are yours.”

He made a presentation of his herd. The Princess accepted the horses and thanked him for a good contest. She behaved in a queenly manner and accepted her tribute.

Just then, a palace messenger approached Jinggim and delivered a message privately. Jinggim turned to the Princess. “It is time to take off your riding clothes and act like a princess. Your mother has sent for you. She says you are to take a bath and then come to see her.”

Princess Jinguk’s mother was Noble Consort Two, a great beauty who lived in the residential wing of wives and concubines ruled by the Empress Chabi.

“Don’t worry, I will be presentable. I am not an idiot,” said the Princess.

Marco Polo interrupted, “We don’t have such luxuries in my beautiful city of Venice. In Cathay, even the common people take baths in water heated by coal.”

Jinggim said, “In the old days when my people were nomads and lived in the grasslands beyond the Great Wall, we never bathed. The shamans said that the river spirits did not like to be disturbed by humans swimming in the water. We thought that swimming in the river produced lightning storms that set fire to the grasslands. So we did not bathe, not even in winter. How times have changed.”

The Princess mounted her pony. She and her attendants rode off to the imperial palace. She did not see the two Korean courtiers approaching Prince Chong to deliver sad news.

The courtiers informed the Prince that his father King Wangjang had died. Riding toward the imperial city, the Princess did not see the expression on Prince Chong’s face.

His father had been old and in ill health, the news had been expected, but the loss of his father changed his future in an instant. At the moment that he heard the news, the Prince was a son who lost a father and his grief was profound.



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