

THE KITAN AND THE KARA KHITAY*¹*D. Sinor***Contents**

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The rise of the Kitan

Kitan history does not fit easily into the usual pattern of national histories. The subject of this chapter is not the history of one nation-state defined by more or less stable geographic frontiers; rather, we shall follow the destiny of one people which, though maintaining its feeling of identity over a period of some eight centuries, has not only twice changed its country but has also undergone a remarkable cultural and linguistic metamorphosis.

Before the fifth century, under a different name or names, the Kitan belonged to the heterogeneous group called by the Chinese T'ung Hu (Eastern Hu), where Hu may be considered a generic name for barbarians. Chinese sources first mention the Kitan, under this name, in connection with a defeat inflicted on them in 406 by the Chinese Wei dynasty. At that time the Kitan lived on the upper course of the Liao river, but the military reverse prompted them to move into the Sung-mo area of what was to become Jehol, the north-eastern province of China. The Wei–Kitan conflict was, one might say, almost a family feud. The Northern Wei dynasty (386–538) was of alien (*Tabgach*) origin, a name better known in its Chinese transcription: *t'o-pa*. The Tabgach, Kitan, and Shih-wei were all

* See Maps 2 and 5, pp. 427 and 432–3.

¹ Or Karakitay. Editor's note: the form 'Kara Khitay' is used throughout this Volume for consistency with the Islamic sources.

detached clans of the Hsien-pi. Their language was Mongol with some archaic features and they may have spoken different dialects.

The Kitan tribes occupied a region which incorporated the eastern slopes of the Khingan mountains and also the plains crossed by the Shira Muren. Their ancestral territory was marginal to the rich pastures of the steppe but still suitable for pastoralism. The Kitan took full advantage of this, concentrating on horse-breeding, with horned cattle and sheep being of secondary importance. There was also land suitable for agriculture, and the forests and rivers of Manchuria provided for extensive hunting and fishing, both activities being pursued on a grand scale. More importantly, the Kitan's country was an ore-rich land; mining and metallurgy in general were to play a major role in Kitan history. All in all, the land on which they lived allowed the Kitan to develop a diversified economy, with a modicum of industrialization unparalleled anywhere in medieval Inner Asia.

From the outset, the Kitan appear as a conglomerate held together by economic or political interests rather than by sharing the same culture. The composite character of their civilization is reflected in their ancestral legend, according to which the Kitan descended from the union of a man riding a white horse along the Lao-ha river and a maiden travelling in a cart drawn by a grey ox along the Shira Muren. At Mount Mu-yeh, at the confluence of the two rivers, the man and the woman united; the descendants of their eight sons were to form the original eight tribes of the Kitan. It should be noted that the text of the *Liao-shih* [History of the Liao] which provides this information allows the interpretation that procreation resulted from the union of the two rivers. A white horse and a grey ox remained sacrificial animals among the Kitan, probably symbolizing the two main components of their culture. The motif of the birth of a mythical ancestor at the confluence of two rivers appears also in connection with Buqu Khan, legendary ruler of the Uighurs.

Fragmentary legends recorded by understandably sceptical Chinese historians would suggest that at least some of the early Kitan rulers led a segregated life and remained inaccessible to the people. One was said to be a mere skull, covered with felt, emerging from his tent and taking human shape only for the ceremonial occasions when the white horse and the grey ox were sacrificed. Shamans played an important role in the ceremonies connected with these sacrifices. The habit of covering the ruler with a felt rug survived in the investiture ceremony of the later Kitan (Liao) emperors. Another ruler, equally sequestered and appearing only when the need arose, was reported to have had a boar's head and was dressed in pigskin; clearly he was perceived as a pig, an animal which places at least some of the Kitan tribes firmly in a forest-dwelling, eastern Tunguz cultural group. Both rulers vanished when their secret identity was improperly interfered with. A third mythical ruler was said to have owned twenty sheep. Each day he ate nineteen of them, but the next day

there were twenty again. The story of 'King Skull' and 'King Boar' permits the assumption that early in their history, the Kitan were ruled simultaneously by two men: one, a purely ceremonial, sacral king living in seclusion; the other, perhaps an elected individual, in whose hands real power lay.

In the middle of the eighth century, the Kitan are often mentioned in the exploits of the celebrated rebel Ngan Lu-shan, sometimes as enemies and at other times as allies. By the ninth century, the eight Kitan tribes were governed by a chieftain elected from among the members of the Yao-lien family for a period of three years. This term could be cut short if, while he was at the helm, extraordinary calamities struck the community. The Yao-lien family gradually lost its grip, and in 872 A-pao-chi of the Yeh-lü (also called I-la) clan was elected. He became the founder of the Kitan empire. Twice re-elected, at the end of his third term A-pao-chi was reluctant to abandon the reins of power, and, with the consent of the tribes, organized an independent tribe centred on the 'Chinese City', situated on the Luan river. Inhabited by Chinese who had fled the disorders which marked the fall of the T'ang empire, the region was not only suitable for agriculture, but also had considerable mineral resources such as iron, copper, gold and salt. A-pao-chi's father had already a keen perception of the advantages to be derived from industrial progress. He had paid particular attention to the development of metallurgy and, combining the skills of the Shih-wei tribe (reputed specialists in working metal) with those of the recently settled Chinese, he established iron smelteries. Perhaps even more important was A-pao-chi's acquisition of the lake which provided the salt used by the Kitan tribes. The economic power of A-pao-chi enabled him to gain the support of an ever-increasing group of Kitan; the killing in an ambush of all the rival chieftains secured his power. In 907 A-pao-chi assumed the Chinese name T'ai-tsu and declared himself emperor of the Kitan. It should be noted that there is some doubt whether A-pao-chi ever used the title Kaghan, certainly not current among the early Kitan rulers.

