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Imperial Statecraft: Political Forms And Techniques Of
Governance In Inner Asia, Sixth–Twentieth Centuries,
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IMPERIAL STATECRAFT:
POLITICAL FORMS AND TECHNIQUES OF
GOVERNANCE IN INNER ASIA,
SIXTH–TWENTIETH CENTURIES

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Western Washington University
for
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PREFACE

CHARLES MELVILLE

One good thing about the Mongols is that they continue to provide an endless source of inspiration to historians, and fascination to the general public. The first reaction was present almost from the time of their emergence, as Asian, Russian and European chroniclers attempted to understand and explain the onslaught of the Mongol hordes, emerging from the utter darkness of the unknown realms. The second reaction – fascination – came later, for the first emotion provoked by the Mongols among the general public was of dread. Either way, apart from the reported and apparent brutality of their actions, what made and continues to make them a compelling subject for study is their foreignness, the fact that they seem to have come from beyond the pale, to be alien to civilized society, barbaric, different and hence also superbly exotic. That, and the huge size of their empire, which either embraced or affected most of the then known world, therefore opened a window onto a wide range of societies at a particular period of history, and at a moment of particular stress.

To some extent, these volumes address the questions of the marginality of the Mongols, and also of their being different. There have been several conferences on the Mongol period in recent years, at SOAS in 1991, Pont-à-Mousson in 1992, Oxford in 1994, Leiden in 1998, Los Angeles in 2003, to name but those that have generated, or are about to generate, volumes of conference proceedings. Although most of these have had some general theme, they have not found the same level of coherence as the contributions to this volume, nor have they been published so soon after the event. Both points are a tribute to the vision and the organisation of the editor, David Sneath and his supporting team. The conference organized in Cambridge by the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit

CHAPTER 2

Between China and Islam: The Administration of the Qara Khitai (Western Liao), 1124–1218¹

MICHAL BIRAN

The Qara Khitai arrived in Central Asia after more than 200 years of ruling in Manchuria, Mongolia and parts of north China as the Liao dynasty (907–1125), and they are the only Central Asian dynasty recognized as ‘Chinese’ both by traditional Chinese historiography and by their Muslim subjects and neighbours. Ruling over a heterogeneous but mostly Muslim population between the Altai and the Oxus, the nomadic Qara Khitai established an Inner Asian administration that combined different administrative traditions, which prevailed in their original homeland as well as in their newly acquired territories.

In the tenth through the twelfth centuries, the Eurasian steppes were not governed by a steppe empire originating in Mongolia, but by polities arriving from either Manchuria or Central Asia, i.e. in regions in which nomadic and sedentary coexistence was much more prevalent than in the Mongolian steppe. These polities – the Liao (907–1125) and Jin (1115–1234) dynasties in Manchuria; the Qarakhanids (c. 950–1213), Seljuks (1040–1194) and Khwārazm Shāhs (c. 1077–1231) in Central Asia – rose to power against the background of an absence of a strong force in the steppe since the fall of the Uighurs (840), and the decline of the sedentary empires that bordered these states: the collapse of Tang China (906) and the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate from the middle of the ninth

¹ This study was supported by grant 818/03 of the Israel Science Foundation.

century and of the Samanids (888–999) from the mid-tenth century. Unlike their Mongolian predecessors, these states did conquer some of the sedentary civilizations that bordered the steppe, thereby creating empires in which a nomadic (or semi-nomadic) minority, backed by a strong military machine, ruled over a multi-ethnic nomad and sedentary population. This necessitated the acquisition of the knowledge and administrative skills required to manage the government of the sedentary areas and new forms of legitimization. In establishing those states, the rulers became closely associated with the sedentary traditions of the regions over which they ruled, whether Chinese in the eastern steppe or Muslim in the western steppe. The sedentary influence played an important role in the shaping of the royal institutions of these states and in their administration. Yet those outside influences did not supplant the steppe past, which remained a major part of the elite identity and government (Golden 1982: 37–77, esp. 73–74, and his chapter in this volume; Di Cosmo 1999: 32–33; Morgan 1988: 34–40; Barfield 1989: 164ff.; Biran 2004). What is unique about the Qara Khitai, however, is that they apparently relied mainly on a non-local sedentary tradition for the same functions, namely, they used Chinese symbols and techniques for ruling over a non-Chinese population in a non-Chinese territory. Moreover, unlike their predecessors and successors in Muslim Central Asia, throughout their rule they did not embrace Islam, or use its ruling symbols. Yet their administrative system worked, that is to say, the dynasty was able to consolidate its rule for nearly a century.

