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# Diplomatic Marriages Between the Tang and Uyghur Dynasties

## *Tang ve Uyghur Hanedanları Arasındaki Diplomatik Evlilikler*

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This paper explores the practice of heqin (marriage alliance) in Chinese history, a diplomatic strategy used to establish relations between different ethnic groups through marriage. Originating in the 3rd century BCE, heqin became widespread during the Han Dynasty and continued through the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, reaching its peak in the Tang Dynasty. While 13 heqin agreements were made during the Han Dynasty, 23 such marriages occurred during the Tang period. A notable feature of Tang heqin practices is the establishment of marriage alliances with two Turkic qaghanates, the Köktürks and the Uyghurs, providing a comparative framework for analyzing Chinese-Turkic relations. This article focuses on the heqin marriages between the Tang and Uyghur dynasties, examining the historical context and the role of princesses in heqin diplomacy. It shows that the selection of princesses was influenced by the nature of diplomatic relations and strategic priorities, interpreting heqin as a reflection of the power dynamics and cultural exchanges between the two societies. The first section of this paper will outline the heqin practices between the Western Wei, Sui, Tang, and Köktürk dynasties to provide historical context. The subsequent section will focus on the heqin practices between the Tang and Uyghur dynasties.

Key Words: Heqin, Tang Dynasty, Uyghur Khaganate, diplomatic marriage, Chinese princesses.

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## I. Introduction

In 200 BCE, the Han Dynasty initiated a military campaign against the Xiongnu threat on its northern border. During the campaign, Emperor Gaozu of Han was unexpectedly trapped by Xiongnu Emperor Modu. This event, known as the “Siege of Baideng” or the “Siege of Pingcheng” lasted for seven days. To resolve the situation, Gaozu consulted his advisors and adopted the suggestion of Liu Jing, who proposed offering the Han emperor’s daughter to Modu as a means to end the siege. The agreement stipulated that the male descendants of the princess would inherit the Xiongnu throne, thereby making the future Xiongnu emperor the Han emperor’s grandson (Chin 2010: 340). This marriage alliance was intended to reduce the likelihood of future conflicts between the two powers. Modu accepted the proposal, resulting in a significant shift in the political dynamics between the Han and Xiongnu.

This marriage led to the establishment of a kinship-based relationship between the two powers. Initially emerging out of necessity, the diplomatic practice known as *heqin* was later institutionalized in China’s relations with the steppe peoples. In addition to securing military and economic interests, *heqin* played a significant role in shaping China’s broader foreign policy. Beginning with the Siege of Baideng in 200 BCE, this practice continued for nearly 1,200 years, evolving into an essential diplomatic tool that not only ensured border security but also facilitated the formation of alliances and provided a strategic stance against enemies. During the Han Dynasty, over a dozen *heqin* agreements were made (Pan 1997: 127), and this trend continued in the Sui and Tang periods, where 29 successful and 34 unsuccessful *heqin* attempts were recorded (Skaff 2012: 210). These agreements went beyond political relations between Chinese dynasties and neighboring states, profoundly influencing the economic and cultural dynamics between settled and nomadic societies over time (Şaşmaz 2022: 366-368). Thus, examining the periods of the Köktürk and Uyghur khanates through the lens of *heqin* sheds light not only on the political aspects of Sino-Steppe relations but also on their socioeconomic and sociocultural dimensions.

## II. Heqin diplomacy between Western Wei-Sui-Tang and Köktürks

### a. Western Wei (Northern Zhou)-Köktürk Relations

In the mid-5th century, the Köktürks were vassals of the Rouran Khaganate (402–555). During a political crisis within the Rouran Khaganate, the weakening government led to a rebellion in Tiele Province, which was suppressed by Tumen (Bumïn khagan). After quelling the rebellion, Tumen gained the allegiance of fifty thousand families from Tiele. Tumen then requested a marriage from the Rouran Khagan, but the king insulted him by calling an “my blacksmith slave”. In response, Tumen killed the Rouran messenger and severed relations with the Rouran Khaganate (Li 1974: 3287).

During this period, northern China was divided between two rival dynasties: Western Wei (later Northern Zhou) and Eastern Wei (later Northern Qi). In 551, Tumen sought a marriage alliance with Western Wei, leading to Princess Changle (長樂公主) being sent to him. Tumen established the Köktürk Khaganate in 552 but passed away the following year (Urgunbuyan 2023: 39). After the Köktürk Khaganate was founded, the Northern Zhou and Northern Qi, fearing Köktürk military strength, became its vassals. To secure the favor of the Köktürks, they paid annual tributes and actively arranged marriage alliances with the khagan’s dynasty (Kozhabekova 2013: 120). The rivalry between these two Chinese dynasties was seen as an opportunity by Taspar Khagan to advance his political and economic interests. Notably, Taspar referred to the rulers of the Northern Qi and Northern Zhou dynasties, who paid tribute to him, as his “filial sons”. He is quoted as saying: “So long as my two sons to the south remain filial, why should I worry that I may lack anything?” (Skaff 2012: 107).