A-pao-chi (T'ai-tsu) thus became the first ruler (907–26) of a dynasty which in 947 took the name Liao – adopted in memory of the Kitan homeland located at that river – and ruled over northern China until 1115. The investiture of the ruler followed practices well attested among other Inner Asian peoples. In the course of the ceremony the future emperor gallops off, 'falls' from his horse, to be covered – as mentioned above – with a felt blanket. In the Türk ceremony of investiture, as recorded by the *Chou shu*, the order of events was reversed, the future Kaghan being first bundled in a felt rug and then put on horseback. In Kitan practice, having faced what must be viewed as an ordeal, the ceremony culminated in the emperor being raised on a felt carpet.

The *Liao-shih* also records the precursory signs marking the birth of a proper founder of a dynasty. Born of a sun-ray, so our sources tell us, A-pao-chi had the body of a 3-year-old and could, from the moment of his birth, crawl on all fours. It took him but three months to walk and one more year to speak and to foresee the future. He was undoubtedly an exceptional man: the ancestral hero of an ascending dynasty. Similar signs of precocity characterize the legendary Oghuz Kaghan, eponymous ancestor of the Oghuz tribes.

The diplomatic skills of A-pao-chi were considerable. In the words of the *Liao-shih*, he:

treated all tribes kindly, made the rewards and punishments equitable and abstained from wanton military campaigns. He benefited his people by pursuing their interests. The herds flourished and both the government and the people were sufficiently provided for.²

Kitan history did not unfold in a vacuum and, from the very beginning, the relationship with China was the dominant factor in external relations. The first recorded Kitan embassy reached the Wei court in 468. In 479 some Kitan tribes, fleeing a Juan-juan invasion, submitted to the Wei. Contacts became more frequent in T'ang times when, as we have seen, the Kitan were increasingly inclined to take advantage of the weakening of central power. A-pao-chi's rise coincided with the fall of the T'ang dynasty, followed by a period of political upheaval known in Chinese history as that of the Five Dynasties (907–60). The growing importance of the Kitan is shown by the fact that in 906 the founder of the short-lived Liang dynasty (907–12) thought it opportune to send envoys to A-pao-chi.

It was with Kitan help that in 936 the Later Chin (one of the Five Dynasties) could establish their rule. In 938 they had to repay this service in kind by ceding to the emperor T'ai-tsung (T'ai-tsu's successor; 927–47) sixteen prefectures located in northern China, thereby extending Kitan territory well into China proper. In 938 Peking became the Kitan Southern Capital (Nan-ching) for which in 1012 they revived its old name, Yen-ching. With the founding of the (Northern) Sung dynasty in 960, a barrier to further south-ward Kitan expansion was erected, and the treaty of Shan-yüan (1005) established a long-lasting peace on the basis of equality between Liao and Sung. The history of Liao rule over China is beyond the scope of the present chapter.

There is evidence of Kitan contacts with the great nomad empires centred on Mongolia. In the first part of the sixth century, under attack by the Kao-chü-li (called somewhat later Kao-li, i.e. the Koreans) and the Juan-juan, at that time the dominant power in Mongolia, some Kitan sought refuge with the T'o-pa dynasty of the Northern Wei. Gaining strength, the Kitan then invaded the short-lived Northern Ch'i dynasty (550–70) but in the process they suffered the loss of some 100,000 men. By that time the Türks held sway in Mongolia. The Köl Tegin inscription in Mongolia lists the Kitan among the peoples hostile to

² Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 127.

the Türks though they were represented at the funeral of that Türk prince. The Tonyuquq inscription, of a slightly later date, speaks of a Tokuz Oghuz–Chinese–Kitan triple alliance against the Türks. It is impossible to establish the exact nature of Türk domination over the Kitan. Interestingly, Kitan–Türk hostility survived the fall of the Türk empire of Mongolia; we know of Kitan attacks against the Western Türks in 916 and 983. It is not clear what was meant by the ‘Türks’ since by that time their states, both Eastern and Western, had long since disappeared. However, it is known that some Türk groups survived the dissolution of their empire. In the middle of the tenth century, Hu Ch’iao, a Chinese in Kitan service, mentions two groups of Türks: one, called the ‘Türks of the *shan-yü*’, living to the west and north of the Kyrgyz; the other far to the north in a very cold country. It seems likely that it was with the former group that the Kitan had their conflicts.

