

# LIFE ALONG THE SILK ROAD

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Susan Whitfield

University of California Press  
Berkeley • Los Angeles

## *The Princess's Tale*

*Taihe, 821–843*

I have left my beautiful country, China,  
And have been taken to the nomads' camp.  
My clothing is of coarse felt and furs,  
I must force myself to eat their rancid mutton.  
How different in climate and custom are China and this land of nomads.  
Lady Weng, 'Eighteen Refrains to a Barbarian Flute', 3rd century AD

IN THE AUTUMN of 821 Taihe, an imperial princess, sister of the current emperor of China and daughter of his predecessor, rode in a howdah on a Bactrian camel. Her female attendants rode beside her on the treasured Ferghana horses from the imperial pastures, not side-saddle but with their silk pyjama'd legs straddling the high-pommelled saddles. As the sister of the Chinese emperor, the princess had been chosen as 'tribute': she was on her way to wed the Uighur kaghan to cement their countries' friendship. The emperor had already received soft cloth made of camel hair, brocades, sable furs, jade girdles, fifty camels and one thousand ponies as her bride price. Although she came from the east – from the imperial palace in China's capital, Chang'an – much of her dress, her ornaments and her aesthetic preferences came from the west, from the distant Central Asian steppe through which she was now travelling.

In her hair she wore fine pins of translucent white jade from the riverbed in Khotan, and decorations made of tortoiseshell from Vietnam and lapis lazuli, traded in Khotan but originating further west in Badakhstan. Her Buddhist rosary beads were of amber, perhaps from the shores of the Baltic or northern Burma. She



*Chinese Tang hairstyle and phoenix hair ornaments, from a stone engraving in an imperial Tang dynasty tomb near Chang'an*

carried perfumes for her body, her bath and her clothes, some believed to be aphrodisiacs and many originating in India, and mixtures of aloeswood and musk to make her breath smell sweet. Before leaving Chang'an, she had started to learn a new style of dance, the 'whirling' dance, usually performed by Sogdian girls dressed in crimson and green, spinning on a small, round rug. And she was especially fond of Kuchean music, a pleasure which she would continue to enjoy in the kaghan's palace where she would play on a gold-inlaid zither. 'Western' music was extremely popular among city society in China and there were several resident foreign orchestras at the imperial palace who performed at banquets and other functions, while the palace courtesans adapted the words of traditional Chinese songs to fit the new tunes. The courtesans in

### *The Princess's Tale*

the city made up their own lyrics, often satires on political scandals or corrupt officials. Street children soon picked these up and ran around the streets singing them in return for a few coins.

As an imperial princess, Taihe had left the palace infrequently, and then only to visit her country estate. But she was not wholly inactive or confined to the domestic sphere. She played polo, another import from the western regions, and, like many of the court ladies, she was an excellent horsewoman:

The Palace ladies in the front hall with their slender waists  
Are greatly afraid the first time they learn to ride.  
But soon they manage to sit up in the saddle and immediately  
want to gallop.  
How many times they lose the reins and clasp the pommel in  
their arms!\*

The imperial palace in Chang'an had its own polo field and five stable blocks which, apart from polo ponies, provided horses for generals, for hunting and for ceremonial purposes. Many of these were horses from western Central Asia, unrelated to the small, tough steppe ponies used by the ordinary soldier, and acquired as tribute or in trade from distant Central Asian kingdoms. Such horses were the subject of many legends. The most common held that they were half-dragon, that they were born in water and could carry their riders to heaven. In fact, some were probably related to the Nisaen horse, bred in Medea for the kings of Persia and mentioned by Herodotus as sweating blood. Others may have been a breed known as the Aryan horse, common around the Caspian Sea. It stood 15 or 16 hands high and was usually grey or bay in colouring with a large head and long, slender legs.

Chinese stories told of many countries renowned for their horses, such as the land in the far north, always covered in snow and called 'The Land of the Dappled Horse', or Arabia, where it was said that the horses could understand human speech. Gifts of horses were received from numerous countries and peoples, including Kashmir, Gandhāra and Arabia, but the moist valleys of

\* Poem by Lady Xu, consort of the ruler of Shu in south-west China, Meng Chang (r. 935-6).