I argue that the Qara Khitai administration worked despite the use of non-local sedentary tradition, because first, this non-local tradition, while foreign, was highly relevant even for the Central Asian Muslim population (Biran 2005a; Biran 2005b). Second, and this is the focus of this chapter, the allegedly Chinese tradition was based on Inner Asian content, not new to the region but covered with a Chinese veneer. To demonstrate this claim, the chapter will start by drawing a

sketch of Qara Khitai administration as can be gleaned from the historical sources.² On the basis of this sketch I will evaluate the function and relative importance of Chinese and other components in the dynasty's statecraft, discussing in detail why the Chinese trappings were kept, why and how this administration worked, what were its limitations, and how it compared with other Inner Asian modes of government.

First, however, a few words introducing the Qara Khitai are called for. In 1124 the Khitan Liao dynasty that had ruled in Manchuria, Mongolia and parts of north China for more than 200 years (907–1125) was overthrown by another wave of Manchurian invaders, the Jurchens. One Khitan prince, Yelü Dashi (耶律大石), chose not to submit to the new rulers. Instead, he led his few adherents westward, hoping to return subsequently to restore the Liao in its former domains. After spending six years at Kedun, the Liao's western-most garrison post in Mongolia, he became aware of his inability to challenge the Jurchen Jin dynasty and of the relative weakness of the Central Asian kingdoms. Dashi thus decided to continue further westward. In little more than a decade he succeeded in setting up a new empire in Central Asia that was known there as the Qara Khitai (the Black or Great Khitans) and in China as the Xi Liao (西辽; Western Liao). The dynasty existed for nearly 90 years, and was finally vanquished by the Mongols in 1218.

After concluding their conquests in 1142, the Qara Khitai ruled over nearly the whole of Central Asia, from the Oxus to the Altai Mountains, and until 1175 even further eastward into the territory of the Naiman and the Yenisei Qirghiz. The southern territories of the Qara Khitai included Balkh (south of the Oxus), Khotan and Hami. In the north it extended to Lake Balkash and until 1175 also to the further northern territories of the Qangli. This vast empire, roughly

² For fuller description of the Qara Khitai administration see Biran 2005b: Ch. 4.

equivalent to most of modern Xinjiang, Qirghizstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and south Kazakhstan, more or less equalled the territory of the Jin or the Song in China.

The population of this vast empire was multi-ethnic and heterogeneous. Apart from the Khitans, who were a small minority in their empire, it was mainly composed of Turks (including Uighurs), Iranians, Mongols and a few Han Chinese. Most of the population was sedentary, though most of the Khitans, the Mongols and some Turkic tribes were nomads. In terms of religion, while the empire included flourishing Buddhist, Nestorian and even Jewish communities, most of its population, including a notable part of the people within the Qara Khitai central territory, were Muslims (Biran 2005b; Ji Zongan 1996; Wei Liangtao 1987, 1991; Pikov 1989; Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 619–74; Barthold 1968: 323–80).

The administration of the Qara Khitai was the creation of the dynasty's founder, Yelü Dashi (1087–1143). Before migrating into Central Asia Dashi had filled several offices, both civil and military, in Liao administration, and was well versed in its unique features. These included a dual administration, divided between the northern and southern realms (*beimian* 北面, *nanmian* 南面). The northern division handled the affairs of the Khitans and other nomads as well as the emperor's personal retinue, in continuation of the Khitan native tradition, while the southern division dealt with the sedentary population, mostly Chinese and Bohai, and was organized on the basis of the Tang bureaucracy. Indeed, even before the establishment of the Liao dynasty the Khitans were well versed in both the Chinese world of the Tang and the steppe tradition of the Turks and Uighurs. Liao regional administration was based on the system of five capitals, which originated in the Bohai kingdom. The empire was divided into five circuits (*dao* 道), each named after the capital which was its center, and the circuits were divided into prefectures (*zhou* 州) and counties (*xian* 縣). Throughout the year the emperor moved between the five capitals, hunting and fishing in his

seasonal residences on the way from one to another, his mobile court following closely behind him (Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 131–34, 434–50; Twitchett and Tietze 1994: 77–80; Yang Rouwei 1991: 86–214).