Relations with the Uighurs, whose empire succeeded that of the Türks in Mongolia in 745, were more friendly and more complex. Theoretically at least, the Kitan were subjects of the Uighur empire of Mongolia. But Uighur rule may have rested light on the Kitan, as may be concluded from the following anecdote. In 924, on the occasion of a visit to Karabalghasun, the old capital of the former Uighur empire, A-pao-chi ordered that an inscription in honour of the Uighur Bilge Kaghan be erased and replaced by a trilingual (Kitan–Turkic–Chinese) text extolling the deeds of the defunct Kaghan. If the historian may be allowed to suggest a seemingly far-fetched analogy, many former subjects of empires that no longer exist – such as those of the British or of the Habsburgs – look with a measure of nostalgia on the days of their ‘subjugation’. It was in this frame of mind that A-pao-chi offered the Uighurs of Kocho the possibility of returning to their former homeland from which they had had to flee when, in 840, the Kyrgyz put an end to their empire in Mongolia. By 924 the Uighurs had been settled for almost a century in a land where they were content and so they did not take up the offer. Unfortunately the inscription erected by A-pao-chi has not survived nor do we know which of the several Bilge Kaghans it was intended to honour; the text might have thrown light on the conjectures just adumbrated. The date of 924 is often referred to in the scholarly literature as that at which the Kitan, having defeated the Kyrgyz, took possession of Mongolia. It may be more accurate to suggest that A-pao-chi took advantage of a political vacuum created by the gradual withdrawal of the Kyrgyz into their homeland in the Yenisei region. What is certain is that by 924 the Kyrgyz evacuation of the Orkhon region must have been completed. Kitan–Uighur political co-operation continued over the years and, almost a century later, a joint diplomatic action was undertaken aimed at establishing contact with the Ghaznavids. About this more will be said later in this chapter.

Beyond strictly political links, the Kitan and the Uighurs were connected in more than one way, particularly following the Uighurs' expulsion from Mongolia. The Kitan tribal confederation comprised several tribes of Uighur origin, such as the I-shih, second in rank only to the imperial Yeh-lü clan. Also of Uighur origin was the Hsiao clan which provided consorts to the ruling Yeh-lü. The power of the consort was almost as great as that of the emperor. The empress accompanied her husband at ceremonial hunts and participated in public ceremonies such as the annual sacrifice at Mount Mu-yeh where, it should be recalled, not only the male but also the female ancestor of the Kitan was duly honoured. T'ai-tsu's widow refused to follow her deceased husband into the grave – as tradition would have demanded – and got away with it. Her act of defiance marked the end of the custom. Among the powerful women in the *Liao-shih* mention should be made of Hu-lien, wife of the second son of T'ai-tsung. In 994 she led a campaign against the Tatar and ten years later founded K'o-tun ch'êng, i.e. the 'city of the Khātūn [the empress]' near the Orkhon river. Kitan women of her stature presage the long-ruling female regents of the Kara Khitay and the forceful Chinggisid consorts of the thirteenth century.

The *Liao-shih* records for 924 the arrival of Uighur messengers to the Kitan court. Since the short notice raises several questions, it is given here in the translation of Wittfogel and Fêng:

Uighur messengers came [to the court], but there was no one who could understand their language. The empress said to T'ai-tsu, 'Tieh-la [a younger brother of the emperor] is clever. He may be sent to welcome them.' By being in their company for twenty days he was able to learn their spoken language and script. Then he created [a script of] smaller Ch'i-tan characters which, though fewer in number, covered everything.³

The first, somewhat surprising, fact that emerges from this notice is the seeming ignorance of the Uighur language in the Kitan court. Yet one should not attach too much importance to the statement, which may simply indicate that, at the precise time of the messengers' arrival, and in the emperor's immediate entourage, there was no one who could speak Uighur. For all his cleverness, Tieh-la could not have learned Uighur in twenty days; it must be assumed that he knew it already.

The second part of the statement has been widely interpreted to mean that the 'small' characters of the Kitan script were, in fact, those of the script used by the Uighurs. Recent research⁴ indicates otherwise. The Kitan created two scripts, at present neither of them completely deciphered, which in the sources are called respectively 'large' and 'small'. Texts written in each of them have survived, and to the layman's eye both are similar to

³ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 243.

⁴ See Ch. 9 by György Kara in Vol. IV, Part Two, of this *History*

Chinese characters. The superficial similarities notwithstanding, the systems underlying the two scripts are different and the ‘small’ script has nothing to do with any of the scripts used by the Uighurs. Tieh-la is probably justly credited with the invention of the ‘small script’; the link with the arrival of the Uighur messengers is coincidental.

Uighur cultural influence on the Kitan manifested itself in various ways and included the teaching of the cultivation of melons, a rather sophisticated process, since it involved the fertilizing of the plants with cow dung and their protection with mats. Important and cordial as Kitan–Uighur relations may have been, the Kitan took care to keep their distance from the politically insignificant Uighurs of Kocho. On two occasions Uighur requests for imperial brides were rejected.

