

KHITANS AND CENTRAL ASIANS

A STUDY IN THEIR BILATERAL RELATIONS

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Abstract:

The period of Qara Khitai rule in Central Asia (1124-1218) has been generally a neglected subject, despite the availability of wide range of literature on it in Arabic, Persian and Chinese. However, there has been a revival of interest in the recent years. Michal Biran's book on *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and Islamic World*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2005, speaks for the same. Biran is the first scholar whose writing on the Qara Khitais was based on the information contained in the Muslim and Chinese accounts. Nonetheless, certain gaps exist. For instance, one has yet to know a lot about the pre-Qara Khitai period. Similarly, the relations of the Khitans with the Central Asian rulers before Yelü Dashi established the Khitan empire, finds just little mention in the modern works.

Keywords:

Khitans, Qara Khitai, Central Asia, Yelü Dashi, Qarakhanids, Ghaznavids.

Introduction:

In 1125, Khitan or Liao Empire (907-1125) was defeated by Jurchens. Pursuant to that, several Khitans headed by Yelü Dashi came to Central Asia and laid down the foundation for the empire of the Qara Khitai or Xi Liao (1125-1218).¹ Having been referred to as a Chinese dynasty² in medieval Chinese accounts and "Infidel Turks" in the Muslim chronicles, the Qara Khitai was the only Central Asian dynasty³ that protected Islam from its enemies.

With its capital in Balasaghun, the state of the Qara Khitai had such vassals as the Idiquts of Turfan, Eastern and Western Qarakhanids, Khwarezmshahs, Qarluqs, Qangli, Qipchaqs and Naimans and after the battle of Qatwan in 1141, the borders of this state extended to as far as

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¹ For details on their political history, see: M. Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and Islamic world*, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

² Touktou, "Liao shi," Tr. K.D. Jusaev, *Kyrgyzdardyn jana Kyrgyzstandyn taryhyi bulaktary*, 2, Bishkek, 2003, 82-86.

³ Muḥ ammad ibn Khandshāh Mīrkhwānd, *Tārīkh-i ravzat aṣ-ṣafā*, 4, Tehrān, 1960, 71; Shams ad-Dīn Muḥ ammad b. Aḥ mad Dhahabī, *Ta'rīkh al-Islām*, Ed. B. 'A Ma'rūf, 62, Beirut, 1988, 330; Ala-ad-Din Ata-Malik Juwaini, *The History of the World Conqueror*, Tr. J.A Boyle, Manchester, 1958, Rpr. Manchester, 1997, 79-80, 89.

the Aral Sea in the west, Eastern Turkestan in the east, lake Balqash in the north and Khotan in the south.

However, the said empire suffered a defeat at the hands of the Khwarezmshah in 1210 for the reason that is best explained by Āta Malīk Juwainī in his *Tarīkh-i Jahāngushā*. Juwainī mentions the following story that he heard from his nephew: “Beyond these Turks (i.e. Qara Khitai) are a people stubborn in their vengeance and fury and exceeding Gog and Magog in the multitude of their numbers. And the people of Khitai were in truth the wall of Zul-Qarnain between us and them. And it is unlikely, when that wall is gone, that there will be any peace within this realm or that any man will recline in comfort and enjoyment. Today I am in mourning for Islam.”⁴ It is to be noted that the Qara Khitai accepted Islamic faith only towards the last phase of their reign. Nevertheless, the Muslim chronicles mention them as the defenders of Islam.

The present paper is devoted to a discussion seeking to reply the following questions: How did the “infidel” dynasty win the distinction of being the champion of Islam? How could it legitimize their rule? Were the Qara Khitai aliens or the natives? Besides other things, the authors tries to examine the relationship of the Khitans with Central Asians before the emergence of the Qara Khitai state.

Content:

The ruin of the Uighur Gaganate (Khanate) in 840, and the Tang state in 906 resulted in the formation of the Liao state in Manchuria and Khitan state in Central Asia between 907 and 1125. While some Khitan tribes joined the Liao state, others joined the Qara Khitai state in Central Asia region. The migrations of the Khitans finds adequate mention in the records of the Muslim chronicles. For instance, according to Ibn Al-Athir, more than 300,000 families of Turkic tribes left China in 1017/1018, and these included the Khitans also. Taking advantage of illness of Tughankhan, the ruler of the Qarakhanids (998-1018), they tried to conquer the Qarakhanids state. When they reached as close as 8 km to Balasaghun, the capital of the Qarakhanid, Tughankhan learned about this and raised an army of 120,000 souls in defence of his country. On this, the Khitans retreated, but Tughankhan chased them for three months and killed 200,000 and imprisoned 100,000 Khitans.⁵ Both Ibn

⁴ *The History of the World Conqueror*, 347

⁵ Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kamīl fī-t-Tārīkh*, Tr. P.G. Bulgakov, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 2006, 183-184.