Despite the tendency of Chinese and Russian scholars to automatically ascribe Liao features to the Qara Khitai (Ji Zongan 1996: 63–69; Wei Liangtao 1991: 66–69; Pikov 1989: 130–31), these specific features were not apparent in the government Yelü Dashi established in Central Asia. Yet the dual, Chinese and Inner Asian, character of the Qara Khitai government was evident from the dynasty's earlier years. In Central Asia Yelü Dashi started by consolidating the status of the empire's leader: from around 1131 the Qara Khitai ruler who headed its administration was designated as emperor in the Chinese style. He used Chinese reign titles and calendar, justified his rule by the heavenly mandate, conferred Chinese honorific titles on his relatives and supporters and wore only Chinese silk (Tuotuo 1974: 30/357; Ibn al-Athīr 1966: XI, 86). Yet the Qara Khitai emperor also bore the Inner Asian title *Gürkhan* (*Geerhan* 葛儿罕, 'universal khan'), the exact etymology and origin of which, however, are still an open question (Ibn al-Athīr 1966: XI, 83; Juwaynī 1912–1937: II, 86; Juwaynī 1997: 354; Rashīd al-Dīn 1953: I, 236, 419; Rachewiltz 2004: par. 151, 152, 177, 198; Tuotuo 1974: 106/1540; for the etymology see, e.g. Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 431; Menges 1953: 68–79; Doerfer 1963–75: III, 633–37). Apart from this dual, Chinese and Inner-Asian, titulature, Dashi's successors were also known by his name (or title?) *Dashi* (大石), and all of them came from the founder's immediate family. This last fact suggests the building of personal legitimation, stemming from Dashi's personal achievements, not only from his Liao descent (Biran 2005b: Ch. 4).

Most of the *Gürkhans* appointed their successors, according to the Chinese fashion. Yet the fact that these successors included women (Biran 2005b: 54–59, 160–68),

incorporating also the appointment of a daughter as a legitimate successor, certainly reflects Khitan – and not Chinese – social norms.³

The Gürkhan was the political and military leader of the empire. His office also had a religious dimension, as he continued the Khitan tradition of sacrificing a white horse and grey ox to heaven and earth before going into an important military campaign (Tuotuo 1974: 30/356–57).

Under the Gürkhan, the main feature of the Qara Khitai administration was its division into two domains: the administration of the Central territory, organized around the Qara Khitai capital, Balāsāghūn, in the Chu valley of modern north Qirghizstan, and the indirect administration of the subject kingdoms and tribes. These included the eastern Qarakhanids around Kashgar and Khotan; the Western Qarakhanids in Transoxania and their cousins in Farghāna; the Gaochang Uighurs, and Khwārazm, though the latter was never fully integrated into the empire. It also included the realm of the subject tribes: the Qarluq principality of Qayaliq and Almaliq (perhaps in the process of turning from tribe to state), and, at least till 1175, the territories of the Naiman and the Qangli.

The Administration of the Central Territory

This administration had three main overlapping functions: first, the manning of the Gürkhan's personal retinue; second, the administration of the army, and third, the collection of taxes from the population of the central territory.

The central administration included several offices that belonged to the Gürkhan's personal retinue. These were the

³ The *Liao shi* (Tuotuo 1974: 30/357–58) and other Chinese sources and studies describe the empresses as regents, while Muslim sources see them as rulers on their own right (e.g. Mīrkhwānd 1961: IV, 368; Juwaynī 1912–1937: II, 88–89; Juwaynī 1997: 356). The continuation of the existence of female rulers, both widows and daughters, in the Qara Khitai successor state at Kirmān (1222–1306) and despite the islamization of this dynasty, suggests that the Muslim description of the Qara Khitai empresses is closer to the truth. See Biran 2005b: 161–62.

personal attendants (*jinshi* 近侍), the imperial body guards (*huwei* 護衛), the tutor for the imperial princes, and the court's physician (Song Lian 1976: 120/2969–70, 124/3046; Tuotuo 1974: 30/357; °Awfī 1954: 165–66). The biography of this doctor in the anthology of °Awfī (d. c. 1232)⁴ enables us to cast a rare glimpse into life at the Gürkhan's court. According to him, the Gürkhan's officials were 'good companions' of one another and belonging to their close circle resulted in prestige and wealth. The court officials were generally described as *amīrs*, military commanders. Indeed, the court physician himself, who was also a Muslim judge and a poet, had been credited also with unique military skills, which probably helped him in the new environment (°Awfī 1954: 165–66). This description highlights both the personal relations between the Gürkhan and his officials and the dominance of military positions in the Qara Khitai court.

