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The Mongols and Nomadic Identity The Case of the Kitans in China

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One of the salient aspects throughout the Eurasian steppes during and after the Mongol conquest was a major shift in ethnicity and identity. This chapter examines this phenomenon through the prism of the later history of the Kitans. My principal argument is that Mongol imperial policies played a crucial role in determining the direction of identity change among their mixed subject population,¹ and contributed to the Kitan assimilation in China more than “the cohesive force of the Chinese nation”² that often gets the credit for nomadic “sinicization.”

THE MONGOLS AND THE ETHNIC CONFIGURATION OF EURASIA

Peter Golden and Thomas T. Allsen have persuasively argued that the Mongol period basically reshaped the ethnic configuration of Eurasia. The crucial factors in this process were the devastation left in the wake of the initial Mongol drive; the formation of new ethnic and political taxonomies under the Mongol empire; the empire’s policy of ruling via foreigner administrators; and the imperial disintegration, which forced many new collectivities to refashion their identities. These factors led to the uprooting of many hitherto well-established peoples (such as the Tanguts, the Uighurs, the Qipchaqs, and the Kitans) and to the emergence of new groupings, which form the basis of many contemporary Central Asian nations (e.g., the Uzbeks and Kazakhs). The majority of pre-Mongol steppe peoples lost their identity as ethnic groups. As a result, they were either reduced to clan or tribal units in the new collectivities that took shape in Mongol and post-Mongol Eurasia, or assimilated into the sedentary civilizations surrounding them.³ Fascinating as it may be, this phenomenon has yet to attract a thorough investigation.⁴ This study endeavors to shed light on this shift by tracing the fate of the Kitans both during and after the Mongol era.

The Kitans are indeed an illuminating case study for Eurasian identities. Throughout their pre-Mongol history, the Kitans displayed a unique ability to preserve their distinct identity. Additionally, their far-flung geographical dispersion on the eve of the Mongol invasion enables scholars to compare acculturation and identity change in different parts of the empire. Although the focus of this chapter is on the Kitans in China, it will occasionally draw insights from their counterparts in Iran.

THE KITANS

The Kitans, a tribal confederation that originated in the Xianbei 鮮卑 and rose in the Mongolian-Manchurian borderland, near the Liao 遼 River, appear in historical sources from the fourth century CE onward. Falling within the orbit of both the nomadic states of Mongolia—most notably the Turk and Uighur realms—and the Chinese empire, particularly the Tang dynasty, the Kitans were consecutively subject to one or another of these polities from the sixth to ninth centuries. In the early tenth century, exploiting power vacuums in both China and Mongolia, Abaoji 阿保機 (r. 907–926) united the Kitan tribes, transformed himself into an emperor (as opposed to the loose, rotational leaders of the preimperial Kitans), and aspired to conquer both steppe and sown. In time, Abaoji founded the Liao 遼 dynasty, which ruled over Manchuria, Mongolia, and parts of north China for over two centuries (907–1125). His transition from tribal chieftain to emperor prompted substantial changes in the lifestyle and culture of the Kitan elite. However, befitting their Inner Asian character, they did not relinquish their native traditions, such as the Kitan language, shamanic rituals, origin myth, nomadic lifestyle, and elevated status of women. Instead, the Kitans added new layers to their heritage, thereby creating their own, nuanced imperial tradition. Within this framework, the royal clan adopted a surname, Yelü 耶律, and its members married exclusively women from the Xiao 蕭, a clan of Uighur origin (with its subclans of Shulü 述律 and Yaoli 姚里) that became the Liao consort clan. In parallel, the Kitans started embracing the Chinese imperial tradition, not least its trappings, including its reign titles, calendar, and the Chinese language, which they used alongside Kitan and Turkish. Other major changes were the invention of two Kitan scripts; intensive urbanization, which did not prevent the Kitans from maintaining their nomadic lifestyle (for example, the royal court’s seasonal movements continued throughout the Liao dynasty); patronage of Buddhist institutions, for the purpose of enhancing the Kitans’ own legitimacy; the modification of their burial customs; and the emergence of a unique and sophisticated material culture that revolved around gold. They also set up a dual administration, in

which the southern branch was responsible for the sedentary population and the northern branch for the nomadic sector.