## *The Princess's Tale*

Sogdiana and Ferghana to the west of the Pamirs were the supply for China's finest mounts. During the reign of the emperor Xuanzong, before Rokhshan's rebellion, six famous 'dan horses' from Ferghana were stabled in the palace. These horses performed their dance on the fifth day of the eighth month of the emperor's birthday, and were commemorated in stone reliefs that was in the past. The Tibetans had raided the imperial pastures so many times since then that it had not been possible to replenish the stock of fine horses. Now the Chinese military relied on the Uighurs for their vital supply of cavalry ponies, paying up to one or even fifty bolts of silk per head under the implicit threat that Uighur raids should they refuse to buy. In 773 the emperor tried to curb the Uighur's extortionate demands when the amount asked for 10,000 head exceeded the annual income of the Chinese state. Decreeing that 'the afflictions of the people should not be increased' he had bought only 6,000. But now the Uighurs regularly sent herds numbering tens of thousands, draining the Chinese exchequer. As each horse arrived at the Chinese pastures, it was branded with several marks to show its origin, agility, stamina and occupation – whether it was a post horse, a mount for a general, or for use in government service.

Taihe was the fourth Chinese princess to be promised to a Uighur kaghan. The first had been her great-great-aunt, sent in 758 when the Uighurs had first helped fight the rebel Rokhshan. She was no longer young when she was sent, having been widowed twice. When, after only a year among the Uighurs, she was widowed a third time she returned to China. Her younger sister, who accompanied her, remained behind and married the next kaghan. She died in Karabalghasun in 790, two years after another princess. Taihe's great-aunt, Xian'an, was sent in a hastily contrived bid to obtain Uighur military assistance against the Tibetans. Xian'an stayed there until her death in 808, marrying three other kaghans in succession. After stalling for seven years, in 820 the Chinese emperor eventually offered Princess Yong'an, Taihe's elder sister, to the present kaghan's predecessor. Fortunately for her, the kaghan died before she left Chang'an and not long afterwards.

### *The Princess's Tale*

Yong'an requested permission to be ordained as a Daoist priestess, thus avoiding any threat of future marriage alliances. She was not the first Tang princess to take this course. At the very beginning of the eighth century the way had been led by Princess Gold-Immortal and Princess Jade-Perfect, who started the long ordination procedure as young girls. Their father used state funds to endow each with an abbey, until complaints were made by the people and officials, after which the princesses used their own money to complete the work. Since then fifteen imperial princesses had been ordained, including two of Taihe's nieces.

Princess Taihe's fate had been decided only a month before she embarked on her journey, when nearly six hundred Uighurs had entered Chang'an to collect Princess Yong'an. The original embassy had numbered several thousand, but the majority had been asked to wait at the border, since Chang'an was ill-equipped to quarter so many foreign envoys at one time. Now that the kaghan to whom Yong'an had been promised had died, the emperor was in a dilemma. It was expensive for the court to give away a princess: the bride had to be sent with a dowry befitting her status, and the ponies and other goods brought by the Uighur embassy as 'tribute' had to be purchased with hard currency — in this case, silk. But though the Uighurs were not as strong as they had been, they were still important allies and would want the original agreement to be honoured.

Eventually it was decided that Taihe would be sent in Yong'an's place and a minister was dispatched to inform the Uighur embassy of the emperor's decree. A Chinese embassy would accompany the princess to Karabalghasun and bestow the insignia of office on the new kaghan: China always maintained the pretence that her neighbours were vassal states. An armed escort of Uighur cavalry would join them at the border to ensure their safety. The need for this was emphasized only a week later when Tibetan raiders were repulsed just south of the princess's intended route. A few years before, Tibetan soldiers had ridden to within two stages of Karabalghasun itself. In fact both sides hoped the guard would not be necessary as a Chinese embassy was already on its way to Lhasa to sign a peace treaty. This declared that 'henceforth, on either side, there shall be no enmity, no warmongering and no seizure of territory'.

### *The Princess's Tale*

The betrothal was announced on the first day of July and Princess Taihe left at the end of August by the city's north-eastern gate. The journey of over a thousand miles would take until the new year. Post horses could cover the distance in less than two months, but such a large caravan travelled slowly and stopped frequently. Taihe's brother, the emperor, and all the officials lined up in rank to bid her a ceremonial farewell. The people of Chang'an had also come out to watch the spectacle. The procession of Uighur horsemen, the princess and her retinue, Chinese officials and camels laden with gifts for the kaghan took several hours to pass through the gate and start on its northward journey.