In peacetime, all of the standing Qara Khitai army was stationed in the central territory. The army retained the traditional Inner Asian decimal divisions, mostly organized along tribal lines. Yet all of the identified army commanders were noble Khitans either of the royal clan (Yelü 耶律) or of the consort clan (Xiao 蕭). Among them there was a special place for the *fumas* (駙馬), imperial sons in law (in the reign of Pusuwan, also the empress' husband), who often headed the dynasty's campaigns (e.g. Tuotuo 1974: 30/356; Tuotuo 1975: 121/2637; Ibn al-Athīr 1966: XI, 377–80, XII, 137; Naṭanzī, fol. 174a). As mentioned above, the personal bodyguard of the emperor is attested, yet its dimensions and importance are hard to determine. Most of the recorded Qara Khitai titles that were

⁴ °Awfī spent his youth in Qara Khitai's Transoxania, leaving for Delhi after the Mongol invasion. His work referred to here, *Lubāb al-albāb* ('Quintessence of Hearts'), is an anthology of poets which also contains a biographical introduction on each poet. In addition, it includes biographies and poems of people for whom poetry was only marginal to their other careers as rulers or administrators, such as the doctor serving the Qara Khitai.

preserved are military titles, mainly those of campaign deployment. These titles suggest the existence of a *shumi yuan* (樞密院), Bureau of Military Affairs, which had existed under the Liao (in both its northern and southern administration), but its functions in the Qara Khitai realm are nowhere specified (Tuotuo 1975: 30/357; for the Liao *shumi yuan* see Twitchett and Tietze 1994: 77–80; Yang Ruowei 1991:128–52). One of the more prominent posts in the military realm was that of *tayangū*, a Turkic title meaning chamberlain. The title is attested in the Qarakhanid realm, although already by the eleventh century it was replaced there by the equivalent Arabic term of *ḥājib*. Moreover, the Qarakhanid post included no military function, while the Qara Khitan *tayangū* often led their troops (e.g. Juwaynī 1912–1937: I, 56–57, II, 55; Juwaynī 1997: 74–75, 322; Ibn al-Athīr 1966: XII, 268; Kāshgharī 1982–1985: II, 344; Doerfer 1963–1975: II, 652).

Unlike most tribal armies, the standing army of the Qara Khitai was salaried (Ibn al-Athīr 1966: XI, 86; Juwaynī 1912–1937: II, 92; Juwaynī 1997: 359). Moreover, in sharp contrast to the customary practice in Liao China, Seljuk Iran and Qarakhanid Central Asia, the Gürkhans did not allocate appanages to their commanders (Ibn al-Athīr 1966: XI, 86), i.e. the salaries were paid in cash or kind alone. This method of payment enabled the Gürkhan to keep his troops under relatively strict control, yet it also laid a huge burden on the Gürkhan's treasury. The need for money (combined with the need to engage the troops) probably accounts for another curious feature of the Qara Khitai – their willingness to hire their army to their vassals, helping them in their feuds in return for a heavy financial compensation (see Biran 2005b: 84–85, for examples).

Very little is known about the financial aspects of the Qara Khitai central administration, which must have included tax and tribute collection, distribution of salaries, as well as census taking. We also know nearly nothing about its staff. Although both vizier and prime minister (*xiang* 相) are attested

in the Qara Khitai realm (and it is uncertain whether these were different positions or dual titles for the same office), there is nothing specific that connects the holder of this position to civil administration; the vizier, at least, had certain military duties (Juwaynī 1912–1937: II, 89–90; Juwaynī 1997: 357–58; Yelü Chucai 1986: 2/32, 7/153, 8/171). Taxes were levied according to census, and on the basis of households and not individuals, both methods of Chinese origin. Each household had to pay one *dīnār* annually, and in addition the peasants near Balāsāghūn paid one-tenth of their crops to the state (Tuotuo 1974: 30/357; Tuotuo 1975: 121/2637; Ibn al-Athīr 1966: XI, 84; Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 664). Special officials (known as *shihnas*, to be discussed below), responsible for collecting taxes, were stationed in cities inside the central territory, thereby creating the kernel of the central territory's local administration.

Officials in the central territory were promoted from the personal retinue to the local administration, or from the local staff to the central administration. At least part of the offices were hereditary (Yelü Chucai 1986: 2/32, 7/153, 8/171). While most of the core offices in the Qara Khitai central territory were held by Khitans of Yelü or Xiao origin, talented individuals of diverse origins and beliefs could also participate in the highest echelons of the administration, as proved by the Chinese (or Bohai) assistant to the prime minister, Li Shichang (李世昌); the vizier Maḥmūd Tai, a Muslim merchant; the Muslim judge (*qādī*) Shams al-Dīn Maṣṣūr b. Maḥmūd al-Uzgandī, the court doctor; and Hala Yihachi Beilu (哈刺亦哈赤北魯 Qara Jighach Buiruq), the Uighur tutor of the Gürkhan's children (Yelü Chucai 1986: 2/33, 7/153, 8/171; Juwaynī 1912–1937: II, 89; Juwaynī 1997: 357; ʿAwfī 1954: 165; Song Lian 1976: 124/3046). The administration was also multi-lingual, using Chinese, Khitan, Persian and probably also Uighur Turkic as administrative languages (Biran 2005b: 126–28; Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 670).

