

## Seventy years of Khitan Small Script studies

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After founding the Liao dynasty (907–1115), the Khitan (*Qidan*) people are known to have created two different types of script to record their language. These were the so-called «Large Characters», or Large Script (*Qidan Dazi*), and the so-called «Small Characters», or Small Script (*Qidan Xiaozhi*). The extant sources on the Khitan language include both of these types. With the exception of the *Da Jin Huangdi Dutong Jinglüe Langjun Xingji* inscription, all of the Khitan materials known today were excavated or discovered in the twentieth century. As has become gradually accepted by scholars both in China and elsewhere, the Khitan Small Script is the type of script used, for instance, in the epitaphs excavated from the tombs of the Liao Imperial Mausoleum in Balin You Qi (Baarin Right Banner) of Inner Mongolia. This script is also used in the *Xiao Xiaozhong Muzhi* inscription, which was excavated in Jinxi County, Liaoning Province. The present paper is focussed on selected problems concerning the Khitan Small Script.

The earliest discovered sources on the Khitan Small Script are the *Xingzong Huangdi Aice* inscription and the *Renyi Huanghou Aice* inscription. These two inscriptions, located in the Liao Yongxing Tomb in Walin Mangha of Balin You Qi in Inner Mongolia, were discovered by the Belgian missionary L. Kervyn (Chinese name: Mei Lingxin). The handwritten copies of these two inscriptions were first published in *Le Bulletin Catholique de Pekin* no. 118, 1923. The first scholar to study this new material in Khitan characters was Haneda Toru, Rector of Kyoto University, who in January, 1925, published his paper titled «A new source on the Khitan Script» in *Shirin*, vol. 10, no. 1. A Chinese version, translated by Wen Weizhi, was later included in the *Liao Ling Shike Jilu* «Collection of Inscriptions from the Liao Tombs».

By means of comparative analysis, Haneda tentatively concluded that the characters on the right side of the *Da Jin Huangdi Dutong Jinglüe Langjun Xingji* inscription also represented the Khitan script, and not the Jurchen script, as had been assumed previously. This conclusion marks the beginning of serious Khitan Script studies. From then until the present, over seventy years have passed. The following remarks attempt to give a

brief survey of the general development of the Khitan Small Script studies in these seventy years.

### The materials in the Khitan Small Script

Following is a list of the principal source materials today known to exist in the Khitan Small Script. The list is arranged chronologically following the order in which the materials were discovered:

(1) The *Xingzong Huangdi Aice* inscription. The circumstances of the excavation have been described above. Only a handwritten copy of this inscription is available. The original stone tablet is still buried in the Yongxing Tomb.

(2) The *Renyi Huanghou Aice* inscription. The details of discovery and present location are the same as above.

(3) The *Da Jin Huangdi Dutong Jinglüe Langjun Xingji* inscription (abbreviated as *Langjun Xingji* in the following text). This inscription was engraved in the 12th year of Tianhui of the Jurchen Jin dynasty (1134) on the *Wuzi Bei* stele, situated in front of the Tang Qianling Tomb complex in modern Qian County of Shaanxi Province. The *Wuzi Bei* stele was originally set up uninscribed for empress Wu Zetian during the Tang dynasty. Today it is fully engraved with texts on its four sides. The *Langjun Xingji* is the earliest text which was engraved on the upper part of the front side. It is a unique Khitan-Chinese bilingual text. The five lines in the right part of the text are in the Khitan Small Script, and the other five lines in the left part are in Chinese. A rubbing of this inscription had been published in some works of epigraphy since the Ming and Qing dynasties, but was misunderstood as representing the Jurchen script. It was only Haneda who, in 1925, correctly identified the text as being written in the Khitan (Small) Script. In November of 1982, I found in the ruins of the Qianling Tomb a broken stone tablet on which there is an inscribed copy of the *Langjun Xingji*, that is, the *same* text as on the *Wuzi Bei* stone tablet. This broken stone tablet is now preserved in the Museum of Qianling Tomb. In reduced format a rubbing of the *Langjun Xingji* inscription was first published in the *Liao Ling Shike Jilu*, printed by the Fengtian (Mukden) Library in 1934.