During Muqan Khagan’s reign, the Köktürks reached the height of their power. The Northern Zhou and Northern Qi dynasties competed to form alliances with the Köktürks, with inter-state marriage serving as a key political strategy. Muqan Khagan delayed his decision for a long time, keeping both dynasties engaged, but eventually aligned with the Northern Zhou dynasty (Ganiev 2017: 189). In 568, for the first time, a Köktürk princess married a Chinese emperor of Xianbei origin through the heqin alliance and received the title of empress. Later, in 577, the Northern Zhou, with the support of the Köktürks, launched an attack on the Northern Qi (Kara 2015: 554-557).

In this period, the Köktürks and Northern Zhou followed the *heqin* policy, exchanging princesses as part of their diplomatic relations. In 579, Taspar Khagan of the Köktürks requested a wife from Northern Zhou, and Princess Qianjin was sent to marry him in 580. After Taspar Khagan's death in 581, Princess Qianjin married Ishbara Khagan. That same year, the Northern Zhou dynasty was replaced by the establishment of the Sui dynasty.

### **b. Sui-Köktürk Relations**

The Sui dynasty marked a new phase in Köktürk-China relations. Although the ruling family had intermarried with the Xianbei elite and experienced some cultural mixing, it was ethnically Han Chinese through the paternal line, unlike the previous Xianbei-originated dynasties (Holcombe 2020: 46; Lorge 2011: 93). It unified China politically after a period of fragmentation, leading to a shift in policy compared to earlier dynasties, which had political ties with the Köktürk Khaganate in the north. Although it continued the policy of marriage alliances with the Köktürks, a key difference was that the marriage proposal came from the Köktürk side, with the Sui dynasty being the only party to send a princess. This shift reflected a political strategy where the Sui dynasty viewed the Köktürk Khaganate not as a superior power, as the former Northern dynasties did, but as a direct rival.

The rivalry between the Köktürk Khaganate and the Sui dynasty was partly shaped by the *Heqin* agreement established during the Northern Zhou dynasty. In 580, one year before the Sui dynasty replaced the Northern Zhou, Emperor Zhou sent Princess Qianjin (千金公主) to Taspar Khagan as part of a marriage alliance. Taspar Khagan died in 581, and following the nomadic tradition of levirate marriage, Princess Qianjin became the wife of Ishbara Khagan. In the same year, the Northern Zhou dynasty was overthrown, and the Sui dynasty was established (Urgunbuyan 2023: 42). During this transition of dynasties, Princess Qianjin, whose family was killed, influenced Ishbara Khagan's decision to take a hostile stance toward the Sui dynasty from its earliest years, and by 583 CE China and Eastern Köktürks were at war (Wright 2011: 44). During this period, an interesting aspect of the *heqin* policy was its use not only to halt wars or form alliances but also to interfere in the internal affairs of rival states. After the death of Ishbara Khagan, his brother briefly ascended the throne but did not rule for

long. Ishbara's son, Dulan (r. 588–599), became the next khagan. Following tradition, Princess Qianjin married Dulan. However, the Sui emperor viewed her presence as a threat to his rule and sought to eliminate her (Wright 2011: 45–46).

At the same time, he sought to exploit internal power struggles within the Köktürks. One of the Köktürk leaders, Yami (later Tuli Khagan), sent an envoy to the Sui dynasty, requesting to marry a Chinese princess. The emperor agreed, on the condition that Princess Qianjin was killed. Shortly after her death, Princess Yicheng (義成公主), a member of the imperial family, was married to Yami. With Sui support, Yami emerged victorious in the internal conflicts and became the khagan of the Eastern Köktürks. Princess Yicheng married multiple khagans during her lifetime. After Yami's death, she married his successor, Shibi Khagan. During Shibi's reign, relations between the Köktürks and Sui deteriorated. In a key battle between the two powers, Princess Yicheng, managing military affairs in her husband's absence, falsely reported an attack from the north, causing Shibi to withdraw from the siege (Liu 2011: 103; Urgunbuyan 2023: 48).

In 618, the Sui dynasty collapsed, and the Tang dynasty was established. Interestingly, Princess Yicheng found herself in a situation similar to that of her predecessor, Princess Qianjin. She opposed the Tang dynasty for the rest of her life and was ultimately killed by a Tang general in 630 during the war that ended the Eastern Köktürk Khaganate.