The Administration of the Subject Territories

The most prominent feature of Qara Khitai rule over its subject kingdoms was that it was minimal: the local dynasties remained mainly intact, and most preserved their rulers, titles and armies. No permanent Qara Khitai army was stationed in the subject territories, and only in the case of the Eastern Qarakhanids, a part of whose domains was integrated into the central territory of the Qara Khitai and became its capital, did the conquerors downgrade the title of the local ruler (from Ilig Khan to Ilig Türkmen or Ilig Turkān), and relocated him, transferring him from Balāsāghūn to Kashgar (Juwaynī 1912–1937: II, 88; Juwaynī 1997: 355; Pritsak 1953–1954: 43). Other subject rulers retained their original abodes and titles, including that of Khan and Qagan (Kochnev 1993: 22–23; Iakubovskij 1947: 27–32). Occasionally, however, the Qara Khitai replaced a hostile ruler with a more pliable one; attempted to limit a subject ruler's power by encouraging the fragmentation of his realms; or supported a pretender for a certain throne in return for a notable financial gain (ʿAwfī 1954: 51; Ibn al-Athīr 1966: XI, 303; Shabānkārahī 1984: 137; Karypkulov 1984: 300). The Gürkhans concluded marriage alliances with their most respected subject rulers, but while they willingly received the daughters of the Khwārazm Shāh and the Western Qarakhanids, they were less enthusiastic about giving their daughters in marriage (Rashīd al-Dīn 1960: 87; Ibn al-Athīr 1966: XI, 81; Ibn al-Jawzī 1992: 8/2:19).

The rulers subordinated to the Qara Khitai received seals and silver tablets of authority, which they either hung at their waist or attached to their palace's gate (Ibn al-Athīr 1966: XI, 84; Alfī, fol. 32b; ʿAwfī 1954: 517). The Qara Khitai demanded that the rulers send hostages to the Gürkhan's court (Tuotuo 1974: 30/355; Juwaynī 1912–1937: I, 48; Juwaynī 1997: 65). At least in the case of the Western Qarakhanids, the ruler made periodic visits to Balāsāghūn, although it is unclear whether these were obligatory or voluntary. Submission to the Gürkhan also included compliance with a certain set of

‘commands and prohibitions’, whose content is unspecified (Juwaynī 1912–1937: II, 122; Juwaynī 1997: 393). The Qara Khitai confirmed the investiture of newly elected rulers, and in part of their realm the investiture also involved the nomination of a permanent commissioner of the Gürkhan (*shihna* or *shaojian* 少監). New commissioners were also sent after the appointment of a new Gürkhan (Ibn al-Athīr 1966: XI, 310; Juwaynī 1912–1937: I, 56, II, 89, 122; Juwaynī 1997: 74–75, 357, 393).

The main obligations of the subject rulers to their Qara Khitan lords were financial and military. The subject kingdoms were allowed to keep their armies, but were required to mobilize them as auxiliary troops for the Gürkhan (Biran 2001; Biran 2005b: 117). They also had to pay taxes.

The Qara Khitai collected their taxes from the subject territories in one of three ways (Barthold 1962: I, 103–04; whence, e.g. Ji Zongan 1996: 72; Pikov 1989: 131):

1. By a representative of the Gürkhan (the same *shihna* or *shaojian* mentioned earlier), who was permanently stationed in the subject kingdom. Such representatives are attested at Samarqand, Qayaliq, Gaochang, and in Bukhara during the 1140s (Juwaynī 1912–1937: I, 56 [Qayaliq], II, 122 [Samarqand]; Juwaynī 1997: 74–75 [Qayaliq], II, 393 [Samarqand]; Song Lian 1976: 122/3000, 124/3049; *Shengwu qinzheng lu* 1983: 59a; Ouyang Xuan, 11/5b [Gaochang]; Nizāmī ʿArūḍī 1954: 22/24–5; Narshakhī 1892: 25 [Bukhara]).

2. By emissaries of the Gürkhan who came annually to levy the taxes (Khwārazm).

3. By the local ruler of the city himself, who was responsible for transferring the taxes to either the Gürkhan's representative or to the Qara Khitai court at Balāsāghūn (in Balkh and Bukhara). This method seems to have been used in order to limit the power of the Western Qarakhanids of Transoxania, rulers of both Balkh and Bukhara, by creating alternative channels of communication between the Gürkhan and his subjects (Karypkulov 1984: 300).