(4) The *Daozong Huangdi Aice* inscription. The inscription consists of a pair of stone tablets, one being the cover and the other including the text. There exists also a similar pair of stone tablets inscribed in Chinese. This

inscription was excavated in 1930 from the Liao Yongxing Tomb located in modern Balin You Qi of Inner Mongolia. The original stone tablets are today preserved in the Liaoning Provincial Museum. Rubbings of the inscription were first published in *Guoxue Jikan* vol. 3, no. 3, in September, 1932. The same rubbings in reduced format were also published in the *Liao Ling Shike Jilu*.

(5) The *Xuanyi Huanghou Aice* inscription. The details are the same as above.

(6). The *Xiao Zhonggong Muzhi* inscription. Both the cover and the text of this inscription are in the Khitan Small Script. This inscription was excavated in 1942 by local farmers in Zimu Lingzi Village of Xinglong County, Hebei Province. In 1972 it was moved to Baoding City and is today preserved in the Administrative Office of Cultural Relics of Hebei Province. The inscription was engraved in the 2nd year of Tiande of the Jin dynasty (1150). The photos of the rubbings were first published in *Kaogu* («Archaeology»), no. 5, 1973.

(7) The *Xiao Linggong Muzhi* broken stone tablet. This stone tablet was discovered in May, 1950, from tomb No. 2 of a group of tombs of Xiao Shenwei family in Xishan Village of the Qinghemen district of Fuxin City of Liaoning Province. The inscription was engraved in the 3rd year of Qingning (1057). The original tablet is now preserved in the Liaoning Provincial Museum. A photo of the rubbing was first published in *Kaogu Xuebao* («Acta Archaeologica Sinica») no. 8, 1954.

(8) The *Gu Yelü Shi Mingshi* epitaph. The cover of this inscription is in Chinese. It was engraved in the 5th year of Tianqing (1115). There are 25 lines of text altogether. The epitaph was excavated in 1969 in Shanzuizi Village of Wenniute Qi (Ongniut Banner) of Inner Mongolia. The photos of the rubbings and the facsimiles were first published in *Wenwu Ziliao Congkan* no. 5, 1981. The original stone tablets are now preserved in the Museum of Chifeng City.

(9) The *Xuwang Muzhi* inscription. The inscription was excavated in the autumn of 1975 at Baitai Gou Village of the Fuxin Mongol Autonomous County of Liaoning Province. The original stone tablet is now preserved in the Museum of Fuxin City. A photo of the rubbing and a facsimile were first published in *Wenwu Ziliao Congkan* first issue, 1977. The Japanese scholar Osada Natsuki stated that the owner of this tomb was Yelü Hutela. I believe that this is a reasonable statement.

The photos of the rubbings and facsimiles of the nine inscriptions mentioned above are collected and published in the work by Chinggeltai, Liu Fengzhu, and Chen Naixiong, *Qidan Xiaozhi Yanjiu* («Studies on the Khitan Small Script»), 1985.

(10) The *Yelü Renxian Muzhi* epitaph. On the back side of the cover with Chinese characters, there are 70 lines of text in the Khitan Small Script. Altogether there are more than 5,100 characters in this epitaph, which also includes the biggest variety of different characters among all available sources of the Khitan Small Script. The epitaph was excavated in March, 1983, at Dongshan Village of Xiaotazi Town of Beipiao County, Liaoning Province. The original stone tablets are now preserved in the Liaoning Provincial Museum. The photos of the rubbings and the facsimiles were first published in *Nei Menggu Daxue Xuebao* (section of philosophy and social science) no. 1, 1991. The facsimiles were also published in the *Proceedings of the 35th Permanent International Altaistic Conference*. The two versions of the facsimiles are slightly different, however, so they should be consulted together.