Moreover, it was during the Liao period that Chinggis Khan's forefathers migrated to Mongolia. Kitan rule in this realm, especially the unprecedented scope of urbanization and the strength of its garrisons, made a deep impression on the local nomads. In a similar vein, Kitan cities served as a platform for introducing Chinese and Kitan concepts to the Mongolian steppe. In consequence, the Mongolian word *Kitad* became the designation for north China. Moreover, the word *Cathay*—the term for China in medieval Europe as well as Western and Central Asia—derived from the ethnic affiliation (*Khitai*) of the Liao's rulers. Put differently, while preserving much of their pre-imperial traits (first and foremost the nomadic way of life) and cultivating their own imperial tradition, the Kitans were also able to portray themselves as no less Chinese than the Song both within and outside their realm.⁵

In the early twelfth century, with the fall of the Liao at the hands of the Jurchens (another wave of Manchurian invaders), most of the Kitans remained in north China under the rule of the Jurchen Jin 金 dynasty (1115–1234). However, a small group, estimated at 20,000 men, followed a Kitan prince, Yelü Dashi 耶律大石, to the west, where he swiftly established the Qara Khitai (i.e., the Liao Kitans) or Western Liao (Xi Liao 西辽) empire in Central Asia (1124–1218).⁶

The Jin Kitans reportedly numbered between 750,000 and 1.5 million men, and were treated as a separate ethnic group along with Chinese and other non-Jurchen people.⁷ A handful of these Kitans, refusing to acknowledge Jin rule, moved to the forests of northern Manchuria, where they hunted for subsistence and yearned to revive the Liao.⁸ That said, most of this populace placed themselves at the Jin's disposal, serving primarily as border guards.

The Kitans also played an important role in shaping the Jurchen polity, as some rose to senior positions in the Jin bureaucracy. Donning the hat of cultural agents, the Kitans introduced Chinese culture to the Jurchens. For instance, most Jurchen translations of Chinese works derived from Kitan renderings. Kitan fluency in Chinese, Mongol, and naturally their own language also qualified them for jobs as translators and emissaries.⁹

Be that as it may, relations between the Kitans and the Jurchen were not always peaceful, as Kitan rebellions were a common occurrence. The largest insurgency erupted during the reign of Jin monarch Hailing wang 海陵王 (r. 1150–1161). This confrontation was provoked by Hailing wang's forced conscription of Jin Kitan troops for his attack against the Song and by his 1161 decree calling for the liquidation of all male progeny of the Yelü

clan and the Zhao 趙 (descendants of the Song royal house)—last-gasp measures aimed at neutralizing attempts to undermine his legitimacy. The rebels, though not well organized, even established their own dynasty before they were quelled by the new Jin emperor Shizong 金世宗 (r. 1161–1189). In the immediate aftermath of the failed “coup,” many of the Kitan military units (*mengan mouke* 猛安謀克) were dismantled, and the troops were divided among various Jurchen units. While the regime allowed the Kitan herders to maintain their tribal divisions, the elite were ordered to change their surnames: Yelü became Yila 移剌 and Xiao became Shimo 石抹. The Jin also transferred more Kitans from the empire's northwestern frontier—one of the rebellion's strongholds—to the east, with the objective of negating the possibility that they would join forces with the Qara Khitai. In parallel, the regime consciously promoted Kitan assimilation by, say, encouraging them to marry Jurchens. These steps notwithstanding, Kitan mutinies recurred in 1177, 1183, and 1195. The insurrection of 1177 even entailed the proclamation of an independent Kitan state. Not only were all these revolts smashed, but the Jurchens subsequently carried out mass slaughters and population transfers to the east. These heavy-handed measures were accompanied by acculturation programs. In the early thirteenth century, for instance, the Jin passed several laws that were designed to abrogate the differences between Jurchen and non-Jurchen soldiers. However, these gestures were late in coming: by this time, the Kitans were well aware of the approaching Mongol storm, and many of them saw this as a golden opportunity to exact their revenge against the Jin.¹⁰