Al-Athir and Bar Hebraeus trace the occurrence of the event in 1014,⁶ though Narshakhi mentions it to have taken place in 1012/13.⁷

According to Ibn Al-Athir, 16,000 families of the Khitans were sent by Arslankhan, the ruler of the Qarakhanid state (1102-1130) to safeguard the borders towards Transoxiana. As the Khitan population was enormously growing, Arslankhan tried to restrict it by separating them from their wives. On this, many of the Khitans moved to Balasaghun and settled there. Here, they often had skirmishes with Arslankhan.⁸ However, their area of migration was even bigger than Transoxiana. For instance, in 1103, a Qipchaq prince namely Kitanopa was killed in the battle between the Russians and Qipchaqs, and the embassy sent by the Kumans to the ruler of Kiev (Khiva) was headed by a person namely Khitan.⁹

The marches by the above mentioned Khitans to the western regions is not mentioned in Liao shi. Considering this, G.G.Pikov has concluded that it might be the Mongol and Turkic tribes who actually lived in the western borders of the Khitan state:¹⁰ may be they included some Khitans and Tatar tribes as is directly or indirectly recorded in Liao shi.

In 1012, the Tzubu, or the Tatar tribes, who lived within the Khitan state, rebelled. The rebellion started in Kedun and subsequently spread to other border areas of the Khitan state. Though it was crushed in 1013 by Liao aristocrat Yelu Huag, yet most Tatars succeeded to escape to the west.¹¹ While chasing them, Yelu Huag had to encounter the military forces of the Qarakhanid state. During the battle, Huag imprisoned several men of the Qarakhanid army. But having seen among them the folk of the Liao state (Khitans), he immediately set them free.¹² Actually, this event might be the representative of the Chinese version but described by Ibn Al-Athir, Bar Hebraeus and Narshakhi. Firstly, the date of the occurrence is the same. Secondly, the Khitans

⁶ Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronography of Gregory Abu'l Faraj* (commonly known as Bar Hebraeus), Tr. E.A.W. Budge, London, 1932.

⁷ Mīr Ḥaydar b., *Alī Ḥusaynī Rāzī, Ta'rikh-i Ḥaydarī, Extracts in Muḥammad Narshahi, Ta'rikh*, Ed. C. Schefer as *Description de Boukhara par Nersshahy*, Paris, 1892, 233.

⁸ *Al-Kamīl fi-t-Tā'rikh*, Tr. P.G. Bulgakov, 244-245.

⁹ D.Sinor, "Western Information on the Khitans and Some Related Questions," *Journal of American Oriental Society*, 115(2), 1995, 266.

¹⁰ G.G. Pikov, *Zapadnye Khidan*, Novosibirsk, 1989, 74.

¹¹ A large number of the Khitans might have fled with the Tatars, an event that coincides with Khitan migration mentioned by Ibn Al-Athir, Bar Hebraeus and Narshakhi.

¹² K. A. Wittfogel, Feng Chia-sheng, "History of Chinese Society: Liao (907-1125)," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 36, Philadelphia, 1946, 587.

might have also joined the rebellion for they too were annoyed with the Khitan state policies as others were. Thirdly, on the failure of the rebellion, the Khitans also fled the country as the Tatars did. This matches the records mentioned in the Islamic sources: "More than 300,000 families of Turkic tribes, among them there were also the Khitans."¹³ Fourthly, the battle between Tughankhan and the Khitans described in the Islamic sources might actually be the battle between Yelu Huag and the Qarakhanid army mentioned in the Chinese source. True, Yelu Huag chased the rebels till and out of the state borders. But the Muslim chroniclers must not have known it; hence, did not mention it in their accounts. For this reason, it was understood that the rebel tribes and the army lead by Yelu Huag were marching on Balasaghun to invade it. Taking into account the views mentioned above, it can be concluded that Liao shi also mentioned that the Khitans migrated to Transoxiana before the Qara Khitai. Besides, according to the Chinese source, the Khitans migrated to and settled in Transoxiana even before this event. This was confirmed by the Khitan prisoners held by the Qarakhanid army first and released later by Yelu Huag.