(11) The *Yelü Zongjiao Muzhi* epitaph. The epitaph is on the back side of the cover. There is another version in Chinese. The two versions, however, do not correspond to each other. The epitaph was discovered in May, 1991, at Gaoqi Village of Baojia Township of Beining City, Liaoning Province. The photos of the rubbings were first published in *Liaohai Wenwu Xuekan* («Journal of Liaohai Cultural Relics») no 2, 1993. The facsimiles were published in Taipei in *Hanxue Yanjiu* («Chinese Studies») vol. 13, no. 2, in December, 1995. The original stone tablets are now preserved in the Administrative Office of Cultural Relics of Beining City of Liaoning Province.

(12) The *Haitangshan Muzhi Canshi* broken stone tablet. The tablet was discovered in the autumn of 1991 in the Haitang Mountain located in the Fuxin Mongol Autonomous County, Liaoning Province. The original stone tablet is now preserved in the Administrative Office of Cultural Relics of Fuxin County. The photo of the rubbing and the facsimile was first published in *Kaogu* («Archaeology») no.8, 1992.

(13) The *Jindai Bozhou Fangyu Shi Muzhi Canshi* broken stone tablet. The tablet was excavated in September, 1993, at Laohugou Village of Xindi Township of Aohan Qi (Aohan Banner) of Inner Mongolia. There are 51 lines of text. The inscription was engraved in the tenth year of Dading of the Jin dynasty (1170). That was only 21 years before the

Khitan script was abolished in the second year of Mingchang (1191). This inscription is the latest one among the available sources of the Khitan Small Script. The photo of the rubbing and the facsimile was first published in *Kaogu* («Archaeology») no. 9, 1995. The original stone tablet is now preserved in the Museum of Aohan Qi.

(14) The *Sanshan Xiang Muzhi Canshi* broken stone tablet. The tablet was excavated in 1994 at Sanshan Township of Balin Zuo Qi of Inner Mongolia. The tablet is currently preserved at the Police Station of Balin Zuo Qi, as it was excavated by grave robbers. The rubbing of the inscription has not yet been published. The inscription was engraved in the 8th year of Qiantong (1108). Only 26 lines of the originally longer text are preserved.

(15) The *Yelü Langjun Muzhi Canshi* broken stone tablet. The tablet was excavated in March, 1995, at Zhengjia Wopu Village of Gongyingzi Township of Kalaqin Qi (Kharachin Banner) of Inner Mongolia. The tablet is now preserved in the Museum of Kalaqin Qi. The rubbing and facsimile have not yet been published. Unfortunately, the up-right corner of this stone tablet with the name of tomb owner is broken. Since, however, the third line of the inscription mentions the relationship between emperor Taizong of the Liao and the tomb owner's seventh generation of ancestors, it could be suggested that the owner of the tomb belonged to the imperial family of the Liao. In the 42nd line, it reads «a tomb of *langjun* (an official title)», so it could be proposed that the official title of the owner of the tomb was a *langjun*. There are two persons together with the dates of their birth and death mentioned in this inscription. One was born in the 5th year of Qingning (1059), and died in the 1st year of Da'an (1085) at the age of 27, while the other was born in the 2nd year of Xianyong (1066), and died in the 3rd year of Da'an (1087) at the age of 22. Since the life-span of both persons was very short, and nothing important happened during their life-time, the 26 lines of text are used to describe their family history.

(16) The *Yelü Fushu Muzhi* epitaph. The epitaph was discovered in the summer of 1996 from the tombs of the Yelü Qi family at Hansumu Guri Banhushuo of Alukerqin Qi (Arukhorchin Banner) of Inner Mongolia. In the 3rd line of the epitaph, it is written that «the nickname of the *fushu* (an official title) was *Tuolun*». According to the study of the excavator of this stone tablet, Liu Xiaoguang, the owner of this tomb was Yelü Wumo, who was an uncle of Yelü Qi. Yelü Qi is apparently the same person as Yelü Asi, who is recorded in the *Liao Shi* (this identification has not been

previously proposed). The stone tablet is now preserved in the Inner Mongolian Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology in Huhhot. The inscription was engraved in the 2nd year of Qiantong (1102) and has 51 lines of text. The rubbing has not yet been published.