### c. Tang-Köktürk Relations

Although the first Tang emperor, Li Yuan (李淵) received military support from the Köktürk khagan Shibi during the collapse of the Sui Dynasty (Liu 2011: 178), relations between the Tang Dynasty and the Köktürks soon turned into intense rivalry. This shift is evident from the absence of any heqin (marriage alliance) agreement between the two powers during the 12 years following the Tang Dynasty's establishment (618–630) and the eventual fall of the Eastern Köktürk Khaganate. During this period, the Köktürk khagans supported anti-Tang forces in China, aiming to weaken the Tang Dynasty (Drompp 2018). Historical records indicate that before 630, negotiations for a marriage alliance (heqin) between the Tang court and the Köktürks remained inconclusive. According to Pan (1997: 112), this failure may have been influenced by the Sui princess Yicheng, who opposed such an alliance as the presence of a Tang

princess among the Köktürks could have undermined her authority. At the same time, internal unrest emerged within the Köktürk Khaganate itself. Taking advantage of these internal divisions, the Tang army launched a surprise attack, catching the Köktürk khagan Jieli off guard. In 630, Jieli was defeated and captured by the Tang forces. This event marked the beginning of a 50-year “Interregnum Period” during which the Eastern Köktürks lived in captivity under Chinese rule (Başkan 2023; Drompp 2018).

During the interregnum period of the Köktürk Khaganate, some political marriages took place between the Tang court and the Köktürks (Başkan 2023: 38-43). Historians debate whether these marriages can be classified as heqin. Traditionally, heqin refers to a type of political marriage involving Chinese princesses and foreign rulers. However, some scholars argue that heqin should not be limited to such arrangements. Instead, they suggest that the term also encompasses marriages with other ethnic groups aimed at preventing conflicts or fostering amicable relations (Xingcheng 2022: 41). Since the interregnum period marked a time when the Köktürks were considered a dependent minority within China, the Tang-Köktürk marriages of this period do not fit within the traditional definition of heqin. Unlike earlier heqin marriages, the marriages between the Tang court and the Köktürks during this period appear to have been aimed not at halting a war or forming an alliance, but at maintaining control over an ethnic group that persisted as a political force within the country. This is evident from the fact that the individuals married to Tang princesses during this time were noble Köktürk leaders living under Chinese rule. Through this policy, Tang authorities likely sought to prevent potential uprisings by the nomadic Köktürk minority settled along the northern borders of the country. A notable example of this is the marriage of Princess Hengyang (衡陽公主), the sister of Tang Emperor Taizong, to the Köktürk general Ashina Sheer (阿史那社爾), who served in the Tang military (Başkan 2023: 39). Unlike traditional heqin, this marriage involved the emperor’s sister marrying a soldier under his command, rather than a foreign ruler, making it quite different from the conventional practice of heqin diplomacy.

After the 50-year interregnum, the Köktürks established the Second Köktürk Khaganate in 682. Following its establishment, the proposal for a heqin agreement between the Second Köktürk Khaganate and the Tang dynasty was

raised multiple times. Each time, the Köktürk khagans sought to marry a Chinese princess, with Qapghan Khagan and Bilge Khagan particularly noted in sources for insisting on this request in their communications with the Tang court. However, their proposals were either rejected or delayed by the Chinese rulers for various reasons (Chen 2021: 71-76, 82-84). The closest the Köktürk Khaganate came to a heqin agreement was during Qapghan Khagan's reign, while Bilge Khagan's repeated requests were dismissed. Bilge Khagan maintained a friendly relationship with China, but the Tang emperor used the promise of a Köktürk-Tang marriage as a tactic, causing over thirty Köktürk delegations to be sent, only to be met with delays and excuses (Chen 2021: 106-120). This can be explained by the weakening of the Köktürk Khaganate during Bilge Khagan's reign, far from its former power. After Bilge Khagan's death, the Köktürk Khaganate, weakened by internal strife, did not send any further heqin proposals to the Tang court. This reflects the political and military influence that shaped heqin diplomacy.

