

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# HSIUNG-NU SOCIAL HISTORY – Gender Relations

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**Overview** Hsiung-nu society was a male-dominated society and varying roles and the social status of Hsiung-nu men is well documented in the historical sources. However, in these same sources of information about the Hsiung-nu practically no information about the role and status of women in Hsiung-nu society is provided. From what is known about women in other, better documented nomadic pastoral societies in central Eurasia, it is likely that Hsiung-nu women had a higher status and relatively more freedom than women in settled, agricultural societies. In addition to their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and their responsibilities in the campsites, Hsiung-nu women were probably invaluable partners in caring for the tribe's herds.

**Royal Brides** Although Hsiung-nu women are almost invisible in the historical record, there is one group of women in Hsiung-nu society who are mentioned more frequently – the Chinese princesses sent as brides to the Hsiung-nu rulers as part of a peace alliance known as the *ho-ch'in* (pinyin *heqin*). However, the status of these royal brides or their role, if any, in Hsiung-nu court life is unknown.

### Readings

Beckwith, Christopher I. *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present*. Princeton, 2009.

Christian, David. *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, Vol. 1. Malden, MA, 1998.

Harmatta, János et al. *History of civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol 2. Paris, 1994.

Sinor, Denis (ed.). *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*. Cambridge, 1990.

Twitchett, Denis and Fairbank, John K. (eds.). *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 1. Cambridge, 2008.

### Discussion Questions

1. Why do the surviving historical sources provide almost no information on the role and status of women in Hsiung-nu society?
2. Why were Chinese princesses included among the gifts provided to the *Shan-yü* as party of the *ho-ch'in* treaties?