CHAPTER 5

Qipchak Networks of Power in Mongol China

Michael C. Brose

Introduction to the Qipchaks

The people known to the Mongols as the Kibca’ut, the Qipchaks, were a con-
federation of Turkic tribes who inhabited a large area of the Russian steppe,
in present-day southern Ukraine and the Russian Federation around the Volga
River and to the west of Central Asia that is more commonly known as the
Qipchak steppe.¹ They are perhaps better known to Western readers as Comans,
who allied with Ukrainian Russian princes in the 1220s to fight the expansion
of the Mongol confederation to the west.² The Comans were the largest and

¹ When I first entered doctoral studies and expressed an interest in working on Yuan Dynasty
social history, my advisor urged me to read two books as a good introduction to this most
complex of imperial periods, China Among Equals, edited by Morris Rossabi, and his biogra-
phy of Qubilai. This was good advice because these two books taught me a lot about how
to research and write about history, and provided a standard of scholarship that I have tried
to meet, however partially, in my own work. His detailed and lively biography of Qubilai
brought this most important figure to life in a way that few biographies had done, and pro-
vided me with a superb and quick introduction into the Mongol world and their domina-
tion of China. It was also one of the most accessible monographs I had ever read, not least
because there was something for everyone from the graduate student and advanced scholar
looking for the most obscure details to the general reader getting their first taste of the his-
tory of the Mongols. His edited volume on China’s foreign relations provided a role model
of a different kind, one that made it acceptable to question the standard Sino-centric trope
and showed the value of studying the other members of that world where China really was
one state and society “among equals.” This was great reading for a first-year doctoral student!
Morris’s subsequent work on Yuan and Ming, and also in contemporary Mongolian history
and society, continues to be a model of scholarship for me and my own students, notable as
usual for his deep analytical insights spun out in persuasive, accessible prose, and always
favoring an approach that looks, if even slightly, outside the box. I hope that my contribution
honoring Morris’s career and groundbreaking scholarship can, in some small way, live up to
the standards and approaches he provided in those first works I read as a student and that
continue to shape his work.

² See Paul D. Buell, Historical Dictionary of the Mongol World Empire (Lanham, MD & Oxford:
(Chicago, 1991).
most powerful tribal contingent of the greater Qipchak confederation who dominated the broad swath of territory between the Atil and Dinester rivers.\(^3\) But Qipchak tribes also played important roles in the eastern half of the new Mongol Empire, especially in service to Möngke and Qubilai. This paper examines one Qipchak clan who were at the center of that service and who created a powerful social and political network in Mongol China that reached to the very highest levels of political power for a time. As the paper illustrates, these Qipchaks relied on the substantial social capital they accrued as payment for their military service to extend their influence in the Mongol civil bureaucracy in China. The paper also demonstrates the utility of social network analysis as an analytic approach to illustrate and understand how the Qipchaks in this family grew beyond military actors into the powerful individuals and family they became.

Qipchak History

The ethnic origin of the Qipchak tribes is complex, but most scholars agree that they are Turkic tribes with some Turkicized Mongol elements.\(^4\) The Qipchaks first came to the notice of Muslim writers starting in the eighth century, and to Russian and Chinese chroniclers in the early twelfth century. The first appearance of the term Qipchak as an ethnonym is found in a runic stone inscription that was set down by the Uyghur Qaghan Eletmish Bilge Qaghan (747–759). A ninth-century Islamic writer, Ibn Xurdadbih, recorded them in a list of northern Turkic peoples, next to the Kirgiz. In western sources (Rus, German, Latin, Armenian) the Qipchaks were known as Polovčin. Much about the specific tribal composition of the Qipchaks is still unclear, but they lived in a very loose tribal confederation in a large swath of land that was known by Islamic writers as the Dašt-i Qipchak (the “Qipchak Steppe”). One of the questions that has

---