After the fall of the First Köktürk Khaganate, the proposal for a heqin agreement between the Second Köktürk Khaganate and the Tang dynasty came up multiple times. Each time, the Köktürk khagans sought to marry a Chinese princess, with Qapghan Khagan and Bilge Khagan particularly noted in sources for insisting on this request in their communications with the Tang court. However, their proposals were either rejected or delayed by the Chinese rulers for various reasons (Chen 2021: 71-76, 82-84). The closest the Köktürk Khaganate came to a heqin agreement was during Qapghan Khagan's reign, while Bilge Khagan's repeated requests were dismissed. Bilge Khagan maintained a friendly relationship with China, but the Tang emperor used the promise of a Köktürk-Tang marriage as a tactic, causing over thirty Köktürk delegations to be sent, only to be met with delays and excuses. Historical records mention that in 713, the Tang emperor arranged the marriage of Qapghan Khagan's son, who was held as a hostage in the Chinese court, to a Tang princess. However, the Köktürk prince spent the rest of his life in the Tang court, effectively remaining a hostage rather than becoming an imperial son-in-law. Therefore, this marriage cannot be considered a genuine heqin agreement (Chen 2021: 79; Pan 1997: 116). This can be explained by the weakening of the Köktürk Khaganate during Bilge Khagan's reign, far from its former power. After Bilge Khagan's death, the

Köktürk Khaganate, weakened by internal strife, did not send any further heqin proposals to the Tang court. This reflects the political and military influence that shaped heqin diplomacy.

### III. Tang-Uyghur Heqin Diplomacy

The Uyghur Khaganate was established in 744 following the death of the last Köktürk khagan and the capture of their capital. Between its founding and collapse in 840, 13 khagans ruled the state. Many of these khagans had Chinese wives, and during this period, seven marriages took place between the Tang dynasty and the Uyghurs (Pan 1997: 118). This close interaction was influenced by Tang-Uyghur relations, which were notably closer than those of earlier nomadic dynasties with the Tang. From the reign of the second khagan, Bayan Chor Khagan, the relationship was based on alliances against common enemies. Such a dynamic was unprecedented for the Köktürks, who never developed this type of relationship with the Western Wei (Northern Zhou), Sui, or Tang dynasties. The Köktürk Khaganate was consistently regarded with caution by Chinese dynasties and frequently engaged in conflicts with them.

The close relationship between the Tang dynasty and the Uyghurs is also evident in the status of princesses married under heqin agreements. This policy, practiced for centuries since the Han dynasty, gradually became institutionalized and developed a systematic framework. The status of the princesses sent varied depending on the nature of relations between the states. In the first heqin agreement, it is noted that Emperor Liu Bang initially intended to marry his own daughter to Modu Chanyu. However, due to opposition from the empress, another woman, later granted the title of princess, was sent instead (Chin 2010: 340-341). One of the most well-known heqin cases in Han-Xiongnu relations involved Wang Zhaojun (王昭君), a concubine from the emperor's harem, who was married to the Xiongnu chanyu Huhanye (Zhou 2009: 471). This arrangement reflected the perception of the Xiongnu as a constant threat that needed to be appeased.

The status of princesses sent to foreign countries varied over time, depending on the nature of international relations. The highest-ranking princesses were typically the emperor's daughters or sisters, followed by the daughters of his brothers and sons. Next in rank were daughters of more distant



members of the imperial family. The lowest-ranking princesses were not originally part of the imperial family but were granted the title later, often being the daughters of government officials (Lin 1985: 32).

The princesses married to Uyghur Khagans were generally of high status. Among them, three—Princesses of Ningguo, Xianan, and Taihe—were actual daughters of Chinese emperors. This highlights the unique significance of the Uyghurs to Tang China compared to other foreign peoples, as this was the only instance in the Sui and Tang dynasties when a non-Chinese woman entered the imperial family as a bride (Mackerras 2004: 100-101). The Uyghurs became valuable allies to Tang China due to their key role in recapturing the Tang capital from the rebels and suppressing the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763). In return for this assistance the Uyghur rulers exacted a very high price. They were able to secure substantial political influence in China as well as a range of other advantages, including great economic benefit. The symbolic beginning of this new era was marked by Tang Emperor Suzong’s decision to marry his daughter, Princess Ningguo, to Bayan Chor Khagan.

#### a. Bayan Chor Khagan-Princess Ningguo 寧國公主

Bayan Chor Khagan (英武可汗), the second ruler of the Uyghur Khaganate (747–759), is considered the most influential khagan in Uyghur history. Under his leadership, the Uyghurs consolidated their dominance in northern China, forcing rival nomadic groups to migrate westward. Additionally, his interest in settled life led him to collaborate with Chinese and Sogdian experts in constructing a city. In the eighth year of his reign, the An Lushan Rebellion broke out in China, providing an opportunity for the Uyghurs to expand their influence (Golden 1992: 158-159). Bayan Chor Khagan seized this chance, leading his forces to support the Tang dynasty in suppressing the rebellion and securing the Tang capital, Changan. As a reward for his assistance, he received an extraordinary honor: marriage to a daughter of Tang emperor Suzong (唐肅宗) (r. 756-762), Princess Ningguo, an event rarely seen in Chinese history (Drompp 2005: 25). The Tang dynasty’s official history, the *Jiu Tangshu* (舊唐書), records that even Uyghur nobles were astonished by this union:

When Yü arrived at Huihe, he saw Bilge Khagan sitting solemnly in a golden robe and fur hat... The khagan asked, “What is your relationship to the Heavenly Emperor of Tang?” Prince Han replied, “I am his cousin”... When the prince did not bow, the khagan remarked,

“The lords of two nations should observe proper etiquette. How is it that you do not bow?” The prince replied firmly, “The Tang emperor values your contributions and has given his daughter to marry you, establishing an alliance. Previously, marriages with external peoples involved daughters of the Tang imperial clan, bearing the title of princess. However, Princess Ningguo is the emperor’s true daughter, a woman of exceptional talent and beauty. She has traveled thousands of miles to marry you. As the son-in-law of the Tang emperor, it is only proper for you to observe decorum. How can you sit on a couch and receive an imperial decree?” At this, the khagan rose, accepted the imperial decree, and respectfully received the marriage arrangements. The next day, Khagan crowned Princess Ningguo the khatun and said with joy, “The Tang emperor holds us in high regard by sending his true daughter!” (Liu 1975: 5200-5201).

The influence of the Uyghur Khaganate on the Tang court lasted for an extended period, undoubtedly due to the eight-year duration (755–763) of the An Lushan Rebellion and the weakening of Tang’s political and military power during this time. Mackerras (2004: 95) notes that the Uyghurs’ assistance to the Tang court in suppressing the rebellion occurred in two phases: the first took place in late 757, during the battles for China’s two major cities, Changan and Luoyang. The second phase occurred almost exactly five years later, when the Uyghur forces played a crucial role in recapturing Luoyang from the rebels. In the second phase, Bögü Khagan, the son of Bayan Chor Khagan, led the Uyghur army. In this way, Bögü Khagan, like his father, maintained the Uyghur khagans’ powerful position in the eyes of the Tang court as protectors and saviors of the Tang dynasty.

After the outbreak of the An Lushan Rebellion, in response to the Tang emperor’s request for assistance, Uyghur khagan Bayan Chor requested to marry a Tang princess. Emperor Suzong responded by offering his daughter, Princess Ningguo, who had been married twice before, to the Uyghur khagan (Barfield 1992: 152; Pan 1997: 119). Additionally, the Uyghur khagan took the Princess Xiao Ningguo, the daughter of Tang’s prominent general Pugu Huai'en (僕固懷恩), as a concubine to accompany Princess Ningguo (Mackerras 2004: 100).

Bayan Chor died less than a year after the marriage. Following his death in 759, an interesting event is recorded. The khagan’s court officials, governors and generals suggested that Princess Ningguo be buried alongside him, but she refused, explaining that such customs were not part of Chinese tradition. As a compromise, she followed the nomadic practice of slashing her face and mourning loudly. Since she had not had any children with the khagan, she

returned to the Tang court that same year. Meanwhile, the daughter of Pugu Huaien stayed with the Uyghurs and was referred to as the Princess Xiao Ningguo (小寧國公主) by the Uyghurs. She became the khatun of the next Uyghur khagan, Bögü, the son of Bayan Chor Khagan (Liu 1975: 5202).

#### b. Bögü Khagan-Princess Xiao Ningguo 小寧國公主

Under Bögü Khagan (牟羽可汗) (r. 759-779), the successor of Bayan Chor, the Uyghurs played a pivotal role in Tang affairs, providing military support against rebellions and external threats, particularly from Tibet. This partnership, solidified through marital alliances after the An Lushan revolt in 756-757, allowed the Uyghurs to strengthen their influence over China while securing access to valuable trade goods like silk and horses. Uyghur involvement often came at a heavy cost for the Tang dynasty. In 762, during a campaign to retake Luoyang, Uyghur forces looted the city, causing widespread destruction and civilian casualties. Despite such actions, the Tang court was compelled to reward them generously in silk, unable to risk alienating a powerful ally. This pattern of military assistance coupled with economic exploitation continued, with the Uyghurs demanding substantial payments for their aid and using their dominance to control trade and financial activities within Tang territory (Barfield 1992: 152-153; Golden 1992: 158-159).

After ascending the throne, Bögü Khagan sent Princess Ningguo, the Tang princess married to his father, back to China. He then married Princess Xiao Ningguo, the daughter of Tang general Pugu Huaien, who had been sent to the Uyghur court as a concubine alongside Princess Ningguo (Pan 1997: 119). This reflects the continuation of *levirate marriage*, a common tradition among Eurasian nomadic societies.