The rise of Kitan power did not go unnoticed in the Islamic world. In 923 a Persian delegation, and in 924 an Arab embassy, arrived at the court of T’ai-tsu. The Kitan seem to have been slow to respond to these overtures; the first recorded Kitan embassy to the west visited Ghazna in 1026 or 1027. It was clearly prompted by the news reaching the Kitan that Mahmūd of Ghazna (998–1030) had embarked on a series of conquests which brought the eastern limits of the Ghaznavid state close to the Kitan sphere of interest. The Liao emperor Sheng-tsung (982–1031) decided to send an exploratory mission which was joined by an Uighur mission. Arabic sources mention their arrival which they interpret either as proof of the Kitan’s fear of Ghaznavid might or even as their desire, in Gardīzī’s words, ‘to place themselves at his service’. In his work written *c.* 1120, the geographer and ethnographer Marvazī gives the text of Sheng-tsung’s letter to Mahmūd:

The Lord of 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 send their envoys, and their letters and presents follow upon one another. [Only] he [Mahmūd] 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.⁵

Marvazī also gives the text of the message of the Uighur Khan, much more modest in tone but equally friendly. ‘We ardently desire’, writes the Khan, ‘that love and respect should be

⁵ Minorsky, 1942, pp. 19–20.

established between [us].’ Judging by Marvazī’s text, Mahmūd was certainly not overawed by the Kitan initiative. In Marvazī’s words:

When the two letters were presented to Mahmūd and he saw what stupidity they contained. . . he did not find it possible to grant what was requested with regard to the establishment of sincere relations and correspondence, and he dismissed the envoys, saying to them: ‘Peace and truce are possible only so far as to prevent war and fighting. There is no faith uniting us that we should be in close relations. Great distance creates security for both of us against perfidy. I have no need of close relations with you until you accept Islam. And that is all.’⁶

Harsh though Mahmūd’s reply was, it certainly contained a core of realism. There was little likelihood of a Ghaznavid–Liao conflict.

The fate of the Liao was not sealed by any distant menace, nor by a sudden change in the *modus vivendi* established with the Sung. The danger arose in the Kitan’s own Manchurian hinterland where the Tunguz Jurchen, for many years subjects of the former, revolted and under the leadership of A-ku-ta (1068–1123) conquered most of northern China. The short-lived Jurchen dynasty of the Chin (1115–1234) was established by A-ku-ta’s younger brother, known as the emperor T’ai-tsung.

The rise of the Kara Khitay

Thus, following a rule of just over two centuries, Kitan dominion over northern China ended. Needless to say, the demise of the Liao did not imply the disappearance of the Kitan people in its homeland or even in the conquered territories. The integration of the Kitan into the new Jurchen Chin state does not belong to the history of Central Asia and, hence, cannot be dealt with in this chapter. We must, however, follow the destiny of the Kitan in Central Asia where, showing a remarkable resilience, they embarked on the foundation of a new state, the third in the course of their known history.

The success of the enterprise was due to the extraordinary determination, as well as the political and military skills, of Yeh-lü Ta-shih, a descendant in the eighth generation of T’ai-tsu. A highly educated man, Yeh-lü Ta-shih was put on his mettle in a number of military engagements with the Sung in which he revealed an uncommon military talent. He fully realized the plight of the Liao, taken in the fearful pincer of the Jurchen Chin advancing from the north and the Sung from the south. With more than half his territory occupied by the Jurchen, and one major city after the other taken, the emperor T’ien-tsu had to flee and in 1125 was eventually captured by the Chin. In the general maelstrom of war, amid intrigues and counter-intrigues and contending, ephemeral, self-styled emperors, Yeh-lü

⁶ Minorsky, 1942, p. 21.

Ta-shih operated with great skill and a good measure of ruthlessness, putting expediency above every other consideration. Captured by the Chin, and perhaps toying with the idea of collaboration with the victors, he escaped and made his way to T'ien-tsu. Appalled by the emperor's incompetence and unwilling to undertake military operations that were doomed to failure, in 1124 – while T'ien-tsu was still alive – Yeh-lü Ta-shih set out with a small band of followers to create a state of his own. According to Chinese sources, he started out with 10,000 horses. Since one must count at least 2 horses per warrior, his following, though fast growing, was very small indeed.

There is some doubt whether, at this moment, he took the title of king or emperor; but what is certain is that, simultaneously, he had himself called *Gür Khan*, a dignitary title he was the first to use. It is a composite of the conventional term *Khan* and the adjective *gür* (universal). It could well be that by the adoption of an unusual title, at the outset of his second career, the Kara Khitay ruler wished to distinguish his regime from those customary in Inner Asia. There is a twentieth-century parallel in Hitler's and Franco's choice of the unconventional terms *Führer* and *Caudillo* respectively. In later years, the title *Gür Khan* was assumed by Jamuka, an erstwhile companion of Temüjin (later to be known as Chinggis Khan), who became his principal antagonist. *Gür Khan* was also the title of the ruler of the probably Turkic-speaking Kerait, who in or about 1008 adopted Nestorian Christianity.