Princess Taihe was on her way to a palace that could rival the imperial court in its opulence, but it must have felt as if she were bound for a very alien land. The first part of her journey was through Chinese territory which extended to the northernmost reaches of the Yellow river. The river flows from its source on the Tibetan plateau far to the south-west of Chang'an, crosses the Gansu corridor and then makes a long sweep north before turning east and then south, doubling back on itself almost to the capital. The land enclosed by this great curve is called the Ordos, a region of desert and mud, and home to the Tanguts. Beyond, to the north and west, lies the Gobi desert, and to the north-east the steppe home of other peoples such as the Khitans. The Chinese sought to control the Ordos and had established garrisons on the far banks of the river. Here also were the trading-posts established at the instigation of the Uighurs. But the Chinese hold on the territory was precarious; since they had withdrawn their forces from the western garrisons during the rebellion of 763, their western flank was unprotected. The Tibetans regularly crossed the Gansu corridor into Uighur territory and made raids along the western edges of the Ordos, while the Tanguts and Khitans, two peoples who were to form powerful kingdoms in later centuries, threatened from the north-east. The eroded, stamped earth walls marking the boundaries of earlier Chinese kingdoms and bisecting the river's bend at the southern edge of the Ordos were a reminder of the long struggle between the Chinese and their northern neighbours in this land.

Though the Chinese army had powerful crossbows, sophisticated armour, steel swords, gunpowder and mechanical catapults,

### *The Princess's Tale*

and Chinese soldiers could ride and shoot like nomads – indeed, many were themselves nomads – they never succeeded in dominating the many peoples pressing at their borders. For this reason, they had long used diplomacy and bribes as much as military force in defence of their territory. The princess was part of this strategy. The practice of sending princesses to cement alliances had started hundreds of years before, and during the course of the current Chinese dynasty over twenty ‘princesses’ were dispatched. In the seventh century a Turkic kaghan has asked for a Chinese prince to marry his daughter, provoking outrage at court: ‘Never since ancient times has an imperial prince been married to a barbarian woman.’ (The substitute, a cousin of the empress, was imprisoned on his arrival.) However, before the princesses sent to the Uighurs, only distant relatives of the emperor – or daughters by lesser concubines – had been chosen as the brides of foreigners.

Since the rebellion of Rokhshan the ruling Tang dynasty had become insecure and lacking in confidence. This insecurity was particularly evident in their increasing rejection of all things foreign, including people: ethnicity, then as now, was largely a matter of politics. The Tang rulers of China claimed descent from the founder of Daoism but in fact their forebears were from the very cultures they were now dismissing as ‘barbaric’ – those of Turkic Central Asia. The influences from outside, welcomed in the early part of the dynasty, were now so assimilated into Chinese culture that few could discern where traditional culture ended and ‘foreign’ influence began. But where the influence was obvious – as in the case of Buddhism – there was growing xenophobia. Buddhism had been practised in China since at least the first century AD, and had been fully assimilated by the start of the Tang dynasty in 618, but towards the end of the dynasty some ministers began to use it as a scapegoat for China’s ills. In 819 a leading statesman and scholar submitted an anti-Buddhist polemic to the emperor. It was rejected, but over the next few decades it became habitual to divert blame from the government for high taxes and rising inflation on to ‘foreigners’ and ‘foreign religions’ – Uighur moneylenders and tax-exempt Buddhist monks.

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*The Princess's Tale*

The land Princess Taihe was going to in the autumn of 821 lay north-west of Chang'an but the caravan first headed north-east to the Yellow river valley at Hezhong, meaning 'On the River'. The heart of China was defined by the course of the Yellow river and the fertile plains nurtured by its loess-laden waters. The caravan then headed north through the province called 'East of the River' to Taiyuan, 'The Extremity of the Plains', where there was a Manichean temple, established at the behest of the Uighurs to serve the considerable community of their countrymen. This was the first large town beyond their border and had recently become a major producer of expensive wine made from the mare's teat grape from Kocho: the loess slopes of the surrounding countryside were covered with vineyards. Most of the produce was sent to Chang'an where Taihe's brother, the emperor, had declared on first tasting it: 'When I drink this, I am instantly conscious of harmony suffusing my four limbs. It is the true "Princeling of Grand Tranquillity"'. A contemporary Chinese poet wrote further of the charms of both the vineyards and their produce in the Taiyuan regions (also known at this time as Qin):