An intriguing question is why Bögü Khagan chose to marry Princess Xiao Ningguo instead of his father's widow, Princess Ningguo. One reason might be Princess Ningguo's inability to bear children. Another possible factor is the ethnic connection between General Pugu Huaien, who was of Tiele origin, and the Uyghurs. Bögü Khagan later strengthened these ties further by marrying another of Pugu Huaien's daughters.

During this period, following Emperor Suzong's death, his son Daizong (r. 762–779) ascended the Tang throne. While Uyghur-Tang relations remained critical under the new emperor, they became increasingly strained due to economic challenges and political tensions. A notable issue was the conflict involving Bögü Khagan's father-in-law, Pugu Huaien. Accused of betraying the Tang, Pugu Huaien rebelled in 764 with the backing of Uyghur and Tibetan forces (Barfield 1992: 153; Golden 1992: 159-160). Fortunately for the Tang court, Pugu Huaien died the following year. The Uyghurs then shifted their stance, reestablishing their alliance with the Tang and contributing to a significant victory over the Tibetans in November 765. This marked the final instance of an effective Uyghur-Tang military collaboration (Mackerras 1972: 28; 2004: 98). Relations, however, deteriorated during the later years of Bögü Khagan's reign. His adoption of Manichaeism as the state religion and the increasing influence of Sogdian advisors, who advocated a more aggressive policy toward China, were major factors that strained ties with the Tang court (Golden 1992: 160).

The tensions in Tang-Uyghur relations during this period are evident in the absence of a heqin marriage agreement similar to those made during Bayan Chor Khagan's reign. Bögü Khagan's two marriages to Tang princesses involved the daughters of Pugu Huaien. The first, the Princess Xiao Ningguo, had initially been a concubine of Bayan Chor Khagan. After his death, she married Bögü Khagan and assumed the title of *khatun*. Although her father, Pugu Huaien, was a legitimate Tang general and prince at the time, she was not a direct member of the imperial family and had been granted the title of "princess" later in life.

### c. Bögü Khagan-Princess Chonghui 崇徽公主

Bögü Khagan's second heqin marriage occurred in 769 when Emperor Daizong granted a younger daughter of Pugu Huaien the title of Chonghui princess and arranged her marriage to Bögü Khagan (Mackerras 1972: 85; Pan 1997: 119-120). The title *Chonghui* meaning "respected and virtuous" was given to Pugu Huaien's daughter by Emperor Daizong, who, despite her father's rebellion, continued to regard him with respect and refused to see him as a true traitor (Mackerras 1972: 148).

Some sources imply that another daughter of Pugu Huaien was also married to Bögü Khagan before Pugu Huaien's death. However, there are no

details regarding this princess's name or fate (Pan 1997: 131). Among all Chinese princesses who married Uyghur khagans and became khatun, Pugu Huaïen's daughters were the only ones not born as imperial princesses.

Although heqin diplomacy continued during Bögü Khagan's reign, the relationship between the two countries shifted from the closer ties seen under the previous khagan due to Bögü's aggressive policies toward China. While Bögü played a key role in the Tang's suppression of the An Lushan rebellion, the Tang did not view him as a true ally because his troops looted Tang cities in exchange for their services (Skaff 2012: 126). Discontent with Bögü's hostile policies led to a coup, during which his cousin, Tun Bagha Tarqan (779–789), killed Bögü. Tun Bagha Tarqan then became Alp Qutlug Bilge Khagan and restored the alliance with the Tang court (Barfield 1992: 153).

#### d. Alp Qutlug Bilge Khagan-Princess Xianan 咸安公主

Alp Qutlug Bilge Khagan (合骨咄祿毗伽可汗), the fourth khagan of the Uyghur Khaganate (r. 779–789), came to power through a coup (Golden 1992: 160). His reign marked a shift in the royal lineage, transferring it from the descendants of Bayan Chor Khagan to his own. After killing Bögü Khagan, he also executed Bögü's two sons, born to Princess Xiao Ningguo (Ouyang 1975: 6123). In the same year Alp Qutlug Bilge Khagan ascended the throne, Emperor Daizong of Tang passed away, and his son, Emperor Dezong (r. 779–805), succeeded him (Barfield 1992: 153). Alp Qutlug Bilge Khagan significantly altered the Chinese policies of his predecessor, Bögü Khagan. He removed the Chinese-opposed Sogdian and Manichaean officials from power and sought to rebuild stable relations with the Tang dynasty (Golden 1992: 160). It can be inferred that these efforts yielded results in 788, during the ninth year of his reign, when Emperor Dezong agreed to give his daughter, Princess Xianan, in marriage to Alp Qutlug Bilge Khagan in 787 (Skaff 2012: 211; Wang 1955: 1746).