Among the many qualities of Yeh-lü Ta-shih, his powers of persuasion must have ranked second only to his steely determination. As a fugitive with no territorial base, in order to gain any credibility he had to raise an army willing to follow him on a road not yet charted leading to a state not yet founded. That he brilliantly succeeded in this undertaking gives the measure of his genius. First, Yeh-lü Ta-shih turned north where he obtained the modest support of the White Tatars. He then advanced towards Mongolia where, in K'o-tun city by the Orkhon, to an assembly of tribal chiefs and heads of Kitan prefectures, he delivered a rousing speech requesting their help in the extermination of the Chin and the re-establishment of the Liao empire. It is a matter for speculation whether, at that time, Ta-shih's prime objective was the restoration of the Liao or the creation of a new empire resting on the military resources of the steppe peoples. His immediate further actions would suggest that he opted for the second alternative.

As an outcome of the successful meeting in K'o-tun, Yeh-lü Ta-shih now had an army of some 10,000 horsemen – a respectable force when well led, but insufficient for large-scale operations against the Chin or any other major power. There was a need for further allies and, to avoid risky confrontations, Yeh-lü Ta-shih decided to proceed westward. The sources report that before embarking on the long expedition, Yeh-lü Ta-shih dutifully

performed the traditional sacrifice of the grey ox and the white horse, a telling sign of Kitan cultural continuity carried from the Manchurian forests, through two centuries of rule over China, towards the steppes of Central Asia. In 1125 – the date is uncertain – he requested permission from the Uighur ruler of Kocho to pass through his territory towards the west. Referring to the erstwhile Kitan offer that his ancestor T'ai-tsu had made to the Uighurs to re-establish them in Mongolia, Ta-shih emphasized the time-honoured friendship between Uighurs and Kitan. The Uighur king of Kocho agreed to the passage of the Kitan troops through his territory. According to the *Liao-shih*:

He presented him with six hundred horses, a hundred camels, and three thousand sheep; and to prove his sincerity gave some of his sons and grandsons as hostages; and declaring himself a vassal of Ta-shih, accompanied him as far as the boundary of his realm.⁷

Whether the co-operation between the kingdom of Kocho and the Kitan was really as harmonious as the sources wish us to believe is of secondary importance. It can be taken for granted that, at a minimum, the advance of Yeh-lü Ta-shih towards the west was not impeded by the Uighurs. How long this crossing took cannot be established; it might have taken a few years during which Yeh-lü Ta-shih prepared his forces for the conquest of West Turkistan.

Before we follow this Kitan advance, we should pause for a moment to examine a change in their name that occurred almost concurrently with this migration. First, it should be mentioned that, although Chinese historians shed few tears over the fall of alien, conquest dynasties, that founded by Yeh-lü Ta-shih has continued to be listed also in the Chinese annals under the name of Hsi (Western) Liao.

For reasons unknown, in Muslim sources the Kitan who migrated to the west appear under the name of Kara, i.e. 'Black' Kitai or Kitay. The first question that emerges is: why has the final *-n* in the name been replaced by a *-y*? (The value of the final *-i* as written in the conventional spelling of Kitai is, in fact, that of a *-y* as in the English 'yes'.) The 'Kitan' pronunciation of the name is vouchsafed by the Türk, Chinese and Tibetan transcriptions, though the first of these suggests a palatalized *ń* sound, similar to *gn* in French 'agneau'. It so happens that the final *-n* or *-ń* became *-y* in the language of the Uighurs of Kocho. Most probably the populations of West Turkistan became acquainted with this name through the intermediary of Uighur and adopted its Uighur form. The fact that the Mongols of the thirteenth century continued to use the original 'Kitan' form supports this explanation. The exact significance of the epithet 'black' (*kara*) in tribal or personal names is not fully established, but the more likely interpretation is that it is an honorific of sorts widely used among Central Asian peoples in conjunction with other ethnonyms.

⁷ Bretschneider, 1911, pp. 214–15.

We have seen that the first Kitan attempt to establish contacts with the Islamic world foundered on Ghaznavid arrogance. Now, almost exactly one century later, Ghaznavid power was a shambles and the Kitan ruler a virtual fugitive. Yeh-lü Ta-shih was now faced by the Turkic tribal confederation ruled by the Muslim Karakhanid dynasty. Since about the middle of the eleventh century there were in fact two Karakhanid states (see above, Chapter 6) and, through geographic necessity, the advancing Kitan first had to face the eastern branch ruled since 1103 by Ahmad b. Hasan Arslan Khan. The two foci of this state were the cities of Kashghar and Balasaghun, the latter located in the Chu valley and, in subsequent centuries, completely destroyed.