The grape vine from untrodden lands,  
Its branches gnarled in tangled bands,  
Was brought the garden to adorn  
With verdure bright; now, upward borne,  
The branches climb with rapid stride,  
In graceful curves, diverging wide;  
Here spread and twin, there languid fall,  
Now reach the summit of the wall;  
And then with verdure green and bright,  
Enchanting the beholder's sight,  
Beyond the mansion's roof they strive,  
As though with conscious will alive.  
And now the vine is planted out,  
It climbs the wooden frame about,  
The lattice shades with tender green,  
And forms a pleasant terrace screen.  
With dregs of rice well soak the roots,  
And moisten all its leafy shoots,

*The Princess's Tale*

The flowers like silken fringe will blow,  
And fruit like clustered pearls hang low.  
On mare's milk grapes the hoarfrost gleams,  
Shine dragon scales like morning beams.  
Once hither came a travelling guest;  
Amazed his host he thus addressed,  
As strolling round he chanced to see  
The fruit upon th'o'er-hanging tree:  
We men of Qin, such grapes so fair,  
Do cultivate as gems most rare;  
Of these delicious wine we make,  
For which men ne'er their thirst can slake.  
Take but a measure of this wine,  
And Liangzhou's rule is surely thine.\*

The caravan stayed in the town for some time, resting, taking on provisions – including both grapes and wine for the princess on her journey – and preparing for the next stage which continued north on the eastern side of the Yellow river, thus avoiding the treacherous and dangerous Ordos country, and led to the army garrison where the Sogdian and Uighur merchants had been massacred half a century before. From here it turned west to follow the northern banks of the river. Hills rose on the northern horizon but once past these, at the river's southern bend, the road veered north-west to the Piti springs. This was the northern boundary of Chinese territory. From here there were many months of marching across the Gobi desert before the Princess would see water in any abundance, let alone another river.

The short summer was nearing its end and the ground was hardening with frost, but it was clear, dry and bright. The caravan only made short stages, stopping to camp early each day to allow the animals to graze. Later the camels would need fodder, for unlike horses they were unable to scrape away the ice and snow from the pasture with their soft pads, and the Uighurs would go out to hunt gazelle to supplement their diet of mutton and beef. When the second kaghan had declared the country Manichean,

\* Poem by Liu Yuxi (772–842), translated by T. Sampson, 1869.

### *The Princess's Tale*

apart from ordering that 'all sculpted and painted images of demons be entirely destroyed by fire', he had also suggested that the people should 'eat vegetables'. However, Taihe saw little sign of the suggestion being heeded during her journey or thereafter. Everyone ate meat in large quantities: cattle, sheep, yak, camel, horse, gazelle, fox, hare or whatever could be raised or caught. Nor were they abstemious in drink: the caravan carried large quantities of fermented mares' milk.

As they advanced into Uighur territory there was little to remind Taihe of home. She had not visited much of her homeland but she knew it through literature and art. For her it was a land of verdant river valleys, lush and spectacular mountain scenery, rain-drops falling on plantain leaves, chrysanthemums set among the rust-coloured leaves of autumn, bamboo-covered hillsides, and distinct seasons characterized by a variety of flowers, insects and birds. The contrast with the desolate, snow-swept grey landscape she awoke to every morning was startling. The words written by a Chinese princess sent west as a bride eight hundred years before ran through her mind: 'My family married me to a lost horizon . . . I wish I were a brown goose and could fly back home.'

One long day in the seemingly featureless landscape followed another. Princess Taihe had nothing to do. In the mornings she was dressed and brought food by her attendants, and her camel was prepared. During the first couple of months when the weather was still mild and the landscape showed some variety, the stages passed quite quickly. When she arrived at each camp, her tent would already be erected and rugs, tables and small folding chairs laid out inside. She was brought water for washing, fresh tea and various dainties to eat. On many evenings she would practise her zither or try to compose poetry about the landscape and her feelings of homesickness, both perennial subjects of the Chinese poet. But after a few months the dry air was bitter with frost and she had to cover her face for protection: there was nothing to look at anyway. She grew bored with the interminable journey, as each day merged into the next, and each month into the one that followed, until she lost all sense of time.