The revival of heqin diplomacy marked the restoration of relations between the Uyghur Khaganate and the Tang dynasty. As part of this arrangement, the Uyghur khagan pledged military support against the Tibetan threat, declaring: "*Once we were brothers, now I am your son-in-law. If Your Majesty faces a threat from Tibetans, I am willing to help with my army*" (Liu 1975: 5208). This proposal emerged during a period when Tibetans were actively invading China's

northern and western territories and had even plundered the capital, Changan. These pressing circumstances compelled the Tang emperor to accept the heqin agreement. The khagan's promise, as noted above, directly aligned with the Tang court's primary expectations for the alliance. Following the marriage in 788, the Uyghurs launched military campaigns against Tibet and, by 791, successfully repelled the Tibetan forces in Lingzhou prefecture. This victory ensured the Tang court could maintain communication with its protectorates in the Western Regions (Wang 2013: 52).

Sources indicate that Alp Qutlug Bilge Khagan died later that same year (Mackerras 1972: 160). Between 790 and 808, the Uyghurs faced a succession crisis. During this period, as the Tibetan threat persisted in the west, the Tang court took every possible measure to ensure that these changes did not negatively impact Uyghur-Tang relations. For instance, following the death of Alp Qutlug Bilge Khagan, his son Tenride Bolmysh Külüg Bilge Khagan ascended to the throne. To formally acknowledge his accession, the Tang court sent an envoy to the Uyghur headquarters in 790, carrying imperial gifts, utensils, and silks (Mackerras 1972: 100; Wang 2013: 52).

Following her husband's death, Princess Xianan continued her diplomatic role and, following the heqin agreement and the Uyghur tradition of levirate marriage, married three successive Uyghur khagans until the end of her life (Pan 1997: 120, 131). She lived among the Uyghurs for 21 years and died in 808 (Mackerras 1972: 189; Pan 1997: 120). The khagans she married and their respective reigns are as follows (Yoshida 2020: 91):

Alp Qutlug Bilge Khagan (合骨咄祿毗伽可汗) (r. 779-789)

Tenride Bolmysh Külüg Bilge Khagan (登里囉沒蜜施俱祿毗伽可汗) (r. 789-790)

Qutlug Bilge Khagan (汨咄祿毗伽可汗) (r. 790-795)

Tenride Ülüg Bulmysh Alp Qutlug Ulug Bilge Khagan (登里囉羽祿沒蜜施合汨咄祿胡祿毗伽可汗) (r. 795-808)

The death of Princess Xianan in 808 brought marriage diplomacy back into focus in Uyghur-Tang relations. During this period, the Uyghurs were ruled by

Ay Tenride Qut Bulmysh Alp Bilge Khagan, who requested a Chinese princess as early as 813 (Liu 1975: 5210; Mackerras 2004: 101).

#### e. Alp Küchlüg Bilge Khagan-Princess Taihe (太和公主)

Ay Tenride Qut Bulmysh Alp Bilge Khagan (愛登里囉汨沒蜜施合毗伽可汗), the eighth ruler of the Uyghurs (808–821), sought a royal marriage with the Tang dynasty in 813, five years after the death of the Xianan Princess. Initially rejected, his request was approved in 820 after years of delay (Drompp 2007: 58).

During this time in China, Emperor Dezong had passed away in 805. He was briefly succeeded by his son Shunzong (順宗), and then by Emperor Xianzong (憲宗) (r. 805–820). Records suggest that Xianzong postponed the Uyghur Khagan’s proposal due to economic concerns but later agreed to it following the advice of an advisor (Liu 1975: 5211; Pan 1997: 120; Wang 2013: 53).

This situation suggests a shift in the balance of relations between the Uyghurs and Tang China, with the Uyghurs losing some of their strategic importance to the empire. The Uyghur Khagan’s proposal for a heqin marriage came during a period when the An Lushan Rebellion had long been suppressed (763) and the Tibetan threat had been weakened following the Uyghur-Tibetan War of 791. Mackerras (1972: 31) summarizes the Tang perspective on the Uyghurs during this era: “*Although the Tang still retained a lively fear of their northern neighbours, they felt free to turn down Uighur requests.*”

While the Tang dynasty sought to reorganize its relations with the Uyghurs, it still maintained a balanced diplomatic approach. However, with the resurgence of Tibetan attacks, Emperor Xianzong finally approved the marriage of his daughter, Princess Taihe (太和公主), to the Uyghur Khagan Alp Bilge Khagan in 820. Both Emperor Xianzong and Alp Bilge Khagan died before the marriage could take place. Subsequently, Xianzong’s successor, Emperor Muzong (r. 820–824), sent his sister Taihe to marry the new Uyghur Khagan Chongde (崇德), also known as Kün Tenride Ülüg Bulmysh Alp Küchlüg Bilge Khagan (君登里邏羽錄沒蜜施合句主錄毗伽可汗) (Mackerras 2004: 101; Pan 1997: 120–121).