(17) The *Yelü Hongbian Muzhi Ming* inscription. The inscription was excavated in September, 1996, from the Liao Tomb No. 4 at the Wuri Gentala farm of Zhalute Qi (Jarut Banner) of Inner Mongolia. The original stone tablet is now preserved in the Inner Mongolian Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology. The rubbing and facsimile have not yet been published. A textual research paper on this inscription written in Mongol by Chen Naixiong and Yang Jie was published in *Nei Menggu Daxue Xuebao* (section of philosophy and social sciences), no. 1, 1998. The authors of this paper believe that the owner of the tomb was Yelü Zhongliang. This is probably an erroneous statement.

(18) The *Yelü Dilie Muzhi Ming*. The inscription was incorporated into the collections of the Peking Liao Jin City Wall Museum in the spring of 1997, but the circumstances of excavation are not known. The inscription was engraved in the 8th year of Da'an (1092). The cover of the epitaph is in Chinese. In the 26th line, the Chinese text says: *Da'an ba Renshen nian*, in which the word *shen* denotes 'monkey' (year). The Khitan text contains the same word written as a block of three syllabic signs (with the probable reading: *bai*). This completes the list of the cyclic animals corresponding to the Twelve Earthly Branches, all of which have now been identified in Khitan texts. The rubbing of this inscription has not yet been published.

(19) The *Tai Shuzu Aice* inscription. This inscription is an epitaph, which consists of a cover and a text. A corresponding epitaph containing a text in Chinese is also present. The epitaphs were excavated in June, 1977, from a tomb located to the west of the Liao Yongqing Tomb in Suobo Riga Sumu Walin Mangha of Balin You Qi of Inner Mongolia. The tomb owner was identified as Yelü Heluhu. The rubbings and facsimiles have not yet been published. The original stone tablets are now preserved in the local Museum of Balin You Qi.

(20) The *Gu Song Wenguo Fei Muzhi Ming* inscription. This epitaph also has a cover and a text, and there is a corresponding epitaph in Chinese. The imperial concubine whose surname was Xiao, mentioned in the inscription, was Yelü Heluhu's wife. The other circumstances are the same as mentioned above.

(21) The *Yeliü Cite Muzhi* epitaph. The epitaph has a cover and a text. It was excavated in the summer of 1997 by grave robbers at Sumu Shari Baote Village of Baiyin Wentu in Alukerqin Qi of Inner Mongolia. There are 28 lines of text, engraved in the 8th year of Dakang (1082). The tomb owner died in the 7th year of Dakang (1081) at the age of 38. The rubbing has not yet been published.

In addition to the 21 sources listed above, which all contain relatively long coherent texts, there are a number of bronze mirrors, coins, and fish-shaped tallies, cast with characters of the Khitan Small Script. Also, samples of calligraphy and graffiti are known from various household utensils as well as walls of Buddhist pagodas and caves.

Among the mentioned 21 sources, eight recent finds have not been published until now. It can be predicted that new inscriptions in the Khitan Small Script will be excavated also in the future. The extant material provides good prospects for research of various kinds.

### **The research on the Khitan Small Script**

In the past, research on the Khitan Small Script has suffered not only from the lack of source material and difficulty of decipherment, but also of external causes like war and political movements. During the past seventy years there have been three main periods of intensive research and rapid progress.

The first tide of Khitan Small Script studies was in the 1930s, more exactly, between the years 1932 and 1935. The research of this period was led by the Chinese scholars Wang Jinru, Luo Fucheng, and Li Dingkui. The basic methodology they employed may be characterized as that of philology and comparative textology. Comparisons were made (1) between the available Khitan texts and the corresponding Chinese texts of the same tombs, (2) between the Khitan texts on the epitaphs and those on their covers, (3) between different Khitan texts, (4) between different portions of a single text, (5) between the Khitan texts and contemporary historical data, as recorded in other (Chinese) sources.

