

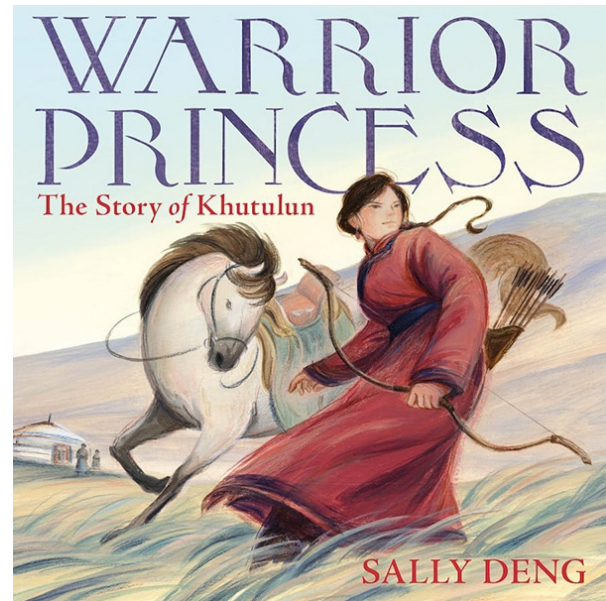


Culture Notes

Warrior Princess: The Story of Khutulun by Sally Deng

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers, 2022 Nonfiction, set in China and Mongolia
2022 Of Note, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

Sally Deng's picture book *Warrior Princess: The Story of Khutulun* brings to life one of Mongolia's most legendary figures, blending vivid imagery with tales of strength and independence. At the heart of the narrative is Khutulun, a figure whose reputation as a fearsome wrestler has captivated audiences for centuries. Yet, separating myth from historical reality reveals layers of cultural significance tied to Mongolian wrestling traditions, gender roles, and sartorial heritage.



Khutulun's portrayal as a divine wrestler traces its roots to *The Travels of Marco Polo*, where she appears under the Tartar name "Aigiarm" and is described as a warrior princess so formidable that no man in her kingdom could defeat her. Suitors forfeited a hundred horses each time they lost to her in combat, and since no one was able to defeat her, she amassed ten thousand horses.

However, scholarly research casts doubt on the historical veracity of Khutulun's mythic wrestling prowess. A study of Mongolian wrestling during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries concluded that while Marco Polo's account mentions a royal princess as a successful wrestler, there is no evidence of women participating in traditional Mongolian wrestling (Batmunkha and Boldbaatar 996). Wrestling, part of the "Eriin Gurvan Naadam" (Three Manly Games: wrestling, archery, and horse racing), was historically a male domain. Khutulun's story, as recounted by Marco Polo, is most likely based on legend rather than factual record.

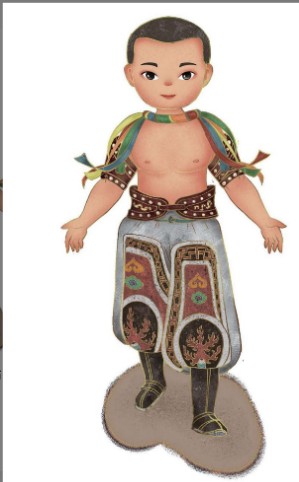

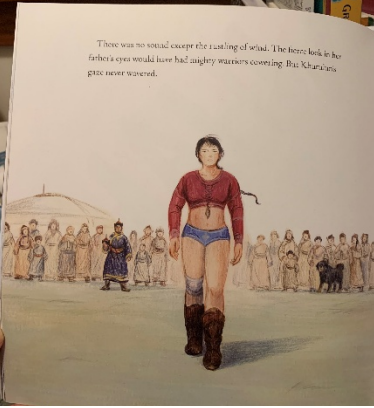
Wrestling, or "bukh," occupies a sacred place in Mongolian culture, symbolizing strength, nobility, and tribal identity. Batmunkha and Boldbaatar emphasize that wrestlers were revered as "symbols representing ancient ideas of strength, outstanding sportsmanship, and nobility," and wrestling became integral to state ceremonies during the Mongol Empire" (988). During Khutulun's era (13th century), two distinct wrestling

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costumes prevailed. One, similar to the long-sleeved top and shorts depicted in Deng’s book, featured a “zodog” (chest garment) with an open front and “shuudag” (short pants)—though Deng’s artistic rendering of a feminine top deviates from historical reality, as male wrestlers’ zodogs were designed for functionality, with exposed chests to facilitate grappling (Batmunkha and Boldbaatar 997). The other wrestling costume consisted of wide, long pants called “banjil,” worn in some regions for wrestling (Batmunkha and Boldbaatar 993). These garments reflected the sport’s masculine origins, with no specialized female versions existing at the time.

	 <p>Hat, zodog (jacket), shuudag (briefs), boots</p>	 <p>There was no sexual except the rustling of silks. The better look to her father's eyes would have had angry warriors coming. But Khutulun gets never wavered.</p>
<p>Mongolian wrestler’s costume in China, illustration from 了不起的中华服饰:蒙古族》 [The Magnificent Costumes of China: Mongolian Ethnic Group]</p>	<p>A traditional wrestling costume consists of a hat, zodog, shuudag, boots, stockings, and boot bindings, illustration from the Mongulai website: https://mongolianstore.com/ (Otgonbaatar).</p>	<p>Khutulun’s wrestling costume as pictured in <i>Warrior Princess: The Story of Khutulun</i>.</p>

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Mongolian everyday and ceremonial attire further enriches the cultural context of Deng’s book. As described in the Chinese children’s book 《了不起的中华服饰:蒙古族》 [*The Magnificent Costumes of China: Mongolian Ethnic Group*], Mongolian clothing is characterized by “wide robes, broad sashes, and elaborate decorations, embodying the nomadic people’s bold spirit” (Yang 2019, author’s translation). Daily wear typically included fur robes and hats, as depicted in Deng’s illustrations of Khutulun’s family. Notably, Khutulun’s mother’s headdress bears a striking resemblance to the Barhu Mongol noblewomen’s headdress— “silver ornaments inlaid with corals, shaped like ox horns, which served as tribal emblems and symbols of royal status” (Yang 2019, author’s translation). This attention to detail aligns with historical records, where a king’s wife’s attire and accessories signified their clan’s identity and prestige.

	
<p>Silver-inlaid coral horn-shaped headdress of the Mongolian noble consort Barhu, illustration from 《了不起的中华服饰:蒙古族》 [<i>The Magnificent Costumes of China: Mongolian Ethnic Group</i>, author’s translation]</p>	<p>Khutulun’s mother’s headdress in Sally Deng’s picture book <i>Warrior Princess: The Story of Khutulun</i>.</p>



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In *Warrior Princess*, Sally Deng weaves myth and culture to celebrate Khutulun's legacy, while grounding the narrative in authentic Mongolian traditions. Although Khutulun's wrestling feats may be a product of legend, the book illuminates the central role of wrestling in Mongolian identity and the richness of the Mongolian nobility's clothes and wrestling attire.

While *Warrior Princess: The Story of Khutulun* shines with its vivid storytelling and thoughtful portrayal of Mongolian culture, it would have benefited from a list of the resources that the author consulted during her creative process. For readers and educators eager to dig deeper—whether to investigate the roots of Khutulun's legend beyond Marco Polo's account, verify details about Mongolian wrestling attire, or connect the book's imagery to authentic cultural traditions—a resources list would have encouraged further exploration of the rich cultural context that shapes Khutulun's story.

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2026

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