In the third year of their marriage (824), Chongde Khagan passed away. While there are no records about how many times Princess Taihe remarried, it is

likely that she entered into levirate marriages, following nomadic traditions, during her 22 years among the Uyghurs. She remained with the Uyghurs until the empire's collapse in 840. During this tumultuous period, Princess Taihe witnessed major events, including power struggles, rebellions, severe famines caused by harsh winters, and ultimately the fall of the Uyghur Empire. In 840, when the Kyrgyz attacked the Uyghur capital, Ordubalyq, they killed the Khagan and captured the princess. However, they later escorted her back to China. On the journey, the princess and her Kyrgyz escort were ambushed by Uyghurs under Öge Khagan, who seized the princess and used her as leverage to request land in northern China for resettlement. This request was denied by the Tang. In 843, Tang forces launched a surprise attack on the Uyghurs, rescuing the princess and bringing her back to China (Drompp 2007: 61-62; Pan 1997: 121; Sinor et al. 1998: 197).

Princess Taihe serves as a symbolic figure in the shift of Uyghur-Tang relations from alliance to hostility. In 821, the Uyghurs welcomed her with great ceremony as a khatun, but by 843, they used her as leverage against the Tang Empire. She was eventually rescued through military action and returned to China. The remarks of Tang General Li Deyu, who oversaw her return, reflect the Tang Empire's stance toward the Uyghurs at that point: *"Now that we have obtained the princess, we should do battle with the Uighurs again, exterminating them completely, so that none remain to cause later calamities"* (Sinor et al. 1998: 197).

### Conclusion

Between 744 and 840, five Chinese princesses were married to Uyghur khagans. Three of these princesses were daughters of three different emperors. The three Tang imperial princesses married to Uyghur khagans were Ningguo Princess, daughter of Emperor Suzong, who wed Uyghur ruler Bayan Chor Khagan in 758; Xianan Princess, daughter of Emperor Dezong, who married Alp Qutlug Bilge Khagan in 788; and Taihe Princess, daughter of Emperor Xianzong, who became the wife of Kün Tenride Ülüg Bulmysh Alp Küchlüg Bilge Khagan in 821. This indicates a unique and close relationship between China and the Uyghurs, as previous heqin marriages typically involved "secondary" princesses, not daughters of the imperial family.



The other princesses were daughters of Pugu Huaien, a Tang prince and general. The first of them, Princess Xiao Ningguo, is recorded in the sources as the concubine of Bayan Chor Khagan. However, given that she became Bögü Khagan's khatun after Bayan Chor Khagan's death, it can be inferred that Bayan Chor Khagan had also married her. Emperor Daizong arranged the marriage of another daughter of Pugu Huaien, who had grown up in the Tang court, to Bögü Khagan under the title Princess Chonghui. Additionally, although the sources do not provide clear and detailed information, they also record that another daughter of Pugu Huaien married Bögü Khagan. Therefore, it appears that Bögü Khagan married three daughters of Pugu Huaien, including one through levirate marriage with his father's wife.

Historically, heqin diplomacy was a product of China's effort to manage its relations with northern nomadic tribes according to its worldview. It was often employed to prevent invasions and secure borders. The institution of princesses in this diplomacy was thus redefined to serve this new purpose, with Chinese princesses married off to foreign rulers to maintain ideal relations with nomadic tribes. China did not use heqin diplomacy only with countries it viewed as threats. Chinese emperors also used these diplomatic marriages to form alliances with foreign countries that could benefit China's foreign policy. Tang-Uyghur relations, from the beginning to the end of the Uyghur Qaghanate, largely followed this direction. The absence of a recorded heqin agreement between the Tang and Köktürk Qaghanate suggests that the Uyghur Qaghanate was strategically more important to the Tang Empire than the Köktürk Qaghanate. This shift can be partly attributed to the internal turmoil of the Tang Empire, with the An Lushan Rebellion, and the external threat posed by the Tibetan Empire in the mid-8th century. The Uyghurs, by skillfully using the balance of power, managed to make Tang China dependent on them for many years, becoming one of the greatest powers of the time, both economically and politically.

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