As a result of these comparisons, the early scholars were able to identify the titles on the *Daozong Huangdi Aice* inscription and the *Xuanyi Huanghou Aice* inscription, as well as some individual Khitan characters, as used to denote numbers, reign titles, chronological cycles (the Heavenly Stems and the Earthly Branches), and concepts such as 'year', 'month', 'day'. In addition, a number of commonly used phrases like 'how sad it is', 'birthday', and others, were tentatively identified.

Later examination shows that these identifications were correct for more than 70 Khitan characters. However, only the *meaning* of the characters was known at this stage, while the question concerning their *pronunciation* was not touched upon.

A representative work of this stage of research is the *Liao Ling Shike Jilu* («Collection of Inscriptions from the Liao Tombs») compiled by Luo Fucheng. This work contains the rubbings and facsimiles of the Khitan texts available at the time. Wang Jinru, on the other hand, published all of his results in the *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology* of the *Academia Sinica*, vol. 3, part 2, and vol. 5, part 4. The fruits of Li Dingkui's work include a research paper published in the *Guoxue Jikan* of Peking University, vol. 3, part 4, 1932, as well as a monograph titled *Qidan Guoshu Lüeshuo* («Studies on the Khitan Characters»).

The second tide of Khitan studies started in Japan in the early 1950s. Many more scholars were now involved in the research than during the first period, and different schools of thought were formed. In addition to the previous line of research, work was now done also on the phonetic decipherment of the Khitan characters, especially those characters which had been semantically identified by scholars of the first tide. The underlying assumption was that Khitan was a Mongolic language, for which reason Middle Mongol and Written Mongol were used as the basis for the Khitan transcriptions. Later examinations shows that more than 30 readings of Khitan words proposed during this period are likely to be approximately correct.

The leaders of the research of this period were Murayama Shichiro, Yamaji Hiroaki, Tamura Jitsuzo, and Osada Natsuki. The single most representative publication is the work titled *Qing Ling*, authored by Tamura Jitsuzo and Obayashi Yukio.

In the early 1960s, due to various factors, Russian scholars, led by V. S. Starikov, also started to work on the Khitan Small Script. Among their initial achievements, the most important is perhaps the paper by E. V. Shavkunov on the «Small Khitan-Jurchen Script» (in *Epigrafika Vostoka*, vol. 15, 1963). The Russian work on the Khitan Small Script was continued well into the 1980s. Some of the results were published in the collective volumes «Forgotten Systems of Writing» (1982) and «Ancient Systems of Writing» (1986).

In China, however, the 20 years from the 1940s to the 1960s, meant a serious depression in Khitan studies. Although some research papers authored by Liu Fuyi, Li Dingkui, and others, were published, these can only be regarded as a repercussion of the first wave of research. No new discoveries were made.



The situation changed in the early 1970s, when two principal research groups appeared in China. One was represented by the present author as well as Yu Baolin at the Institute of Ethnology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Peking, while the other was led by Chinggeltai and Chen Naixiong at the Research Section of Mongol Studies of the Inner Mongolia University. These two groups merged in 1975, establishing the unified Khitan Script Research Group. This marked the beginning of the third wave of Khitan Small Script studies, which is still going on. The detailed circumstances concerning the forming of this research group have been described in my article *Wo yu Chinggeltai jiaoshou zai Qidan wenzi yanjiu fangmian gongtong gongzuo de yinxiang* («The cooperation of Prof. Qinggeltai and myself in the field of Khitan Script studies»), published in *A Collection of Papers and Commemorative Essays* by the Inner Mongolia Press in August, 1997.