The methods, however, could change over time, i.e. one territory could shift from one method to the other. No doubt, the first method of tax gathering implies a firmer control over the territory than the second and the third. In all cases, the taxes were paid as an annual tribute, in either cash or kind (notably cattle) (Juwaynī 1912–1937: II, 88, 122; Juwaynī 1997: 356, 393; Ibn al-Athīr 1966: XII, 134). Initially, Qara Khitai financial demands were quite moderate, earning them the reputation of just rulers. In the dynasty's last years, however, the higher burden of taxes, mainly due to exploitation by tax collectors (of all three kinds), were among the main reasons for the alienation of the inhabitants of the subject territories from the Qara Khitai and for the impoverishment of the Gürkhan's treasury (Biran 2001; Biran 2005b: Ch. 3).

While the emissaries of the Qara Khitai were mainly Khitans of noble origin or high officials in the central administration, their commissioners in the subject territories came from the subjects' ranks. Moreover, the Qara Khitai deliberately chose commissioners who professed the prevalent religious belief of the respective territory, Muslims in the Muslim territories and Buddhist in the Buddhist Gaochang (Iṣfahānī 1900: 255; Bundārī 1886: 278; Song Lian 1976: 124/3049; Ouyang Xuan, 11/5a; Ibn al-Athīr 1966: XI, 378; Kirmānī 1949: 22).

Even in places where *shihnas* were stationed, the presence of the Qara Khitai in their subject territories was minimal. No permanent Qara Khitan garrison was stationed in their lands, and, as stated by Ibn al-Athīr, the Qara Khitai conquerors did not change a thing in their subjects' life, satisfying themselves with modest financial demands (Ibn al-Athīr 1966: XI, 84). The loose notion of sovereignty in the subject territories also probably explains why visitors in Transoxania and Khwārazm such as Benjamin of Tudela, al-Gharnāṭī, or al-Samʿānī ignore their overlordship completely (Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 667; Biran 2005b: 129, 187; Biran 2005a).

What can be said about the characteristics of the Qara Khitai administration from this sketch?

First of all, it does not look Chinese at all. Within the limits of the sources, what is evident about Qara Khitai administration is its Inner Asian character. This is manifested by the personal relationship between the ruler and his officials; the importance of the ruler's personal retinue; the dominance of military positions; and the overlapping of civil and military duties. Moreover, Qara Khitai administration was multiethnic and multilingual, based on a strong personal power of the ruler, and employed a huge military machine. It had a lesser notion of sovereignty, and was ruled by a minority group that preserved its own particular identity and governed a mixed nomad and sedentary population. All these characteristics had existed also in the Liao dynasty (and in the other northern dynasties that ruled in China, the Jin, Yuan and Qing). Most of them, however, could easily be ascribed to the Seljuks as well. In fact these characteristics reflect exactly the strong Inner Asian influence apparent in all these dynasties (DiCosmo 1996: 500–08).

Moreover, there is no conclusive indication for the functioning of a Chinese-style bureaucracy under the Qara Khitai. Although the existence of a *shumi yuan* is tentatively attested, its functions are nowhere specified. Furthermore, the recorded Chinese titles mostly originated in the Liao northern administration, i.e. they initially reflected a Khitan-Inner Asian organization and not a Chinese one. It is also highly significant that the two most prestigious and characteristic titles of the Qara Khitai, Gürkhan and *tayangū* – both Inner Asian and *not* Chinese – do not have a precedent in the Liao realm.⁵ The administration therefore reflects not only Chinese or Liao roots but also other Turkic-Altai influences, whose specific sources are hard to detect, as well as a certain influence of the Muslim

⁵ This despite the fact that the Liao also used Turkic titles. Yet those were mainly limited to low-level positions. See Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 442.

Central Asian administrative tradition (e.g. the titles vizier and *shihna*, the use of Persian, the Muslim personnel). The two last mentioned segments – Inner-Asian and Muslim – reflect the influence of the new Central Asian environment on Qara Khitai rule, and their flexibility in adjusting themselves to their new circumstances.

There is also no conclusive evidence that the Qara Khitai retained the peculiarities of the Liao administration – either the multi-capital system or the dual administration. Yet they seem to have retained the principle that guided the adoption of the dual administration in Liao times: ‘Ruling according to what is common [in each region] brings best results’ (*yin su er zhi, de qi yi yi* 因俗而治, 得其宜矣) (Tuotuo 1974: 45/685; Li Xihou 1989). In the Qara Khitai realm, however, this results not in a dual administration of the Liao style, but in the differentiation between the administration of the central territory, under the direct rule of the Gürkhan, and the indirect administration of the vast areas of semi-independent subject kingdoms and tribes surrounding it. This division is certainly not characteristic of China (in either Tang, Song or Liao periods), but is closer to the indirect and decentralized administrative system of the Turks and Uighurs, or even to the Seljuk model (see Khazanov 1994: 257; Karam-Skaff 2002: I, 366–68; Morgan 1988: 34–40).

