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ON THE KHITAN WRITING SYSTEMS

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It is well-known that at the beginning of the 10th century when Tang China collapsed the nomadic people called Qïtañ by the Orkhon Turks, Ge-tañ by the Tibetans and Khitan (Qidan) by their Chinese neighbors founded an Empire on the territory of historical Manchuria and Eastern Mongolia.[1] The new State needed written records, the prestige of writing. In 920 the founder of the Khitan dynasty, Abaoji of the Yelü clan, introduced a writing system known as "big characters". Some years later (probably in 925) a new system, that of the "small characters", was invented. This latter system is said to have been simpler, consisting of fewer symbols than the "big characters", but able to record any word. As the invention of the "small characters" is mentioned by the Yuan author of the History of the Liao in connection with the visit of an Uigur mission at the Khitan court, it was, until recently, generally assumed that the "small characters" represented an alphabetic writing system like the runiform characters of the Orkhon Turks (also used by their Uigur successors) or the Semitic alphabets borrowed by the Manichean, Buddhist, or Christian Uigurs. However, no Khitan monument of this kind has ever been found. Some Khitan signs or texts reproduced in Chinese and Tibetan sources were thought to be the "big characters" or were considered to be Jurchin writing. Between the two world wars Manchu, Japanese and other scholars discovered several large Khitan inscriptions, imperial epitaphs of the 11th century. These texts were written in a script of which the graphic elements are similar to those of the Chinese characters. But while Chinese characters, simple or compound, have a uniform size, the height of the Khitan compound characters varies according to the quantity of the elements, i.e. graphemes assembled in one block, each block corresponding to a word with or without suffixes. Some epitaphs have a title written in stylized characters like the Chinese seal script, and here the characters which form the parts of one and the same work are not assembled in one block but are written one underneath the other in a "linear" fashion. This is why some scholars thought to have found in these two styles, the "linear" and the "assembled", the two different writing systems mentioned in the sources. The comparison of these "linear titles with the first lines of the corresponding texts in "assembled" characters showed that, apart

from the style and the arrangement of the characters, one was dealing with the same script.[2] Meanwhile some other Khitan inscriptions emerged in which the style and the arrangement, i.e. the lack of compound blocks, resembled the style of the titles of the imperial epitaphs, but most of the characters proved to be completely different from those occurring in the blocks of the "assembled" script. Moreover, these "linear" inscriptions also contained several ideograms of Chinese origin, or rather, Chinese ideograms unchanged as to their form and meaning.[3] Some of the non-Chinese characters of these inscriptions found their way into the later Jurchin script.[4] Thus, despite the scarcity of monuments which have survived, two Khitan writing systems can be distinguished. One is the "linear script" now tentatively identified with the "big characters" mentioned in the Chinese sources of Liao history, the other is the "assembled script" now considered to be the "small characters".

There has been no doubt concerning the affinity of the language of the Khitan, with its Altaic character taken for granted by most scholars. Khitan words in Chinese sources were compared to Solon words by Manchu philologists in the 18th century,[5] and several of these words were identified e.g. with Mongol words by K. Shiratori.[6] V. Starikov's computer analysis of the syntax of the Khitan characters affirmed the agglutinative nature of the underlying language[7] that was also suggested by an early Chinese source.[8] Despite the view of such an authority as Paul Pelliot that Khitan had been a "highly palatalized" Mongolian language[9] and despite a handful of Khitan words in Chinese transcription which are obviously Mongolic (*nair* day, *sair* month, *po* time, *tau* five, *jau* hundred, *šawā* bird of prey, *taul* hare, *qa* to shoot, *čawur* warfare, *qašū* iron), the possibility of the Tungusic origin of this language is still maintained by some.[10] In fact, beside the Sino-Khitan glosses deciphered or revised by Louis Ligeti in several works, [11] a considerable number of Khitan words in Chinese transcription remain not less enigmatic than some isolated archaic lexical elements in e.g. the *Secret History of the Mongols*.