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### *The Princess's Tale*

The lunar new year, an important festival in China, was approaching and she thought of the celebrations she would be missing. But gradually the mood in the caravan became livelier and she realized that they were finally approaching the capital. A track became discernible which soon widened into a well-trodden road. Now there were small villages and farms scattered across the land and people lined the road to watch the caravan pass. Riders went ahead to inform the kaghan of their approach and one evening a delegation arrived from the capital, now only two stages away. After some discussion between the delegation and the Uighurs in the caravan the Chinese officials were approached. It transpired that the kaghan wished the princess to proceed with them by a slightly different route so that she would arrive at the capital unannounced and could be presented to the kaghan in private: he wanted to see her before the marriage. The request was refused, despite protests from the Uighur courtiers that a previous Chinese princess had agreed to this. The ministers accompanying Taihe assured the kaghan's envoys that it would be an unallowable breach of protocol, whatever the previous princess had decided.

The next day the walls of Karabalghasun came into view on the left bank of the Orkhon river. The river spread across the flat land in broad, shallow branches. Since it was deep winter – February 822 – the water was frozen and so easy to cross. The trees, like everything else, were grey with frost. The city itself was rectangular, enclosed by walls that stretched almost five miles from north to south and one and a half miles from east to west. The royal palace, which was also walled, lay in the north-eastern corner. Nine large iron gates led into the city. The princess could clearly see the kaghan's famous tent, erected on the flat roof of his palace and completely covered in gold. She had heard that the Tibetan emperor also had such a tent, a link with the nomadic past. The kaghan would hold court in his, which could accommodate a hundred men. There were numerous other tents erected both inside and outside the city walls, most of them to house the large Uighur army.

When they reached the city Princess Taihe was shown into a large tent. Thick wool rugs covered the walls and floors, overlaid with finer silk carpets. The large cushions laid out along the walls

were covered with the finest Chinese and Sogdian woven silk and brocade in red, green, blue and gold, and the armrests were made of sanderswood decorated with gold, camphorwood and stained ivory. Furs of every description were heaped around – sable, ermine, spotted hare and purple-dyed deerskin. The princess was offered wine from a purple cup with a delicate motif of grapes and vines, made from translucent crystal, rare even in the Chinese court. Before her she saw low tables spread with fruits and nuts – apricots, grapes, melons, apples, walnuts and almonds – and she was then served fragrant tea in a delicate cup of fine porcelain, lobed in imitation of Persian silverware. There were few luxuries that the Uighurs could not afford with their plentiful supply of Chinese silk from the pony sales. Her interpreter explained that the kaghan wished her to dress in Uighur clothes and that he was sending Uighur princesses to teach her the customs of their country. An older maidservant would help her dress and prepare her hair. The Chinese ministers, in the meantime, selected a suitable day for the ceremony.

Taihe's Chinese dress consisted of an under-robe and baggy trousers made of thin silk, the trousers tied with a cord. Over this she wore a richly woven robe, like the Japanese kimono, tied loosely below the waist and cut so as to reveal considerable *décolleté*. On top she wore an apron-like garment in a contrasting colour which reached to the floor and was fastened around her chest (as in traditional Korean dress). Finally she draped a long, narrow silk shawl across her shoulders and over her arms. Her hair was elaborately styled in a high bun and the toes of her red silk embroidered slippers curled up so that they could just be seen peeping out below her robe. The silk was all woven in the imperial workshops. In the heady days of the emperor Xuanzong, a hundred imperial weavers made cloth solely for the Lady Yang, the emperor's favourite consort. Then it had been the fashion among palace ladies to wear the 'foreigner's robe', a plain, collared garment like that worn by Turkic horsemen. Now the latest fad was for impossibly wide sleeves which used as much silk as the rest of the robe.

On the chosen day Taihe first had to show herself outside the tent dressed in ordinary Uighur clothes and bow to the kaghan,

*The Princess's Tale*



*Chinese girl dressed in hufu, from a wall painting  
in a Tang dynasty imperial tomb near Chang'an*

who was sitting on the tower of the palace. She then returned inside and the Uighur maidservant helped her to change. She was given first an undergown of red silk with a modest, plain, round neck, over which went a long crimson robe with wide, embroidered lapels and decorated with red and white braid down the central opening, sleeves and skirt of the robe. The sleeves were narrow, again in contrast to Chinese fashion. Next her hair was styled in large loops on either side of her head and decorated with gold and lapis pins and animal ornaments. Then a wide, red silk scarf was wound around her head, both ends falling down her back almost to the floor, though tied in elaborate bows at her hips. Lastly she was given long, gold earrings and a narrow, gold crown resembling a small boat with high points fore and aft.