In the meantime, the Qara Khitai managed to build a powerful empire in Central Asia (ca. 1124 or 1131 to 1218). At its height, this polity stretched from the Oxus River in western Uzbekistan to the Altai Mountains in northeastern Xinjiang. Until 1175, the state's borders ran even further east into the Naiman and the Yenisei Kyrgyz on the fringes of western Mongolia. The population of this vast empire was heterogeneous. Besides the Kitans, who constituted but a small minority in their own domain, there were Turks (Uighurs included), Iranians, Mongols, and a few Han Chinese. While most of the populace was sedentary and Muslim, there was an appreciable nomadic component (led by the Kitans themselves) as well as flourishing Buddhist, Nestorian, and even Jewish communities.¹¹ The Qara Khitai's religious tolerance, their by and large indirect form of rule, their shrewd use of the Kitans' Chinese and nomadic cultural capital, and the relative prosperity and stability that they brought to Central Asia enabled the empire to govern this diverse land effectively, up to the rise of Chinggis Khan. While the original intention of the polity's above-mentioned founder, Yelü Dashi, was to restore the former boundaries of the Liao, the geopolitical

situation dictated a steady westward advance, into the Muslim world. That said, the Qara Khitai continued to send spies and even small forces to the Jin border throughout the 1100s. Likewise, several Kitan rebels from North China tried to enter its territory and/or collaborate with the regime.¹² In fact, recent archaeological discoveries and philological research suggest that the Kitan character of the Qara Khitai was more pronounced than previously thought.¹³

KITAN IDENTITY ON THE EVE OF THE MONGOL INVASION

While political and geographical differences existed between the various Kitan groups, the Jin branch and the Qara Khitai shared more than a few discernible identity markers. To begin with, the Kitans in China and Central Asia were referred to and referred to themselves as Kitans or Qara Kitans (the Liao Kitans).¹⁴ Moreover, they had a common origin myth: a man riding a white horse along the Muddy River and a woman traveling along the Huang River in a small cart drawn by a gray ox met at the confluence of these waterways by the Muye 木葉 Mountain. The two married and their eight sons became the forefathers of the eight original Kitan tribes. With the passage of time, the patriarch and matriarch were deemed to be incarnations of the god of heaven and goddess of earth. In deference to this myth, a white horse and gray ox were commonly sacrificed by Kitans before any important decision or enterprise, such as a pivotal military campaign.¹⁵

Another facet of this identity was the Kitan language and scripts. The Kitan language is defined as an Altaic, para-Mongolian tongue. While closer to Mongolian, it features significant Tungusic elements. The two Kitan scripts, which were created in the early 900s as part of the Liao dynasty's formation, are both Sinitic. Despite considerable progress on the small Kitan script in recent years (thanks mainly to the unearthing of tomb inscriptions), neither script has yet been fully deciphered.¹⁶ Even in the heyday of the Liao dynasty, however, other scripts were also employed, with Chinese serving as the principal diplomatic and administrative language. Both the Qara Khitai and the Jin Kitans continued to use the Kitan scripts (in Jin China up to 1191, when it was banned), side by side with other languages and scripts: mainly Chinese and Jurchen under the Jin and Chinese, Persian, and Uighur among the Qara Khitai.¹⁷

The Kitans continued to wax nostalgic for the halcyon days of the Liao and its original center—the land of the pines and deserts (*songmo* 松漠) along the Liao River. These sentiments could easily arouse antagonism toward the Jurchens for having destroyed the Liao. Regardless of their location, Kitan members of the royal and consort clans retained their prestige, standing,

selective connubial patterns (though they also took non-Kitan spouses), and distinct surnames. Furthermore, the royal clan upheld its nomadic social norms, including the high position of women in politics.¹⁸ Another part of the Liao legacy that was preserved by the Kitans in China and Central Asia was their reverence for the Chinese imperial tradition. The extent of this dedication is hard to gauge, but the upper-class Jin Kitans and Qara Khitai were certainly familiar with Chinese trappings and exhibited a command of the language.¹⁹

The Jurchens were well aware of the affinity between the two Kitan groups. In fact, the fear that they would one day unite loomed large over the Jin's foreign and domestic policies.²⁰ While this threat never materialized, the existence of the independent Qara Khitai was apparently meaningful to the Kitans in the Jin. Kindling their hope to restore the Liao, it also buoyed their Kitan identity. For instance, upon accompanying Chinggis Khan to Central Asia in the 1220s, Yelü Chucai 耶律楚材, a Kitan from the Jin, collected every bit of information he could find about the Qara Khitai.²¹

On the eve of the Mongol conquest, the Kitans in China found themselves in a unique position. As Rashīd al-Dīn observed, the Kitans were "adjacent to the Mongol nomads, and their language, physiognomy and customs are quite similar."²² Put differently, the two groups shared a resemblance in terms of their nomadic lifestyle, combat tactics, rituals, and language.²³ Another Kitan advantage was their expertise in the sedentary culture of China. This dual nomadic-Chinese identity made the Kitans extremely useful to the Mongols during their expansion. What is more, it would ultimately facilitate their assimilation into one of the two societies.