Based mainly upon the sole Khitan-Chinese bilingual source, the *Langjun Xingji* inscription, and consulting other materials in the Khitan Small Script, the research group gradually established a corpus of Chinese personal names, place names, official titles, and other terms which appear in Khitan transliteration in the material. From such data it was possible to reconstruct the phonetic values of a considerable number of Khitan graphic elements. This is a method that combines pronunciation with meaning, and with its help it is also possible to reconstruct otherwise unknown phonetic values for items whose meaning is known. The method allows to proceed gradually towards the decipherment of an increasing number of characters. Moreover, after a considerable amount of meanings and phonetic reconstructions have been matched, conclusions concerning grammatical rules, including declension, conjugation, and vowel harmony, can also be attempted.

From this work, we now know that the Khitan Small Script is a type of phonosyllabic script. According to the terminology of our research group, the smallest writing and reading unit of this script is called «original character». The original characters refer only to the sounds of Khitan syllables. The larger units of writing, corresponding to words, consist of one to seven original characters.

The first results of the Khitan Script Research Group were published in *Nei Menggu Daxue Xuebao* (Chinese edition), no. 4, 1977. This had a great impact on scholars both in China and abroad, and as a result, a large number of both Chinese and foreign scholars were attracted to the field of Khitan script studies. Shen Hui, Wang Hongli and Ji Shi of China, and Nishida Tatsuo, Toyoda Goro and Osada Natsuki from Japan, are just a few of those who have made significant contributions to our understanding of the Khitan Small Script.

In 1985 the Khitan Script Research Group published its main work titled *Qidan Xiaozhi Yanjiu* («Studies on the Khitan Small Script»). This work contains the total corpus of Khitan Small Script materials, as known at the time of publication. It also contains a generalization of the results achieved by the research group. After the publication of this work, the members of the research group have continued to work on the subject, publishing research papers, giving lectures, and participating in relevant international conferences.

## Conclusion

The achievements made in the research of the Khitan Small Script during the past seventy years may be summarized as follows:

(i) The *nature* of the Khitan Small Script has been ascertained. The Khitan Small Script has been identified as a phonosyllabic system of writing. At the same time, Khitan has been identified as an independent language related to Mongol. The extant readings of Khitan words suggest that Khitan differs considerably both from Mongol (proper) and from other known Mongolic languages, including Dagur.

(ii) The *number* of the Khitan Small Script original characters was calculated in 1977 at 377. This number was based on the nine texts known at that time. A similar calculation made in 1992, which included the newly excavated *Yelü Renxian Muzhi* epitaph and the *Haitangshan Muzhi Canshi* broken stone tablet, yielded 488 different original characters. In the spring of 1998, when Inner Mongolia University and the Founder R & D Center of Peking University were going to develop a software program that could mix together Chinese characters, Mongol writing and the Khitan Small Script, I was entrusted to ensure the number of Khitan original characters and prepare a standard model for each of them. On that occasion, I made a new calculation of the Khitan original characters attested in all the 21 inscriptions known today and arrived at the number of 515, including one repetitive symbol. It is possible that some characters will still have to be added to the list. On the other hand, some entities are likely to be variant forms of each other.

(iii) The *method* that can be used in the decipherment of the Khitan Small Script involves the matching of the reconstructed phonetic values of the phonosyllabic characters with the identified meanings of the Khitan words. Considerable progress has been made in this work. Today, we know with certainty the phonetic (syllabic) values of as many as 168 Khitan characters, which allows us to read several dozens of Khitan words, including titles, chronological terms, kinship terms, and everyday expressions, as well as personal and place names.

(iv) The *corpus* of the materials in the Khitan Small Script has been published and is available to anybody willing to work on the topic. Also, a large number of research papers and bibliographical tools has been prepared.

However, in spite of the progress made in the field, the work on the decipherment of the Khitan Small Script is not yet completed. It has to be hoped that new results will be made with the constant discovery of new material. The emphasis of future research should lie on the identification, decipherment, translation, and analysis of Khitan native words and phrases. I wish that this work will proceed in a spirit of international cooperation and mutual encouragement.