What, then, was Chinese in the Qara Khitai administration?

Chinese influence is apparent at least in two fields, though in both it was not exclusive. First, there were the symbols of rulership (i.e. the position of the emperors, reign titles) and of submission (e.g. tablets of authority; acknowledging Qara Khitai supremacy in certain rites; tribute). The second field of influence was language: most of the recorded administrative and honorary titles of the Qara Khitai were Chinese, and Chinese was the language that appeared on their coins. This also has a symbolic dimension, since the peculiarity of the Chinese language was an integral part of the

image of China in Central Asia (Biran 2005b: Ch. 4). Certain administrative patterns, and some more trappings, such as dress code, were also of Chinese origin.

What we find in the Qara Khitai administration is thus Inner Asian in content, but clad in Chinese trappings. Yet these trappings were enough to secure for the Qara Khitai the designation of Chinese in both Yuan China and the Muslim world. This attests to the importance of the external and symbolic facets of the administration in Inner Asia as elsewhere. It also poses the next question: why did the Qara Khitai retain those Chinese trappings in Central Asia?

The short answer is that Chinese trappings were kept because they were useful. The institutional means embedded in the Chinese-Liao tradition, such as the elevated position of the emperor and the nomination of successors, helped in consolidating the power of the dynasty and overcoming one of the most pressing problems in nomadic states – the struggles of succession. Furthermore, the Qara Khitai arrived at Central Asia as fugitives. The cultural capital that they owned was their former status in China. This cultural capital provided them with a strong sense of identity, which differentiated them from other nomads in Central Asia. It also gave them much prestige, both among their supporters and in their dealing with the pre-existing political units in the new environment.⁶

Indeed, as I have shown elsewhere (Biran 2005b: Ch. 4; Biran 2005a), the Chinese trappings retained by the Qara Khitai contributed to their legitimation not only among Uighurs and Mongols, but even among their Muslim subjects: in Muslim Central Asia of the tenth to twelfth centuries, China, though vaguely known, was closely associated with notions of grandeur and prestige. It was conceived as a mysterious, well-populated kingdom, on the eastern fringes of the world, whose emperor was one of the five great kings of the world (together

⁶ This compares well with the Moghuls’ continued use of their Timurid legitimacy in India (see Foltz 1998), or with the Uzbeks’ stress on their Chinggisid origin in Transoxania and Khwārazm (McChesney 1996: Ch. 4).

with the rulers of India, Byzantium, the Arabs and the Turks). The Chinese were known as idol worshippers, but had a reputation of tolerance towards other religions and of justice in general. The Muslim recognized the peculiarity of the Chinese script, and admired Chinese artisanship (Miquel 1985: 284–301). Moreover, one of the most prestigious titles employed by the Qarakhanid dynasty, to whose realm the Western Liao had succeeded, was *Tamghaj Khan* (Turkic: The Khan of China). The memory of former Chinese sovereignty was still alive even in Western Liao's western-most province, Transoxania (Marwazī 1942: 6; Biran 2005b: 97–100). No doubt the legitimating factor of those Chinese trappings contributed to the preservation of these aspects of Liao culture in the Qara Khitai empire, despite the fact that it was far from China proper and included only a few ethnic Chinese.

The use of Chinese instead of Muslim symbols of authority also had another advantage as it helped to ease the tension between the non-Muslim Qara Khitai and their Muslim subjects. The Qara Khitai hardly ever used the Muslim symbols of submission, namely, mentioning the overlord's name in the Friday sermon (*khutba*) or on the dynasty's coins (*sikka*). The Chinese symbols of authority that the Qara Khitai demanded (e.g. the tablet of authority) were not taken as a sign of submission in the Muslim world, and perhaps even enhanced the subject rulers' prestige. Therefore, from the Muslim rulers' point of view, there were hardly any external signs of their submission to the Qara Khitai, and this certainly smoothed their relationship with their infidel overlords (Biran 2005a).

Moreover, this harmonic relationship between the Qara Khitai and their mostly Muslim population was also made possible due to the common nomadic background of many of the subjects. Apart from being Chinese emperors, the Qara Khitai were also Gürkhans, leaders of the nomadic world, and indeed they had a lot in common with Central Asian subjects – nomads and former nomadic Turks, as well as the partly