Many attempts have been made in the last sixty years to decipher the Khitan written monuments, but none of them has been as successful as the work of Činggeltei and his colleagues published in 1985 in Beijing under the title *Research into the Khitan "Small Characters"*.[12] But even this most significant book shows that the puzzles of the writing system in question are more difficult than ever expected.

Parallel passages of the usually not strictly parallel Khitan and Chinese inscriptions have been semantically identified and so the meaning of about fifty words in Khitan characters had been more or less definitely established by different scholars. Attempts to determine the phonetic value have been highly contradictory and mostly failed, and the semanctic identification had and still has its pitfalls.[13] However, with the recently discovered—or rediscovered—monuments, more characters, more variants and more paradigms have emerged, making it possible to achieve more in the field of semantic identification. Thus, a character which has been known for a long time as occurring both in compounds and independently became identifiable as the numeral 'nine' for the first time in the text of the inscription of 1150 edited some ten years ago. Its exact phonetic value has not been determined yet and with it remains unsolved the reading of the well-known five- or six-character block recording a verbal noun meaning 'he who shows filial piety', also attested in several Chinese transcriptions (e.g. *chi-shi-de-ben*).[14]

The greatest achievement of Činggeltei's team is the identification of a great number of Chinese proper names and titles as well as loanwords occurring in the monuments of the Khitan "assembled script". Khitan transcriptions of these Chinese elements give important information on the phonetic value of Khitan symbols, especially in those cases where a single Khitan character renders a whole Chinese syllable, like the Khitan ideogram (a) *huang* (cf. Middle Mong *qong, qoong* ‹Chin. (b) *huang*)[15] 'imperial' also transcribing a Chinese homonym, the family name *Huang* 'yellow' in the inscription of 1134. Otherwise this Khitan character is a modification of the Chinese ideogram (c) *zhu* 'ruler, lord, chief'.

However, Chinese syllables are mostly recorded by a group of several Khitan characters, similar to the Chinese fanqie method defining the pronunciation of an ideogram or transcribing a foreign syllable by two or three other ideograms, one for the initial, another for the final, i.e. the rest of the syllable, and usually a homophonous third character for the whole syllable, using ideograms as syllabic symbols. If the phonology of the Chinese dialect known to the Khitans were known to us well enough (which is, of course, not the case), this kind of transcription would offer us information on the initial of the first and on the final or the whole of the second (or third) Khitan character. At present it remains unclear whether the first symbol is a letter for a single consonant or a syllabogram for a consonant

followed (or sometimes, preceded) by a vowel.[16] The relatively great number of the characters having the same or similar consonantal value according to Činggeltei and his colleagues suggests that we are dealing with syllabograms. (The same problem is still to be solved in Jurchin writing.)