Now dressed in her queen's robes she again left the tent and bowed. Then she was helped into a sedan-chair which was led by the nine chief ministers nine times around the court. After this she

## *The Princess's Tale*



*Uighur princess holding a lotus bud, ninth-century cave mural*

climbed up the tower and sat beside the kaghan, facing east. The kaghan's silk robe was also long but had a high collar and bore a pattern of large roundels. He was bearded and moustached and he wore his hair long. On his head there perched a high, pointed crown held in place by a red ribbon fastened under his chin. Broad ribbons wound around his hair and reached down his back. His robe was split up each side to reveal his high, leather boots and he wore an elaborately decorated belt made of gold and jade, from which hung his jewel-encrusted dagger. The ministers were similarly dressed, although less finely. They presented themselves in turn to the kaghan, addressing him as 'God of the Moon and God of the Sun', and then to Taihe, recognizing her as their new khatun – their queen. She also noticed the Manichean clergy in their distinctive white robes and tall white hats: unlike the Buddhists they did not shave their heads and many had long beards.

Taihe was not simply a symbol of the alliance between the Uighurs and Chinese: as khatun, she had power in the Uighur

### *The Princess's Tale*

court. She was allowed to establish her own quarters and for almost a year she had the company of the Chinese ministers. When they had to return to China in the late autumn of 822 she was distraught. She arranged a great banquet and presented them with bolts of silk and all sorts of ornaments to take back to her sisters, including hairpieces made of beaten gold in the shape of the steppe deer. That summer the kaghan had received an envoy sent by the leader of the Arab forces in Transoxania, Tanim ibn Bahr. There had been Arab embassies in Chang'an so Taihe knew something of these peoples. Her husband sent relays of horses to transport the envoy from Lake Issuk-kul in the far south-west of Uighur territory. Tanim ibn Bahr covered three stages each day, travelling for twenty days across the steppe where, he reported, there was grass and water but no villages and therefore no food. The men in charge of the horses lived in tents at each post, but had no spare provisions. After this he reached the start of cultivation and travelled for another twenty days through villages and farms before reaching Karabalghasun. He also reported seeing the golden tent from afar but failed to mention the queen in his brief account of his journey.

We know nothing of Taihe's relationship with her new husband. China during the Tang dynasty was not particularly prudish and the restrictions which characterized late imperial Chinese society were not yet in force: foot-binding only started to appear in the next century, divorce by mutual consent was still part of the legal code, and widows were allowed to remarry. Uighur women were probably subject to even fewer restrictions than their Chinese counterparts – Uighur princesses accompanied several of the embassies to China, including the one sent for Taihe. Chinese authors produced explicit sex manuals and the 'Art of the Bed-chamber' was regarded as a branch of medicine. Deprivation of sex was considered by many doctors to be injurious to health, although Daoist practitioners enjoined their male patients not to ejaculate, believing that semen contained the vital energy – *qi* – necessary for health and long life. A seventh-century text by a Daoist physician, for example, states:



### *The Princess's Tale*

Until a man has reached forty he is usually full of vigorous passion. But as soon as he has passed his fortieth year he will suddenly notice that his potency is decreasing and, just at that time, countless diseases will descend on him like a swarm of bees. If this is allowed to continue then he will be beyond cure, but Pengzi has said, 'Curing one human being by another is the real cure.' Thus when a man reaches forty it is time for him to acquire a thorough knowledge of the Art of the Bedchamber.

The principle of the Art of the Bedchamber is very simple, yet few can practise it. It is simply to copulate with ten different women on one night without once emitting semen.

Erotic poetry, essays and literature also circulated, written by respected literati. Reproduction was discussed openly. The dates of menstruation of all the wives and concubines of the Chinese emperor were carefully noted along with the date and hour of each of the emperor's successful sexual encounters. We do not know if Princess Taihe was similarly monitored in the Uighur court nor if she bore the kaghan children.