Turkicized sedentaries.⁷ First of all, they shared the coexistence of nomad and sedentary populations in the same state, a typical situation in both Liao China and Central Asia. The position of the nomads as rulers or overlords was also not an innovation on the Central Asian scene. Recognizing the needs of the sedentary population and effectively controlling the nomads for most of their rule, the Qara Khitai achieved economic prosperity, which certainly contributed to their acceptance as legitimate rulers in Central Asia. Moreover, the Qara Khitai shared social values, such as the important role of warfare in everyday life; the high position of women; and the high position of merchants. They shared certain aspects of political culture, such as the importance of marriage alliances, the policy of holding subjects as hostages, and the practice of hunting as a royal sport; and certain aspects of military organization (Biran 2005b: Ch. 5). These similarities do not preclude the uniqueness of the Qara Khitai, but they significantly contributed to the legitimation the Qara Khitai gained in their new environment despite their different ethnic and religious background. The unique combination of the common nomadic political tradition and the prestige of China in Muslim Central Asia enabled the Qara Khitai to construct their identity and legitimation without using any Islamic components, in a sharp contrast to their predecessors and successors in Central Asia.

This feature of the Qara Khitai highlights another contrast between them and the northern Chinese tradition. In both cases the dynasties display multi-faceted legitimation for their multiethnic and heterogeneous subjects, but while the northern Chinese dynasties always displayed a facet directed towards the majority of the population, in their case Chinese, the Qara Khitai legitimacy did not include any Muslim facet. This is equivalent to a situation in which the Manchus would

⁷ For the Turkicization of the Central Asian sedentary populations at this stage, see Golden 1992: 228–29.

portray themselves in China as Manchus, successors of Chinggis Khan and champions of Tibetan Buddhism, but without any Chinese façade (for the Manchus see, e.g. Elliot 2001; Crossley 1999). The Qara Khitai were able to do this because the Chinese tradition was also relevant for their Muslim subjects and because of the common Inner Asian political culture they shared with their subjects.

The Qara Khitai partly compensated for the absence of the Muslim facet by the broad religious tolerance, also typical to steppe empires, which they practiced. Yet the absence of a Muslim facet certainly limited the Qara Khitai ability to practice a more direct rule in their subject territories, and also caused certain limitations on the expansion of their empire.

First, the retaining of the Liao tradition implied a continued interest in the Qara Khitai eastern border, which limited their ability to continue westward. Moreover, it is doubtful whether outside the Qarakhanid realm of Transoxania the Chinese tradition would have remained relevant for the Iranian Muslim population, and this was another reason to limit the Qara Khitai western expansion. More practically, since all of the Qara Khitai army was stationed in the central territory in peace time, the empire was built on the ability of its army to reach quickly any of the subject territories if necessary. This certainly also limited the expansion of the Qara Khitai, and indeed, despite some raids into Khurāsān and a few spying missions into the Jurchen borders, there was no serious Qara Khitai attempt of expansion after they had defeated the Seljuks at the battle of Qatwān near Samarqand in 1141. Yet the Chinese-nomadic legitimation of the Qara Khitai allowed the dynasty to build a stable and rather vast regional empire.

This regionalism seems to be at odds with the universality imbued both in the title *Gürkhan* and in the concept of the heavenly mandate. Yet Qara Khitai pretension to universal rule was formal rather than practical. As is well known, the limitations of the universality of the mandate of heaven were quite apparent in China after the rise of the Liao,

when the Chinese recognized the coexistence of 'Two Sons of Heaven', the Liao emperor in the north and the Song emperor in the south, and since 1005 a strict boundary existed between those two presumably universal empires (Tao Jingshen 1982). This pragmatic awareness of the limitation of their dominion was maintained also by the Qara Khitai, despite their universalistic titulature.

In sum, by a wise and flexible use of the different symbols of rulership, combined with non-destructive conquest, reasonable financial demands, religious tolerance, and by keeping a balance between nomads and sedentaries, the Qara Khitai managed to build a stable regional empire in Central Asia. A close examination of the peculiarities of their administration draws our attention, first of all, to the continuing importance of China in the 'western regions' several centuries after the rise of Islam and the battle of Talas (751), which lost China its control of Central Asia. It also stresses the importance of external symbols of rulership for the empire's identity and consolidation, and the power of a common political steppe tradition to bridge gaps between different cultural traditions.

Lastly, this picture of the Qara Khitai administration also stresses how different the situation in Central Asia was before the eruption of the 'big bang' of the Mongol conquests. The Mongol period will be widely covered in other chapters of this book. Here it is enough to say that while both empires borrowed technologies of government and personnel from both the Chinese and Islamic realms, the Qara Khitai tended consciously to maintain much of the order that had existed before them, keeping a delicate balance between different forms of legitimacy, ecology and religions; their benign conquest and their limited expansionist and universalistic ambitions sharply contrast with the situation under the *Yeke Monggol ulus*. The Mongols did not try to find or maintain a delicate balance. They destroyed it. Armed with a truly universalistic ideology, and on the basis of their unprecedented