THE MONGOL CONQUEST OF THE KITANS

By dint of the Mongol conquests, the assorted Kitan groups all found themselves under the same authority. However, instead of leading to their unification, this turn of events scattered their communities throughout the Eurasian continent.

Both the Qara Khitai and the Jin Kitans were subsumed by the Mongol empire in the early thirteenth century, during the first stages of its expansion. Mongol assaults into Jin territories began in 1211. Within four years, they had entered the Jin capital of Zhongdu 中都 or Yanjing 燕京 (near modern Beijing), compelling the Jurchens to take flight southward to Kaifeng. However, Chinggis Khan soon turned his attention to the west. In 1218, his forces seized the Qara Khitai territory in what was a swift and uncharacteristically benign campaign, before proceeding into Central Asia. Although Chinggis Khan dispatched General Muqali (in 1217–1223) to

reengage the Jin, this rather bloody affair was only completed in 1234 (by Ögödei, Chinggis Khan's son and heir). While a fair share of Kitans died in battle against the Mongols, most of them chose to switch over to the juggernaut at an early stage of the conquests.²⁴ By so doing, they averted the catastrophe that befell several of their contemporaries—the Tanguts, the Qipchaqs, and Khwārazmians included. More specifically, the Kitans became allies of the Mongols and heavily influenced the formation of the world empire.

THE DATABASE

Before exploring the ramifications of the Mongols' ascent on Kitan identity, a few words about the database that undergirded this study are in order. Yuan sources cite the names of over two hundred Kitans who were active in Mongol China. About half of these figures surface in the dynastic history, the *Yuanshi* 元史, whereas the remainder are scattered in, above all, Yuan literary collections (*wenji* 文集), epitaphs, and local gazetteers. A few prominent Kitans also turn up in Muslim sources, foremost among them records from the Ilkhanate. Some of these individuals are explicitly referred to as Kitans or "Liao people" (Liao ren 遼人), while others have been identified on the basis of their distinctive surnames: Yelü/Yila, Shimo/Shulü, and Xiao. Since the last is also a Chinese surname, if a Xiao is not specifically described as a Kitan or Liao, s/he was excluded from this survey.²⁵

It bears noting that the information about many of these Kitans is limited to their name and occasionally their position or the odd biographical note (e.g., son of so and so, filial son, died young). For the more important figures, however, there are more detailed sources that allow us to track certain families over several generations.²⁶ In addition, the data is elite-biased. Since most of the rank-and-file Kitans lacked surnames, their identity has evidently passed under the radar. Although a few women appear in the sources, the list is male dominated. The Kitans in China practiced a wide range of professions (most exotically, a *fengshui* expert and a sculptor specializing in Buddhist images), yet most of the well-documented Kitans were military men.²⁷ Notable exceptions are Yelü Chucai (1189–1243), Chinggis Khan's astrologer and Ögödei's chief minister, and Yelü Youshang 耶律有尚 (d. 1320), a celebrated Confucian scholar.

MAIN FACTORS BEHIND IDENTITY CHANGE

Over the next few pages, we will explore two developments that had a major impact on the Kitan identity: the loss of the Kitans' political frameworks

and their geographical distribution. This will be followed by a discussion of the two main paths of Kitan assimilation, each of which roughly corresponds to its own period. The first phase is the absorption into the Mongol ranks, which was most salient in the conquests period, from the united Mongol empire period (1206–1260) to the fall of the Song (1279). During this time, the Kitans played a more active role in the Mongol army and administration, so that they feature more prominently in the relevant sources. Throughout the postconquest period (1279–1368), the main thrust of Kitan assimilation was in the Chinese realm. The primary impetus behind this shift was that the Mongols were now less dependent on the Kitans and thus less willing to accept them in their midst. Accordingly, the number of Kitans mentioned in the source material decreases significantly, but this drop-off might also stem in part from the nature of the documents rather than the processes under review.²⁸ In the pages to come, we will take stock of the main incentives behind identity change at each of these stages and the manifestations of this trend.