It should be emphasized that the reconstruction of Kara Khitay history is, at best, tentative. The relevant Chinese and Muslim sources are often in contradiction and it is possible that occasionally both are wrong. It would appear that, advancing in the Tarim basin, at least one wing of Yeh-lü Ta-shih's army met with little luck and, probably in 1128 near Kashghar, suffered a defeat at the hand of the Karakhanid ruler Ahmad b. Hasan (Arslan Kara Kaghan). Ta-shih was more successful in another push westward, through Kyrgyz territory. The character of this move, whether peaceful or warlike, cannot be determined; a Khitay tribe still lives in southern Kyrgyzstan. Nor is it known with any degree of certainty which of the two Kara Khitay wings – if indeed it is justified to speak of such a division – built the city by the River Emil of which, in the mid-thirteenth century when the Persian historian Juwaynī wrote his work, 'some traces still remained'.⁸

Yeh-lü Ta-shih left his country and moved westward with the avowed intent of gathering sufficient forces to re-establish Liao power over China. Perhaps, as time passed, he found this aim unrealistic. The dispatch in 1134 of an expeditionary force which he did not join himself was more an empty gesture than a real effort to achieve this aim. It could also be that he thought that the creation of a new empire further west offered him a better opportunity to leave his mark on history. Whatever the true motive, he made no serious effort at a reconquest. Unmistakably, Yeh-lü Ta-shih's ambition was to carve himself an empire in the west.

Internal dissent within the Eastern Karakhanid state facilitated Yeh-lü Ta-shih's search for a territorial base. The Karakhanid ruler, Ibrāhīm II b. Ahmad, unable to cope with his unruly Kangli and Karluk subjects, sought and obtained Yeh-lü Ta-shih's help. This assistance, if this is what it was, took the form of the occupation of the Karakhanid capital Balasaghun in the Chu valley and the de facto elimination of Karakhanid rule in the region. In Juwaynī's words, 'the Gür Khan proceeded to Balasaghun and ascended the throne that

⁸ Juwaynī, 1958, Vol. 1, p. 355.

had cost him nothing'.⁹ Yeh-lü Ta-shih had thus acquired a capital city; the marauding refugee was now in possession of a fixed territorial base. Unfortunately, the date when this happened cannot be established with any degree of certitude. Ibrāhīm II, while recognizing Kara Khitay suzerainty, was allowed to remain in place, occupying the more modest position of Ilig-i Türkmen (Ilig-i Türk?), perhaps a concession to the predominantly Turkic population of the Kara Khitay empire.

The neutralizing of the Eastern Karakhanids did not satisfy the ambitious Gür Khan, who now embarked on a western expansion of his domain. In 1137, near Khujand, he defeated the Karakhanid Mahmūd II, a nephew of Sanjar, the powerful Seljuq sultan. Clearly, Yeh-lü Ta-shih was bent on further conquest. Taking advantage of a conflict between Mahmūd and his Karluk subjects, in which the latter called on him for help, the Gür Khan inflicted a crushing defeat on the joint forces of Mahmūd II and Sanjar at a battle fought north of Samarkand in the Qatwan steppe in September 1141. News of this débâcle reached participants in the Second Crusade and, it is usually assumed, became the basis of the creation of the legend of Prester John, a fictional Christian king of the east bringing sorely needed relief to the Crusaders battling with the Seljuqs. Despite his victory at Qatwan, which brought the whole of Turkistan under Kara Khitay control, Yeh-lüh Ta-shih did not assume direct governance; Karakhanid amirs, recognizing his suzerainty, continued to rule. Effective power was in the hands of the Burhān family of Bukhara, the so-called *sudūr* ('eminences'), Sunni religious leaders who dealt directly with the Gür Khans.

Yeh-lüh Ta-shih died in 1143 and was succeeded by his widow, T'a-pu-yen (the empress Kan-t'ien by her honorific title), who acted as regent for 8 years until Ta-shih's son Yeh-lü I-lieh (1151–63) could ascend the throne. During his reign, Kara Khitay involvement in the perennial conflicts in Transoxania continued. In 1158, answering a request for help from the Khan of Samarkand, a Kara Khitay contingent of 10,000 men was sent to his rescue. It was headed by the Ilig-i Türkmen, the deposed Karakhanid Ibrāhīm II. He showed no more courage this time than when he had yielded to Yeh-lü Ta-shih; faced by the forces of the Khwarazm Shah II Arslan, he sued for peace.

A census taken under I-lieh counts 84,500 households with men aged 18 or older. This figure probably does not include the population of the conquered territories. According to Kitan traditional reckoning – which the Kara Khitay probably followed – each household had 2 adult, arms-bearing men. In the decisive battle fought on the Qatwan steppe, the Kara Khitay forces numbered probably fewer than 20,000 men. Whatever the value of these figures, it is certain that the Kara Khitay element constituted but a small fraction of the population under its control. It could not influence in any significant way either the

⁹ Ibid.

economy or the cultural structure prevailing in the land. While ruling over China, the Kitan (Liao) had operated within a fairly homogeneous Chinese population whose vast majority did not object to the alien rule for the simple reason that it did not seriously interfere with their way of life. The tasks faced by the Kara Khitay state were very different. Here too, the Yeh-lü clan and its followers represented a minority within a much larger population which, however, was far from homogeneous. Here, in Wittfogel's words, 'a limited imperial domain [was] surrounded by a vast agglomeration of vassal peoples, sedentary as well as nomadic'.¹⁰ The tradition and the values of this Kara Khitay island constituted a conglomerate of Chinese and Kitan customs, the latter kept alive by the Yeh-lü clan, inheritors of a centuries-old tradition and know-how of government.