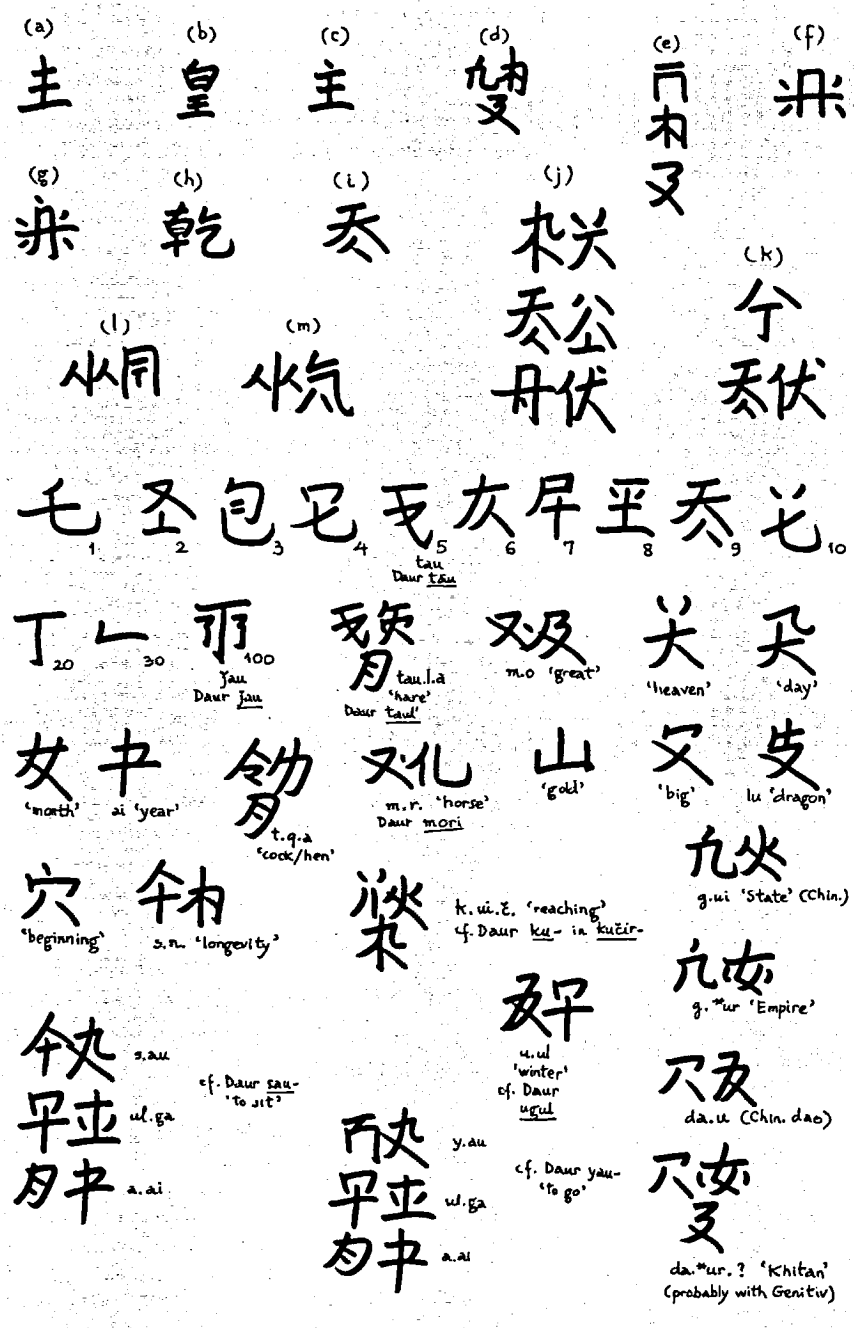
From among the 378 characters (including some variants and the mark of repetition) now less than one third (125) is semantically, and more than a quarter (115) is phonetically, partially or fully deciphered. This means that it is possible to define at least the character of one of the phonetic components forming the syllable marked by the latter group of symbols. In some cases it is possible to tell whether the consonants, mostly the initials, are dental, labial, guttural, oral or nasal, etc., in other cases it can be stated that the vowel is labial or illabial, or front or back in character. In this manner we have a deeper insight into the rather complex nature of this extinct but sometime very vivid writing system, although it is perhaps needless to say that our knowledge of many essential details is far from being satisfactory. Nonetheless it is sure that the system of the Khitan "assembled script" or "small characters", like the Japanese writing system, consists of ideograms and phonetic symbols.[17] Its ideograms are frequently used as phonetic symbols. Genuine phonetic symbols are mostly syllabograms, but some of them may be letters. The phonetical value of an ideogram can be stated with certainty only if it is also used—anorganically and secondarily—as a syllabogram or if it is substituted by a block of syllabograms.[18]

To conclude: it is still a long way to the heart of the jungle of the Khitan writing system. The Khitan script remains one of the most fascinating problems in the history of writing in the Altaic world, and much hard work needs to be done before we shall be able to read for instance, the Khitan rhymes in memory of Empress Xuanyi, the poetess who was put to death nine hundred and eleven years ago (1075).