The Breakup of the Kitan Political Framework: The Rise and Fall of Yelü Liuge's State

Identity in China and, all the more so, on the steppe was largely political. For this reason, the mere existence of the Qara Khitai empire and the pining for the Liao significantly bolstered Kitan identity among the Jin Kitans. Soon after Chinggis Khan invaded the Jin, a Kitan commander established a short-lived Kitan state in Manchuria (1213–1233 or 1236), under Mongol dominion. The founder was Yelü Liuge 耶律留哥 (1174–1220), a descendant of the Liao royal family who had served as a commander of a thousand in the Jin army. While heading an army totaling an estimated 100,000 Kitans, Liuge surrendered to the Mongols in 1212. That said, he was not the first Kitan who submitted to Chinggis Khan. Among the ruler's closest supporters were several other Kitan noblemen, some of whom had joined Temüjin even before he assumed the title Chinggis Khan. However, while the other Kitans joined the empire as individuals, Liuge came as a leader who aspired to build a Kitan state.²⁹ After defeating Jin troops with Mongol help in 1213, his followers (allegedly 600,000 men!) enthroned him as the king of Liao (*Liao wang* 遼王) in the Kitans' ancestral land of Liaodong. The new state was called "the Great Liao" (Da Liao 大遼), thereby restoring its namesake after more than a century of Jin rule. The recently enthroned monarch chose a reign title and conferred Chinese honorifics on his wife and several of his leading followers. Most importantly, these steps were reminiscent of those taken by Yelü Dashi upon establishing the Qara Khitai dynasty in 1124.³⁰ What is more, the Great Liao featured many of the aforementioned

Kitan identity markers, such as the tribal religion, the trappings of Chinese imperial tradition (reign titles, seals, etc.), the elite status of the Yelü clan, and the lofty standing of women. Last but not least, a considerable portion of the state's residents was Kitan.

Symbolism aside, the Great Liao failed to attract most of the Kitans or forge a sustainable political entity. One of the reasons for these shortcomings was the domestic instability that plagued the new Liao dynasty. After a series of victories against the Jin in 1215, elements within the polity's top brass demanded that Liuge promote himself from king to emperor, so as to assume an equal footing with Chinggis Khan and his Jin counterpart. When Liuge declined, on the grounds that this contradicted the terms of surrender with the Mongols (not to mention the true balance of power), they mutinied against him, enthroned his viceroy as emperor, and raided Korea.

The rebels viewed themselves as the Liao's true heirs. For example, they demanded that the Koreans submit to the newfangled entity. In so doing, they were harking back to the Kitans' dominion over Korea from the tenth to the twelfth centuries.³¹ Correspondingly, Liuge hastened to ask for Chinggis Khan's help in this "civil war." As a token of his allegiance, he presented the emperor with his eldest son, Xuedu 薛闢, as a hostage. Only in 1219, with the assistance of Mongols, as well as Korean and Jurchen defectors, did Liuge finally manage to stamp out the insurrection of this "fake Liao state" (*wei Liao guo* 偽遼國). However, by then, he and his state had lost much of their power.³² Following the victory, some of the rebellious Kitans were given to the Koreans in return for their military services, while others chose to stay on the peninsula. In addition, a considerable portion of the defeated troops—reportedly 50,000 Kitans—was divided among various Mongol units.

Liuge died soon after the triumph (1220), without having consolidated his realm. Centered in Guangning 廣寧 (part of modern-day Liaoning), the Great Liao continued to exist under the rule of his widow and then his son, Xuedu. Fighting alongside Ögödei in Korea between 1230 and 1237, Xuedu "liberated" over 6,000 Kitan households and brought them to Guangning. However, the successes of both father and son were not enough to avert the downfall of their state. Already in 1227, when Chinggis Khan sent Xuedu back to Manchuria to head his father's state, he instructed him to share the command of his armies with the khan's younger brother, Belgütei (Bolu-gutai, 孛魯古台). In 1233 or 1236, Ögödei formally abolished the Liao entity, adding the Guangning region to Belgütei's appanage. Nevertheless, Liuge's sons and grandsons continued to serve in the Mongol army and acquitted themselves well in battles against Korea, the Jin, and the Song. They continued to lead the Guangning troops and administer the region until 1269

when it was placed under the purview of Liaoyang, the Jin's eastern capital. Henceforth, there would be no other attempts to set up a Kitan state under Mongol rule.³³