The princess's husband died only two years after her arrival and a new kaghan was appointed. At the death of her husband, the first Chinese princess to marry a Uighur kaghan had been informed that she was expected to commit suicide so that she could be buried alongside her late husband. She refused to do so, but made a concession by slashing her face with a knife, a traditional Uighur sign of mourning. Taihe did not commit suicide either, but neither did she leave, though she would have had the opportunity to do so either with the Uighur embassy which was sent to inform the Chinese court of the kaghan's death, or with the Chinese embassy that was sent back to acknowledge the new kaghan in the spring of 825. This latter brought a staggering half million bolts of silk for pony purchases. A bolt, about thirty feet, is the maximum amount that can be made by a skilled silk-weaver in a day. Half a million bolts therefore represented over ten thousand days' work.

Perhaps Princess Taihe was persuaded to remain in Karabalghasun by her Chinese advisers for political reasons, or to avoid the expense attendant on providing a new princess; perhaps by this time she had married the new kaghan. Embassies arrived every few

### *The Princess's Tale*

years from China and the city was home to a considerable Chinese population. The embassies always brought letters, news and gifts for her, and would pay her court, and in return she sent elaborate gifts of her own, among them five female archers, exceptionally skilled on horseback, and two young boys from the tribe of Shatou Turks on the Uighur empire's southern border. Another kaghan came to the throne in 832 after the assassination of his predecessor and many of his ministers. Still Taihe remained. By this time Uighur fortunes were in serious decline: there was dissent at court and frequent incursions by Kirghiz armies.

The Kirghiz were a forest-dwelling people from the north-west of the Uighur empire, some forty days' journey from the Uighur capital, a land where 'the pine trees grew so tall that an arrow could not reach their peaks'. They had been in conflict with the Uighurs for twenty years and although their language was Turkic, they were a tall people with light hair and green or blue eyes. They despised those with dark hair and dark eyes, believing them to be the descendants of a renegade Chinese general of the first century BC who had defected to the nomads. Many of their customs differed from those of the Turks: they did not lacerate their faces as a sign of mourning, and their ruler was called the aje, not the kaghan (although they later adopted the Turkic appellation).

In 839 a crisis was reached in Karabalghasun when the kaghan executed two of his ministers for treason and their supporters retaliated by assassinating him. The winter of 839 was exceptionally severe. Frost settled early into the earth, there were heavy falls of snow and by the end of the year supplies of fodder had been exhausted. Livestock died in their tens of thousands. The army defending the capital was no longer able to repel the continuing Kirghiz advances and, in 840, they seized the capital, killed the new kaghan and set fire to the city. Its residents and those who lived on the surrounding farms fled south: Princess Taihe was among them.

The Kirghiz soon moved back to their base in the forests, but owing to the lack of any serious opposition, they held control of the former Uighur lands until 924 when the Khitans, a people from the north-east of China, moved in.

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Princess Taihe's journey in 840 was very different from the one she had made two decades before. She was travelling in haste, fleeing for her life across land which was now as familiar to her as her homeland. When she and her fellow refugees reached the bend of the Yellow river in the autumn the Chinese armies garrisoned nearby were alarmed at their numbers: some 100,000 eventually gathered and set up residence in the lee of the Yin hills. The new kaghan informed the Chinese envoys sent to ascertain his plans that he had no immediate intention of trying to recapture his kingdom but would settle on the Chinese border until the situation was more favourable. The Chinese sent food and clothing to the restless Uighurs at Taihe's behest, but in the meantime they called up their troops, repaired the border forts and issued weapons. What followed was no surprise.

In the spring of 843 a Chinese expeditionary force took the Uighur camp unawares. The Uighurs were driven back and thousands were killed at a place the Chinese later named 'Slaughtering the Uighurs Hill'. Many more surrendered and still others fled south to the Silk Road where they settled in Ganzhou, on the Gansu corridor, and Kocho, in the Tarim basin. The kaghan also fled but was hunted down and murdered a few years later in the Gobi desert. Over the next few generations those Uighurs still remaining in north China became naturalized.

Meanwhile the princess had travelled south and reached the Chinese capital in the late spring of 843. Her Uighur escort was turned back at the city gates and rumours that she had murdered the Uighur prince accompanying her were not confirmed. The emperor called his ministers together to discuss what to do with her. Some were opposed to allowing her back because of hostilities with the Uighurs but the emperor pleaded on her behalf: 'It has often made me sorrowful to think of her,' he said. 'She must have thought many times of her homeland with great longing.' In the end it was decided to welcome her back, and the imperial guards were sent to escort her to the palace from Zhangjing temple, outside the north-eastern gate of the city from whence she had departed over two decades before. Her Central Asian life was over.