Qutadghu Bilig, the work written in the 11th century also contains information about the Khitan traders: "...The Khitan trains of camels sold Chinese goods ..."¹⁴ This indicates wider space of Khitan trade with those neighbouring states with which it had diplomatic relations; among these were the Kyrgyz and Uighur states. Liao shi mentions that in 930, 952 and 975, the leader of the Qirghiz tribe sent embassies to the Khitan state.¹⁵ The Uighurs also sent diplomatic missions to the Khitan state for cooperation and friendship. In fact, the minor Khitan script was developed after this event in 925.¹⁶

The Khitan state evinced interest in Central Asia and the Arab world, because, in 923, the Liao ruler received the embassy sent from Posy (Persia), perhaps the Samanides (875-999). This was followed a year later by the arrival of the Tashi (Dashi) embassy from the Abbasid Khaliphate.¹⁷ The Khitans also reciprocating by establishing diplomatic

¹³ Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kamāl fī-t-Tārīkh*, 183-184.

¹⁴ Yusuf Khas Hajib, "Qutadghu bilig ("Kniga o tom, kak stat schastlivim")" S.E. Malov Pamyatniki drevnetyurksoi pis'mennosti. Teksty i issledovaniya, Moskow-Leningrad, 1951, 238.

¹⁵ Touktou, "*Liao shi*," 82.

¹⁶ Feng Chia-sheng, "The Ch'itan script," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, L XVIII, New Haven, 1948, 14; D. Kara, *Knigi mongolskikh kochevnikov*, Moscow, Nauka, 1972, 10; F.W. Mote, *Imperial China 900-1800*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1999, 30, 42.

¹⁷ E.Bretschneider, *Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources (MREAS)*, London, 1, 1888, 265; K.A.Wittfogel, Feng Chia-sheng, "History of Chinese

relations with the Central Asian rulers. According to Marvazi, “the Qitay and Uighurs mix with the Turks...They have relations and correspondence with the Kings of Transoxiana.”¹⁸ In 1027, the Khitans sent an embassy to Sultan Mahmud (999-1030), the ruler of the Ghaznavids. Marvazi furnishes a translated version of the letter sent by the then Khitan ruler to the Amir Khorasan Mahmud Qara-khan. It reads: “The Lord of the Heavens has granted to us (many) kingdoms upon the face of (this) wide earth and placed us in possession of regions occupied by numerous tribes. In our capital we enjoy security and act according to our will. Anyone in the world who can see and hear cannot help seeking friendship and close relations with us. Our nephews from among the Amirs of the nearer regions constantly and without exception sent their envoys, and their letters and presents follow upon one another. (Only) he (Mahmud) until now has sent no envoy or messenger, while we hear of his excellence in strength and courage, of his outstanding position in might and elevation, of his supremacy over the Amirs by awe, of his control of the provinces by might and authority and of his peace in his homeland according to his own will. As he enjoys such a glorious position it is a duty for him to write his news to the Supreme Khan than whom there is none higher beneath the heavens, and to treat him with consideration according to his state. So we have taken the initiative, limiting ourselves to the dispatch of this lightly equipped envoy rather than someone who would exceed him in rank and equipage, in view of the greatness of the distance and the length of time (necessary) for covering it.”¹⁹

The Khitans had an alliance with Qadir-Khan²⁰ through a noble lady who was married to his son Chaghri-tegin, and (thus) two ruling families were united through a matrimonial bond. Consequently, the Khitans asked Qadir Khan to facilitate the audience of a Khitan envoy (Qalitunka)²¹ to Mahmud. The envoy comprised of men of intellect,

Society: Liao (907-1125),” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Philadelphia, 36, 1946, 347; T.T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 9. According to V.V. Bartold, the second mission might not have been an embassy but a group of Arab traders with camels: *Raboty po istorii i filologii tyurkskih i mongolskih narodov*, Sochineniya, 5, Moscow, 1968, 542

¹⁸ Sharaf az-Zamān Ṭahīr Marvazī, *Ṭabāḥi al-ḥayawān*. (*Abvābu fi-s-Sīni va-l-Turki va-l-Hindi*,” Ed. & tr. V. Minorsky, *The Muslim World 1100-1700: Early Sources on Middle East History*, London: Geography and Travel, 1942.

¹⁹ Here the Khitans were either the Qarakhanids, Ghaznavids or the Turks. The title the Great Khan might have been used for courtesy’s sake.

²⁰ It is known that this state was vassal to the Khitans and paid tribute. The tradition of exchange of brides might have been well established between them.