All the blame for the abolishment of the Great Liao cannot be placed entirely on Liuge's failure to secure an alliance with fellow Kitans, for the consolidation of Ögödei's holdings in north China also played an instrumental role. So long as the Jin war raged on, the Mongols tolerated the handful of kingdoms that were established in Manchuria by various Jin defectors, who had exploited the temporary power vacuum in the area since 1214. When the Jin finally succumbed in 1234, these states were no longer of any use to the Mongols, and Ögödei preferred to subsume Manchuria—a region that was partly suited for nomadism and close to Mongolia—under his direct rule. "The time of the petty kings," as Rashīd al-Dīn put it, "was over."³⁴ As a result, the Kitans in China no longer had a political framework to help them retain their identity. Moreover, the termination of both the Qara Khitai and the Jin (the Kitans' foil and arch rivals) also accelerated the decline of Kitan identity and encouraged them to throw in their lot with the Mongols.

At around the same time, the remnants of the Qara Khitai royal house were manipulating the upheavals that were instigated by the Mongol invasion on the other side of the steppe for their own benefit. More specifically, Baraq Ḥājib, a scion of the Qara Khitai royal house, founded a Kitan state in Kirmān (a province in southern Iran) in 1222. While also bearing the name Qara Khitai, this incarnation had limited political and territorial ambitions, as its monarchy was subject to both the Mongols and the Abbasid caliph. Located in a comparatively marginal area of the Mongol empire, outside the steppe belt and far from Mongolia, the area was moderately conducive to transhumance.³⁵ It existed as a vassal of the united Mongol empire and then the Ilkhanate until 1306, when the polity was dismantled either for neglecting to pay its dues to the Mongols or as part of Ilkhan Öljeitü's efforts to centralize his administration. While retaining fewer Kitan markers (the most prominent of which was the elevated status of women) and despite its rulers' conversion to Islam (a step that the Qara Khitai had eschewed in Central Asia), the mere existence of this state enabled the Kitans to hang on to their identity, if only in name. However, their "Kitanness" frayed in the immediate aftermath of the Qara Khitai's dissolution, which only reinforced their assimilatory mind-set.³⁶

Geographical Dispersion: Population Movements and Their Impact

As demonstrated in Allsen's chapter in this volume, one of the distinguishing features of Mongol rule was the colossal population movements that

were triggered by its armies' advance. In this respect, the Kitans were no exception. Due to their early incorporation into the Mongol ranks and their value as both nomadic soldiers and qualified administrators, Kitans were indeed dispatched across the Eurasian continent to serve the needs of the ever-expanding empire. However, even before their integration, Chinggis Khan's attacks against the Jin spawned Kitan refugees. Many escaped with the Jin court to Kaifeng in 1214, where they subsequently fought against the Mongols, and a few Kitans migrated to the lands of the Song.³⁷ With respect to those under the empire's rule, Chinggis and his successors transferred farmers to Central Asia with the objective of repopulating areas that were devastated by war. In addition, one of Chinggis Khan's earliest Kitan supporters, Yelü Ahai 耶律阿海, was appointed governor of Transoxania, a position later held by his son.³⁸

At any rate, the prime catalyst of Kitan relocation was military deployment. The Kitans indeed made substantial military and administrative contributions in the Jin campaigns (1211–1215, 1217–1223, and 1229–1234) as the Mongols took full advantage of their close familiarity with the terrain and its inhabitants.³⁹ Both as groups and individuals, they also took part in all the empire's other major battles: Korea in the 1210s–1230s, where some of the troops settled down following the mutiny against Liuge; Chinggis Khan's campaign in Central Asia (1220–1225); the Eastern European front during Ögödei's reign (1237–1241); the fighting in the Middle East under Hülegü during the 1250s; Möngke's battles in Sichuan (1258–1259); and Qubilai's conquest of the Dali kingdom (1253–1256) and the Song dynasty (1268–1279).⁴⁰

Most of the Kitan-related information in the Chinese sources pertains to those who returned to China. However, it stands to reason that some fell on the battlefield and others remained in their new locations.⁴¹ With respect to north China, while a substantial Kitan population indeed remained in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, after 1215, the region of Yanjing (or Zhongdu, near present-day Beijing) was by and large administered by Kitans and became a central destination for ordinary Kitan migrants as well.⁴² In general, the later distribution, especially after the sixteenth century, of tribal names and toponyms across Eurasia bearing the word *Khitai*/*Khatai* is reflective of the magnitude of Kitan dispersion, which probably included the descendants of the Qara Khitai.⁴³ In the thirteenth century, this Eurasia-wide movement considerably thinned the original Kitans' ranks.