NOTES

1. See K. A. Wittfogel and Fêng Chia-Shêng. *History of Chinese Society. Liao (907-1125).* Philadelphia 1949; on the script: esp. pp. 240-253, with K H. Menges' notes.
2. E.G. the three characters of the block (d) are written separately: (e), see Wittfogel and Fêng, p. 251, fig. 19, l. 1 and p. 250, fig. 18, l. 3; reading: *g.n.?.* (the points mark the possibility of an accompanying vowel) 'memorial, funeral, mourning'.
3. E.g. the characters 'day', 'month', numbers.
4. Such is character (f) 'year', of which Jurchin has (g).

5. See L. Ligeti, Les mots solons dans un ouvrage chinois des Ts'ing: *AOH* ix (1959), pp. 234-272.
6. Über die Sprache des Hiung-nu Stammes und der Tung-hu-Stämme: *IAN* St. Pbg. 1902.
7. V. S. Starikov, V. M. Nadeljaev et al., *Materialy po dešifrovke kidan'skogo pis'ma* I-II (Moscow 1970). Cf. also bibliography in the work quoted in note 12 below.
8. Cf. e.g. Wittfogel and Fêng, p. 244.
9. E.g. in *T'oung Pao* XXVI (1929), p. 127: "une langue très palatalisée comme le k'itan".
10. E.g. É. Šavkunov in *Épigrafika vostoka* 15(1963); Herbert Franke in *Zentralasiatische Studien* 3 (1969), pp. 45-50, discussing Menges's study, *Tungusen und Ljio* (Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes XXXVIII, 1968).
11. L. Ligeti, Mots de civilisation de Haute Asie en transcription chinoise: *AOH* I (1950-1951), esp. pp. 155 sqq, 166-167; *AOH* XVII (1964), pp. 287-288.
12. Qinggertai [Činggeltei], Liu Fengzhu, Chen Naixiung, Yu Baolin, Xing Fuli, *Qitan xiaozi yanjiu* (Beijing 1985), 799p.
13. E.g. in several names of ruling periods (nianhao) the Khitan ideogram 'heaven' must be identified with Chin. (h) *qian* (as in Qianlong of the Manchu), while the block/word following it corresponds to the second character/word of its Chinese equivalent.
14. Character (i) 'nine' is an ideogram used as syllabogram in the block (j), *č. i. ?. d. b. n.*, read *čišidebun* or *-ben*? 'he who shows filial piety' and in the block (k), *pu. ?. n.*, read *pušin* or *pušen*? 'lady (Chin. *furen*)'. The reading *š.* cannot be reconciled with any known Mongol or Tungus stem meaning 'nine', the reading *ye* or *yi* (cf. Mong. *yisün* etc. 'nine') is irreconciliable with the Chinese transcriptions of the Khitan stem for 'filial piety'; the same is to be said about *ǰi* (cf. Middle Mong. *üǰin*)
15. The actual Chinese phonetic value of the character may have been different from modern *huang*, but the Chinese monosyllabic words 'yellow' and 'imperial' were surely homophones.
16. E.g. (l) *l. ing* for different Chin. words *ling*, (m) *l. ang* etc. (see Qinggertai et al.).
17. But unlike Japanese characters there is no graphic distinction between the two groups here.
18. A number of non-Chinese words can be given a tentative reading. Some of them seem to be "Mongolic", but some of them still resist any attempt at identification with either Mongolian or Manchu-Tungus words.


(a)
(b)
(c)
(d)
(e)
(f)
(g)
(h)
(i)
(j)
(k)
(l)
(m)
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
tau
Daur tãu
20
30
100
jau
Daur jau
tau.l.a
'hare'
Daur taul'
m.o 'great'
'heaven'
'day'
'moth'
ai 'year'
t.q.a
'cock/hen'
m.r. 'horse'
Daur mori
'gold'
'big'
lu 'dragon'
'beginning'
s.n. 'longevity'
k.ui.ɛ. 'reaching'
cf. Daur ku- in kučir-
g.ui 'State' (Chin.)
g.*ur 'Empire'
u.ul
'winter'
cf. Daur
ugul
da.u (Chin. dao)
s.au
ul.ga
a.ai
cf. Daur sau-
'to sit'
y.au
ul.ga
a.ai
cf. Daur yau-
'to go'
da.*ur.? 'Khitan'
(probably with Genitiv)