²¹ The text gives as قلیتوڭکا .

judgment and diligence, and all of them were laden with gifts of various sorts, suggestive of great deal of Khitan interest in promoting friendship with the Central Asian Muslim rulers.

The language of the Khitan letter written to Mahmood Khan of Ghazna in the year of the Mouse,²² was in Turkic. According to Kashghari, the people of “Mochin²³ and Chin²⁴ spoke their own language. However, the Khitai townsmen spoke the Turkic language as well. They made correspondence with “Ghaznavids in Turkic language,”²⁵ and obviously the letter under reference must have been also in Turkic alone. Further, the year of Mouse, as indicated in the letter, corresponds to 1024,²⁶ the year when King Shengzun (983-1031) commanded the Khitan Embassy to set for Ghazna. After travelling three years, the Embassy reached Mahmood Khan’s court in 1027 as per Marvazi,²⁷ but 1026 as per Gardizi. In all cases, however, it was after Mahmood Ghaznavi’s successful invasion of India.²⁸ Incidentally, Khitan Embassy reached Mahmood’s court on the eve of yet another delegation from Uighuristan.²⁹

The letter of the Khitan King to Mahmood contains information about several gifts sent forth from Khitan capital to Ghazna, and these included: (i) 2 suits of *khwidh*,³⁰ (ii) 1 suit of *zhunki*,³¹ (iii) 1 suit of *k.nzi*,³² (iv) 2 suits of *sh.k.rdi* (each) of 2 pieces,³³ (v) 15 suits of raw silk

²² *The Muslim World 1100-1700: Early Sources on Middle East History*, London: Geography and Travel, 1942; *Early Sources on Middle East History, Geography and Travel*, London, 1942, 19-20.

²³ According to Kashghari, Mochin was 4-month travel away from Chin, and it was known by name of Tavghach: Mahmud Kashghari, *Divan lughat at-Turk*, Tr. A. M. Auezova, Almaty, 2005, 424; for further details on name and location of Mochin, see: Abduholiq Abadurasul ogli. *Chin and Mochin*, Tashkent: Fan, 2006, 7-19, 98-106.

²⁴ Kashghari mentions that Chin meant China (i.e. Khitan): *Divan lughat at-Turk*, Tr., 424; *Chin and Mochin*, 72-98.

²⁵ *Divan lughat at-Turk*, Tr., 69.

²⁶ Chou Yi-Liang, “Notes on Marvazi’s account on China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 1945, 9 (1) 17.

²⁷ *Abvābu fi-s-Sīnni va-l-Turki va-l-Hindi*, 21.

²⁸ *Abvābu fi-s-Sīnni va-l-Turki va-l-Hindi*, 19.

²⁹ *Abvābu fi-s-Sīnni va-l-Turki va-l-Hindi*, 10-20.

³⁰ خويد – a type of fabric.

³¹ ژونکی – probably it was another type of Chinese fabric chin-chi which used to be among the gifts sent by the Khitan emperors to foreign countries: *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 1945, 9(1), 18-19.

³² کزى – “Chinese fabric of red, yellow and green colors.” *Divan lughat at-Turk*, Tr., 397.

³³ شکردى - this might also be a type of fabric.

(each) 2 pieces, (vi) furs of sable-marten for pelisse (*yaqu*),³⁴ (vi) 200 sable martens, (vii) 1000 grey squirrels, (viii) 30 vesicles of musk, and (ix) 1 bow with 10 arrows. After presenting these gifts, the Amir Mahmud Khan well received and served the Khitan and Uighur embassies for the sake of friendship and cooperation if not for any matrimonial ties obviously for ideological incompatibility: “We favour good relations...we are Muslims, while you are heathens. We will not give our sisters and daughters to you. If you accept Islam, this matter will be thought over.”³⁵

Conclusion:

One can conclude that before the establishment of the Qara Khitai state in the 10th-11th century, the Khitan population in Transoxiana or Central Asia swelled due to migration. Some of them shifted there for the fear of the Liao state and others squarely in the train of intra-state trade. Thus when Yelu Dashi entered Central Asia, some portion of population comprised the Khitans. This was quite encouraging for Yelu Dashi's march westwards.

³⁴ ياقو – means a coat: *Divan lughat at-Turk*, Tr., 758.

³⁵ Abū Saʿīd ʿAbd al-Ḥayy Gardīzī, *Zayn al-Akhbār*, Ed. Nazim M., London, 1928, 87.