The division of the Mongol empire into the four khanates engendered a formidable shift in the patterns of Kitan mobility, largely confining its purview to the Yuan's borders where it assumed a southward trajectory. While south China's flourishing economy might have influenced this turn of events,

most recorded cases of migration were initiated by the Mongols, especially their military and administrative appointments. After the conquest of the Song, the empire returned the majority of its "ethnically" Mongol forces to the north, while garrisoning the new army (former Song units) and the Han army in the south. By this juncture, most of the Kitan troops were in the Han army, so that they were primarily serving in south and southwestern China.⁴⁴ Similarly, the lion's share of documented administrative appointments of Kitans after 1279 were in south China, particularly Huguang 湖廣, Yunnan 雲南, Sichuan 四川, Jiangnan 江南, Zhejiang 浙江, and Jiangxi 江西.⁴⁵ It is not uncommon to find several generations of one family spread out in various parts of China, with the last generation located in the south. For example, the family of the brothers Yelü Ahai and Tuhua originated in Inner Mongolia. Both men joined Temüjin in Mongolia before the Baljuna Covenant (1203) and took part in the early battles against the Jin in north China. Ahai accompanied Chinggis Khan to Central Asia and was assigned to administer Transoxania, where he died in approximately 1223. His son Miansige 綿思哥 inherited the post in Samarqand, but returned to China following the Tarabī rebellion (1238–1239) and then was appointed as *darughachi* (governor) of Zhongdu. In the meantime, one of his siblings became left prime minister of Liaodong, and another commanded the Kitan and Han army in Zhongdu. Miansige's son Maige 買哥 succeeded his father in Zhongdu; however, in 1258, he went to fight in Sichuan and was killed in action. Of his seven sons, only two left an imprint: Laoge 老哥 was a right prime minister, probably in the capital of Dadu (Beijing); Luma 驢馬, a *bitikchi* (scribe) in the guard, was stationed nearby. In 1288, Luma was sent to put down a revolt that was launched by Qadan (Hadan 哈丹 or Hadan tuolugan 哈丹秃鲁干), a descendant of Chinggis Khan's brother who joined Nayan's rebellion in Manchuria. His post was inherited by one of his six sons. The other three sons for whom there is data were stationed to the south in Jiangxi, Huguang, and Zhejiang, respectively.⁴⁶

Ahai's brother, Yelü Tuhua, was in the vanguard of both the first (1211–1214) and second (Muqali-led) waves of Mongol attacks on the Jin. His two sons resided in Shaanxi 陝西 during the 1230s and 1240s, where they filled military and administrative posts and sponsored Daoist activities. In the following decade, they took part in the campaigns against the Song in Sichuan. Apart from a grandson of a lesser wife who was sent to administer Weijinglu 衛輝路 in Henan 河南 during the early 1260s, the next generation of this family remained in Sichuan. Tuhua's grandsons continued to lock horns with the Song from 1260 to 1278 and some fell in action. His great-grandson Mangudai 忙古帶 (1250–1307) was born in Shaanxi, but migrated to Sichuan with his father before the age of ten. After proving himself in the battles of

Sichuan, Mangudai was transferred to Yunnan in the early 1280s. At this point in his career, he waged war against various minor kingdoms, invaded Vietnam, and put down local revolts. He died in 1307 while serving as both a general and left prime minister of Yunnan's mobile secretariat. Mengudai's two surviving sons (one of whom died young, leaving behind a pair of small children) also held positions in Yunnan. Reservations aside, some scholars consider Tuhua and his offspring to be the forefathers of the modern-day Yunnan Kitans.⁴⁷ From our standpoint, though, the crux of this narrative is that by the end of the 1200s, the fourth and fifth generations of this Inner Mongolian family were mostly settled in different parts of south China, and the same could be said for numerous other Kitan families.⁴⁸