Very little is known about the cultural fabric of the Kara Khitay. For lack of evidence, even their language cannot be established with certainty. It seems unlikely that the use of Mongol, if at all present, was widespread and possibly the language in Yeh-lü Ta-shih's entourage was Chinese. The chancery used Chinese script, and Kara Khitay copper coins were minted on a Chinese pattern and carried Chinese characters. What is known for certain is that the Kara Khitay were not Muslims and that, by replacing the Karakhanids in Balasaghun, they superimposed an alien culture on the local population. The vast majority of the Kara Khitay subjects were Muslims, speaking a Turkic or Iranian language.

One might argue that with the appearance of the Kara Khitay state, an alternative political structure to the traditional Inner Asian Kaghanate was emerging, a process symbolized by the claim to universality as expressed by the title of the ruler. It was to respond to the needs of a state in which ethnic, religious and cultural diversity excluded the possibility of a strong sense of solidarity. In this, as also in chronological order, the Kara Khitay were the precursors of the Mongols. Both demanded little other than recognition of their rule and, beyond this, the payment of taxes. By the side of the native ruler stood the vigilant Kara Khitay official whose task it was to ensure regular payment. The political aims of the Kara Khitay appear to have been modest, based, as they probably were, on a correct assessment of their military strength. There is every indication to show that in organization and combativeness the Kara Khitay armies were on a par with their Central Asian counterparts: they won some battles, they lost others.

In vivid contrast to some of their Muslim vassals, the Kara Khitay rulers followed a policy of religious tolerance, a feature which was also to characterize the rule of the Mongols. The Yeh-lü dynasty was probably Buddhist but did not try to impose this persuasion on its subjects. Of particular interest is the florescence of the Nestorian Christian Church, whose missionary activity continued unhampered by the Gür Khans. In the twelfth century the

¹⁰ Wittfogel and Fêng, 1949, p. 665.

city of Kashghar was a Nestorian metropolitan see and followers of this creed were still encountered in the region by Marco Polo in the thirteenth century. Among the Christian gravestones with Syriac inscriptions discovered in the Chu valley, the earliest were erected in the Kara Khitay period.

At the death of I-lieh, power was assumed by his younger sister P'u-su-wan, known as the Empress Ch'êng-tien (1164–77). The Kara Khitay continued the tradition of strong female participation in the running of state affairs mentioned above in connection with T'ai-tsu's widow. Ch'êng-tien did not see her role as merely that of caretaker until such time as I-lieh's son could ascend the throne. Under her rule, hostilities against Il Arslan continued until his death in 1172 and she even intervened in the struggle for the throne of his sons. Ch'êng-tien's demise was not caused by any political or military actions on her part, but by her sentimental involvement with her husband's younger brother. She had her husband murdered and, in turn, fell victim to the vengeance of her father-in-law. He staged a coup in which both the empress and her lover perished. I-lieh's second son, Yeh-lü Chi-lu-ku (1179–1211), then became the ruler.

Under the new Gür Khan, Kara Khitay involvement in Khwarazmian affairs continued to follow the earlier pattern: interference in struggles for the succession and more or less successful attempts at collecting taxes. There is no need to enumerate here the battles fought with Kara Khitay participation on behalf of or against successive Central Asian rulers. Let us just mention the Kara Khitay help given to the Khwarazm Shah 'Alā' al-Dīn Muhammad in 1204 in his struggle against the Ghurid Mu'izz al-Dīn. Since Yeh-lü Tashih's arrival in Balasaghun, the Gür Khans had been deeply influenced by and, in their turn, had been able to influence events in Semirechye, Transoxania and even south of the Oxus. But the winds of history were blowing from the east and were soon to disturb the usual pattern of Kara Khitay politics.

Simultaneously with the events just described, far away in the foothills of the Altai, in a decisive battle fought in 1204, Chinggis Khan (still called Temüjin) crushed the Mongol-speaking but Christian Naiman. Their leader Tayang Khan fell in the battle, but his son Küchlüg escaped. In 1208 Chinggis Khan, implacable, led another raid against the Naiman, then living on the upper Irtysh. Once again, Küchlüg escaped the general massacre and sought refuge with the Kara Khitay. He was well received, married the Gür Khan's daughter and abandoned Christianity in favour of Buddhism.

However hurried Küchlüg's flight might have been, he was accompanied by a substantial number of Naiman whose arrival upset the delicate internal balance prevailing within the core of the Kara Khitay empire, and thus posed a serious threat to its very existence. Historians, relying mainly on Juwaynī's description of the events, usually depict a scenario

in which the Kara Khitay fell victim to a joint, concerted attack led from the east by the Naiman under Küchlüg, and from the west by °Alā' al-Dīn Muhammad. This was not the case. Perhaps the best summary of the events is given by Li Chih-chang in his narrative of the Taoist sage Ch'ang-chun's journey to the west, where he was to join Chinggis Khan:

When the Naiman tribe was defeated, they took refuge with the Ta-shih [i.e. the Kara Khitay]; but having recuperated their strength they presently seized the land that had sheltered them, while the western part of the empire was shorn off and allotted to the Khwarazm Shah.¹¹

Indeed, Küchlüg's grab for power is more like a classical palace coup led by a vigorous son-in-law against his aging father-in-law than a military attack from the outside. Armed clashes between their respective followers did occur, but when in 1211 Küchlüg emerged the victor in the conflict, he did not assume the title Gür Khan, and Yeh-lü Chi-lu-ku, who remained the nominal ruler, was allowed to die a peaceful death in 1213, two years after Küchlüg's revolt. For the Franciscan John of Plano Carpini, who travelled through the region in 1246 and was generally well informed, the Naiman and the Kara Khitay were allies who had been defeated by the Mongols.

It could be that it was the threat of a new conflict with the Mongols that prompted Küchlüg to strengthen his position within the Kara Khitay polity by eliminating the Gür Khan. One of Chinggis Khan's leading generals, Khubilay Noyan (not to be confused with the Great Khan Khubilay), who operated in the Semirechye region around 1210, must certainly have been aware of Küchlüg's ascent to power and it can be taken for granted that he warned Chinggis, unless – a distinct possibility – Khubilay had already been sent to the region to report on Küchlüg's actions. A revival of Naiman strength was not something Chinggis Khan would tolerate and steps were taken to eliminate Küchlüg, who had escaped him twice. This time the restless Naiman was to meet his fate at the hand of the Mongols.

Küchlüg was unable to hold together the Kara Khitay inheritance. Internally, his anti-Muslim religious policy alienated his Muslim subjects; in his external affairs he found himself in a desperate situation, trapped as he was between the Khwarazm Shah and the Mongols. The Uighur ruler Barchuk, whose predecessors had been so friendly to Yeh-lü Ta-shih, exasperated by Küchlüg and sensing the approaching Mongol tide, changed his allegiance, killed the Kara Khitay governor in 1209 and submitted to Chinggis. A Mongol army under the command of Jebe, another of Chinggis Khan's chief lieutenants, advanced on Kashghar, where the population, incensed by Küchlüg's religious persecution, rose in revolt. To meet the challenge, Küchlüg went to Kashghar but found that the forces against him were too strong to be mastered. To save his life, Küchlüg fled for a third time, but on this occasion his luck deserted him: captured in Badakhshan, he was decapitated.

¹¹ Waley, 1931, pp. 88–9.

Küchlüg was neither a great statesman nor a great warrior. Moreover, the legitimacy of his rule was doubtful and he certainly lacked the charisma so characteristic of the Yeh-lü clan. One could speculate as to what would have happened had the Mongol advance reached the Kara Khitay state still ruled by a Yeh-lü. The advancing Mongol armies contained important Kitan contingents. Let us also recall that Yeh-lü Ch'u-tsai (1189–1243), trusted adviser of Chinggis Khan and Ögedey, belonged to the same clan. He accompanied the conqueror on the campaign to the west that would destroy Khwarazm. Ch'u-tsai's record of his journey, though far too short, informs us that in November 1221 he was in Balasaghun, of which he briefly notes that it used to be the capital of the Hsi Liao, i.e. the Kara Khitay. One wonders what his thoughts might have been there, just ten years after his relative, the last Gür Khan, had been deposed. Ch'u-tsai had a keen interest in and feeling for the various cultures – Kitan, Mongol, Chinese – all of which he served with great distinction. On his above-mentioned journey, the Taoist sage Ch'ang-chun met another member of the Yeh-lü clan, namely A-hai, the civil governor of Samarkand installed by the Mongols. His son and successor Yeh-lü Mien-ssu-ko was governor of Bukhara.

Clearly, the Yeh-lü were great survivors, a quality that was apparently characteristic of the Kitan people whom they had served with such distinction. Following the collapse of their second great state, that of the Kara Khitay, for centuries to come the Kitan were able to preserve a measure of their national identity in a diaspora that extended well into eastern Europe. References to the Kitan can be found in the heroic poetry of such north-west Siberian peoples as the Voguls and the Ostiaks, and in hydronyms of the same region. As a tribal name, Kitan, Katay, Kitay and their variants can be found among the Kalmucks of the seventeenth century, located to the west of the Ural river; among the Bashkirs of the Volga region; and even among the Tatars of the Crimea. Toponyms found as far west as Moldavia testify to the former presence of Kitan groups and Hungarian chronicles of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries locate the Kitan on the banks of the Don.¹²

The most enduring trace of Kitan power, however, is the very name Cathay, China's medieval Latin appellation, still current in many modern usages and in the Russian name of that country. The search for fabulous Cathay was a principal incentive for the great discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The history of the Kitan constitutes a truly extraordinary chapter in the history of the world.

¹² Sinor, 1995, pp. 264–7.