PATHS OF IDENTITY CHANGE

Mongolization

The abolition of the Kitan political framework and the people's geographic dispersion precipitated slippage in their ethnic identity. What is more, the empire's unprecedented success encouraged the Kitans, as well as many other groups, to identify with the victors and "become Mongols."⁴⁹ The above-mentioned similarities between the Kitans and Mongols in all that concerned language, physiognomy, and customs undoubtedly facilitated this process, as did the two groups' interaction in the military. This sense of unity comes across in the dialogue that was presumably held between Chinggis Khan and Yaoli Shi (姚里氏, i.e., "of the Yaoli clan," a subclan of the Xiao), Liuge's widow and successor.⁵⁰ Upon the emperor's return from Central Asia in 1225, Yaoli Shi, along with Liuge's younger sons, a grandson, and nephew, paid him a visit in the Tanguts' land. She asked Chinggis to accept her and Liuge's son, Shange 善哥, as a replacement for Liuge's eldest son, Xuedu—the above-mentioned hostage who was entrusted to him in 1216—so that the firstborn could succeed his father as head of the Liao state. Chinggis replied that

Xuedu is already a Mongol. He followed us to the Western Regions; and when the Muslims surrounded the heir apparent in the city of Khwārazm,⁵¹ Xuedu whisked him to safety with a thousand men, though he himself was wounded by a lance. He also fought with us against the Muslims in Bukhara and Samarqand and was struck by an arrow. Because he repeatedly rendered such services, he was given [the title] *Badoulu* [拔都魯 = Bagatur or Bahadur = Brave]. I cannot part with him; let Shange inherit his father's post instead.⁵²

In sum, what makes one a Mongol, according to the great khan, is the bond between comrades-in-arms, excelling in warfare, and proven loyalty. Since most of the documented Kitans were soldiers, this path was readily available to them.

This dialogue also attests to Chinggis Khan's willingness to accept the Kitans into the Mongol ranks. The evidence strongly suggests that this path was open, above all, to those who had joined his army before the 1206 *quriltai* or during the Mongols' initial assaults against the Jin, where the Kitans' efforts were particularly valuable. Early defectors from the Jin were treated as *nōkers* (companions, i.e., individuals who voluntarily detached themselves from their own clan to join the promising leader and become part of his tribe), and attained status and privileges that were on par with those of the Mongols.⁵³

As a result, seniority in Mongol service, namely early capitulation to Chinggis Khan, became a valuable form of social capital for the Kitan elite families documented in the *Yuanshi*, in addition to high standing under the Liao or Jin, if there was any.⁵⁴ This sort of dedication, which was often the basis for a Kitan's appointment to hereditary posts, was also immensely appreciated by later Mongol khans, like Qubilai.⁵⁵

The Mongol willingness to accept Kitans in their midst found expression in the bestowment of Mongolian names, nicknames, and titles on leading Kitan allies, although the conferring of Chinese titles was more prevalent even at the outset of the Mongols' expansion.⁵⁶ This in turn increased the popularity of Mongolian names among the Kitans, although quite a few Kitans bore both Mongolian and Chinese appellations in tandem.⁵⁷ While the conferred Mongolian names and titles appear mainly in the united empire period, the practice of taking Mongolian names lasted throughout the Yuan era and was also commonplace among non-Kitan segments of the Yuan polity, including its Chinese subjects. One reason for the popularity of adopting a Mongolian name was that it could help its possessor attain a job that was theoretically reserved for Mongols.⁵⁸

There are also a few recorded cases of Mongols conferring Mongolian wives on their choice allies. These women often entered polygamous households. For instance, Chinggis Khan gave Yelü Ahai a Mongolian wife to compensate him for the Jin's detention of his original family after he crossed over to the Mongols.⁵⁹ Shimo Yexian, another early defector, had multiple spouses: a Mongolian, who was his principal wife; a Chinese woman from the Xiao 肖 clan (not the Kitan Xiao); and a member of the Kitan Yelü clan.⁶⁰ Yexian's son and one of his great-grandsons married Qonggirad Mongols.⁶¹ Yelü Zhu 耶律鑄 (1221–1285), the son of Yelü Chucai, had six Mongolian wives (two from Chinggis' Kiyat clan), a Christian spouse (who might

